

Thilo Folkerts. City as Nature – The concept of Stadtnatur in Berlin

Abstract

Over the course of some decades Berlin has developed a much-noted idea of urban nature that represents a development of its own kind. Its distinctiveness is worth investigating and elucidating, also as a stocktaking of the achievements of this development. Taking interest in Berlin's urban structure is nothing new; 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. However, the particularity of Berlin's landscape culture appears to transcend individual signature projects, and to have extensive cultural and disciplinary ramifications. It therefore merits to regard the individual open spaces as constituents of a broader culture of public space. Harking back to movements of the late 1970s, critical towards modernist urban developments, Berlin saw – convergingly – the founding of urban ecology, the participatory involvement of informed and involved citizens, and a spatial practice in landscape architecture aligned with urbanism, architecture and art. In pairing with the successive dramatic geopolitical openings of the 1990s, a substantial quantity and quality of landscape projects have been realized, reconfirming and enhancing the city's specific entanglement with its urban nature. Developed from a fresh and panoramic view on an extensive number of landscape projects since that period, and a discursive research into a contextual reading of these projects, the 2022 Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche was awarded to the Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände as a seminal reference project. The findings on its ontology and out-reaching reverberations laid base to an anthological publication that is to serve as invitation for further research. The presentation introduces a contextual reading of individual projects and of the confluences that since the initiating developments have fostered trans-disciplinary cooperation, now considered indispensable in reenforcing the city in the face of current challenges.

Keywords: Berlin, urban nature, urban ecology, landscape architecture, public art, urbanistic history



[fig 1] Ruderal Vegetation, Flaschenhalspark Berlin (c) Thilo Folkerts 2021

City as Nature – the concept of Stadtnatur in Berlin

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I assume that the landscape of the conference is an urban one. City and landscape, once categorically kept apart, have since long both changed dramatically. Today we don't know anymore which is which. 'Stadtlandschaft', the modernist urban landscape, promising a better life has not only produced a substantial part of today's various and heterogenous urban texture, it has also extended the city into and beyond its surroundings. When we now speculate about a landscape-centric view as the conference program posits, this view is not antagonistic, not landscape versus city. It is a functional view: landscape used as a model for understanding, or at least describing, the conceptual relationship and concrete cohabitation between "people and their environment". This relationship is specific to its place. The following reflection is on Berlin, its people, and the relationship with their environment.

1.1 Berlin ?

Taking interest in Berlin's urban structure is nothing new. Individual examples of its open spaces and diverse landscape architecture projects have been the subject of much debate both among experts and within the city itself. The particularity of Berlin's landscape culture, however, transcends individual signature projects and it merits to regard individual open spaces as constituents of a broader culture of public space.

This current reality has its deep temporal roots. Harking back to movements of the late 1970s, critical towards modernist urban developments, Berlin saw – convergingly – the founding of urban ecology, the participatory involvement of informed and involved citizens, and a spatial practice in landscape architecture aligned with urbanism, architecture and art. The 1980s with its International Building Exhibition (IBA'87) had Berlin showcase internationally the postmodern urbanistic turn that fostered a critical affirmative view on existing structures – including landscape and nature.[2] In pairing with the successive dramatic geopolitical openings of the 1990s, a substantial quantity and quality of landscape projects have been realized, reconfirming and enhancing the city's specific entanglement with its urban nature.

The example of the sleek transformation of the airfield of inner-city Tempelhof Airport into a public park illustrates the cultural (and not formal) dimension of landscape in Berlin. The widespread appreciation of informality and 'rawness' within public open spaces was demonstrated in the



[fig 2] Tempelhof Airfield, open to the public since 2010 (c) Jessica Bridger, 2011



[fig 3] Tempelhof Airfield, during Covid, ca. April 2021 (c) Lorenza Manfredi

2014 referendum '100% Tempelhof'. The referendum called for abolishing any urban development along the edges of the former airport. Much broader, it also called to keeping the extensive open spaces of Tempelhofer Feld totally unchanged and to forbid any future amendments. The un-treated and un-designed post-infrastructureal expanse of the former airfield has since formally become a public park – and a landscape icon for Berlin.

The situation of and discourse on Tempelhofer Feld must be read as part of the city's specific geopolitical dimension, which continues to have structural impact. But there also is a prior dimension of local landscape design history. After being redesigned by Peter Joseph Lenné in the first half of the 19th century, the centrally located Tiergarten park – some two thirds the size of Tempelhofer Feld – became Berlin's first public park; a 'Volksgarten', a people's garden, in Lenné's words..Tiergarten formed a bridgehead for the development of the Volkspark concept in the later 19th century.[3] A number of communal ventures for public parks followed, such as Volkspark Friedrichshain, in 1846 or Humboldthain opened in 1876. The modernist example of Volkspark Jungfernheide, designed by Erwin Barth and opened in 1923, was intended to intertwine nature and people, creating places of informal entertainment, didactics, and a wide scale of programmatic usages, such as sports, education, or gardening. Urbanistically and architecturally, models of fostering immediate contact between the city inhabitant and his natural environment can be found with the 'Siedlungen', new urban schemes at large scale that were conceived and developed for the rapidly growing metropolis of Berlin between the two wars, in the 1920s. The 'Siedlungen' sported the idea of an integrated play between the city, its inhabitants, landscape and nature. Volkspark and Siedlungen are two original concepts that still play their distinct role in the city.

Berlin's city's spatial reality after Second World War was defined by wastelands and rubble sites where once dense city blocks and industrial zones stood: a voided and disrupted texture in which even many of the remaining buildings were replaced in the decades following, adapted to the new reality of a divided city. Overarching infrastructures, especially railways, however remained undismantled and structurally connected, albeit often defunct. The unique geo-political situation had created unique urban conditions: Berlin was under allied jurisdiction until reunification in 1990, divided in four sectors. The railways and their territories remained under one administration: in the hands of socialist East-Germany. As a result, the extraterritorial rail-structures in the three Western sectors were generally not developed. The structures slowly decayed and were taken over by spontaneous vegetation and a lively fauna. For some forty years these spaces lived a life separate from the surrounding dynamics of urban development.

1.2. Discovering Urban Nature – contextualizing landscape creation

One of the triggers for reflection on the larger context and character of Berlin's current open spaces came, perhaps significantly, not from within the landscape profession itself. In 2013, the German sociologist Jens Lachmund, who teaches and researches in the Netherlands, published the comprehensive study 'Greening Berlin', which examines the "production" of Berlin's open space from a sociological perspective.[4] Lachmund underlines the longterm co-productive processes that since the 1970s took decades of work, negotiation and development between ecologists, neighborhood initiatives, political and administrative agents.

In 2017 Matthew Gandy and Sandra Jasper published the documentary film 'Natura Urbana - The Brachen of Berlin'. [5] The film illuminates the specificity of Berlin's open spaces from geographers' perspective. Gandy and Jasper bridge their structural urban observations with narrating the scientific and societal validation of the porous postwar urban structure of Berlin. In 2020 the findings of the film entered into the book 'Natura Urbana' by Matthew Gandy.[6] One of the main protagonists featured in the film and referenced in the successive publication is the ecologist Professor Herbert Sukopp, founder of the first Institute of Ecology in Germany at Technische Universität Berlin in 1972, and founding figure of a new line of research: urban ecology.[7] Urban ecology as a science looks at nature in the city as a primary category in itself. Urban nature was not anymore considered as an intermediate processual stage, implicitly of minor value, but for its particularity and ecologically valuable diversity. Biotope mapping as part of the immense venture of creating an environmental atlas for Berlin, indiscriminately categorized all surfaces and structures for their, albeit varying, biotope character, parking-lots and wetland included. [8] Initially in West-Berlin only, the city's extensive post-war wastelands, brown-fields and voids (Brachen) exempt from disturbance by building development were a main field of research. After the fall of the wall in 1989, the former border zones between East and West Berlin, the enormous tracts of land occupied by other infrastructure, such as airfields were added to the spatial reservoir of research.

The ecological and, successively, civic validation of the role of natural processes within the city has had its longterm political and structural implications. A general appreciation of 'natural states' has since been informing role and form of Berlin's open spaces and continues to do so.

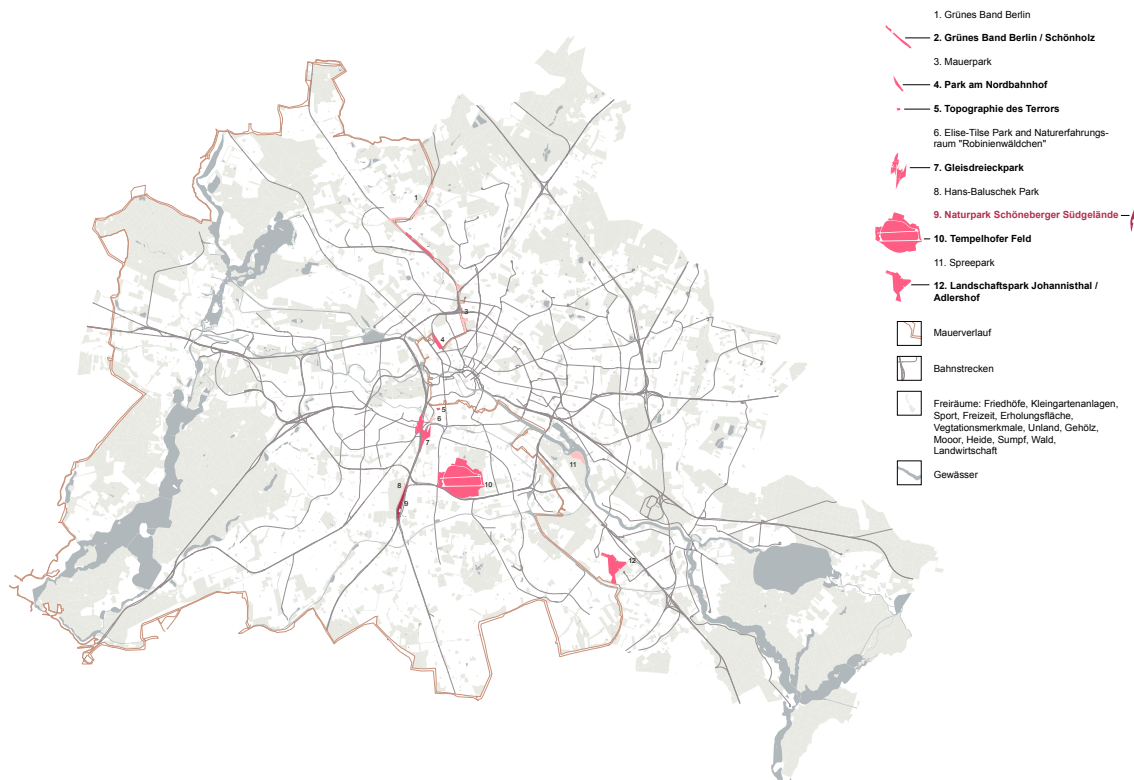


[fig 4] Atelier Loidl, Park am Gleisdreieck / Flaschenhalspark, 2014 (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021

1.3. Nature beyond Ecology – spatial realities

However, Berlin's 'Natura Urbana', is a matter and interest not only to urban ecology. Nature here is part also of an open-space culture that has become part of the city's shape and essence. Next to ubiquitous informal uses of wastelands and a general readiness for implementation and acceptance of temporary and intermediate uses, Berlin features a telling number of official landscape projects, be they concerted, designed projects or strategic attributions in an urbanistic context. A selection of such projects were part of consideration and research for the 2022 International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Garden.[9] The selection aimed to contextualize projects as exemplary of a notable landscape culture. A map, potentially serving as a landscape tour guide, shows the overall distribution and structural connections of these selected projects.

An early example of a "doing nothing" approach later exemplified with Tempelhofer Feld, albeit at comparatively miniscule scale, is one empty city block in Berlin-Kreuzberg, next to Anhalter Bahnhof. From 1984 on 'Naturerfahrungsraum Robinienwäldchen' has been consecrated to play and experience with untattered ruderal nature. 'Mauerpark' on parts of the border zone between East and West Berlin in Prenzlauer Berg was started with plantings by a civic initiative in 1990. Following a design by landscape architect Gustaf Lange, the first part of the park opened to the public in 1994.[10] 'Mauerpark' initially became know for its boldly open lawn area, clearly formulated landscape themes such as a hill with an amphitheatre, and groups of fastigate poplars all of which were immediately occupied by an eager urban clientel. Yet, other less designed elements of the park, such as a birch grove over rail tracks and remnant cobble stone pavement referenced the omnipresence of the city's ruderal flora which was integrated into the park design. One year later planning on Park am Nordbahnhof started. Originally, the competition-winning design for the central, innercity park was strongly formal, yet – for various reasons – had to sucessively adapt to a more economic and more ecologic program, combining public use, ruderal vegetation and public art.[11] 'Topographie des Terrors' (Heinz W. Hallmann, Ursula Wilms, 2010) is a landscape and architecture project situated on the authentic historic site of a number of buildings that housed important institutions of the national-socialist regime, including the headquarters of the Gestapo, the secret police. The landscape project uses the process aspects of maintenance and ruderal growth as representative part of visualizing and explaining site, history and dealing with the built structures of the dictatorship.[12] Elise-Tilse-Park (Büro Laskowski, 2008), is a park situated next to 'Naturerfahrungsraum Robinienwäldchen', on the grounds of former Anhalter Bahnhof, Berlin's busiest train station before the war, characterized



[fig 5] Map of selected urban nature projects in Berlin. International Carlo Scarpa Prize for the Garden 2022. Graphics: Lorenza Manfredi, Jannis Schiefer, Laura Veronese



[fig 6] Naturerfahrungsraum Robinienwäldchen, since 1984 (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021 [fig 7] Gustav Lange, Mauerpark, 1990-1994 (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021 [fig 8 & 9] Fugmann Janotta, Park am Nordbahnhof, 1995-2010 (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021 [fig 10 & 11] Heinz W.Hallmann, Ursula Wilms, Topographie des Terrors, Berlin 2010 (c) Friederike von Rauch, 2010 [fig 12] Atelier Loidl, Park am Gleisdreieck / Ostpark, 2011 (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2012 [fig 13] Atelier Loidl, Park am Gleisdreieck / Ostpark, 2011 (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021

by minimal intrusion into the ruderal overgrowth and use of punctual reconstruction of derelict railway structures, such as platforms. Hans-Baluschek-Park and Landschaftspark Johannisthal / Adlershof (both by Büro Kiefer, 2002 and 2005/2010) are two examples of applying minimalist interventions of a contemporary design language in the spatial context of neighbouring or integrated areas of nature preservation.

Spreepark and Grünes Band Berlin (green belt Berlin) are both currently developing future projects and initiatives which in a few years time will merit an updated critical review of the contextuality of Berlin's urban nature.[13][14] Obviously, 'regular' parks, extensive, publicly accessible forest areas and water bodies constitute other substantial elements in respect. Characteristic of all of these spaces is their almost ubiquitously spread throughout the city.

1.4. In a Nutshell – Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände as point of reference

In the genealogy of these and many other places and projects 'Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände' stands out as a key-figure and reference. The project of combining public park and nature preservation area essentially reaches back to 1981. It was then that citizen initiatives achieved a moratorium on clearing the site of the former railyard that had overgrown undisturbedly since its functional demise around 1953. In the wake of contemporary nature and environment orientent politics and legislation, the citizen initiatives enforced an assessment for its biological diversity and ecologic value – and its subsequent protection. An ecologic survey of the 18 hectare site was repeated and confirmed for its ecological value in 1991. From then on 'Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände' was finally initiated as the project of a new kind of park. It was featured as a "beacon project" in Germany's EXPO 2000.



[fig 14] railyard Schöneberger Südgelände 1935. Archive of Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände (PA131225)

[fig 15] Schöneberger Südgelände 1981 (c) Ulrich Horb

As an experiment on civic comportment and urban ecology, the Natur Park balances its role as a nature reserve that is publicly accessible. The park's vegetation has kept changing dramatically, only few of the originally signature birch trees are left, Robinia trees are slowly replaced by maple and oak. Meanwhile, the natural development processes of the 'technoscape' (Kowarik) are carefully mediated in order to retain a degree of structural diversity of the varying habitats. Parts where spontaneous forest growth is left untouched are balanced against open stretches of meadow, periodically maintained by herds of grazing goats. The open areas also serve as didactic structures which spatially enable the perception of ecological processes. Maintenance and careful clearing is also necessary to assure the safety of visitors. The initial some 10.000 visitors per year have recently peaked at 100.000. Südgelände has been an icon not least, because art and sculpture have played a pivotal role in communicating the concept. Developed over decades from a workshop on site, the artist group Odious developed sculptures that in many ways create access and simultaneously generate respect and instruction. The raised walkway, a sculptural project, which in its haptic experience and constructive details of a detached – although all the more attentive – contact with the surrounding natural structures serves as a tool of observation, didactics and mediation. Initial distrust and particularities between disciplines has given way to the understanding of necessity of constructive, trans-disciplinary collaboration, a *modus operandi* that has become indispensable practice in projecting open spaces in Berlin.



[fig 16] Südgelände. Former rail tracks overgrown by signature birch trees. Tracks are repurposed as a path-system in the publicly accessible part of the park. (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021 [fig 17] Südgelände. Walkway by Odious, Walkway reacts to existing trees. (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021 [fig 18] Südgelände. Walkway by Odious, Walkway as sculpture (c) Marco Zunin, 2021 [fig 19] Südgelände. Walkway by Odious.(c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021

‘Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände’ – as can be expected – it is not a generic Berlin project. It is a special park. The park does not cover the full program of a Volkspark, one goes there for observation, a quiet stroll, a talk with a friend. The park is topographically closed off by its neighbouring, functioning railway tracks and – unlike most other public spaces in Berlin – it is closed at night. Yet, ‘Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände’ may serve 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”. The site as part of the railway structure not only spatially connects to a series of other examples of Berlin’s ‘urban nature culture’. The project must also be seen as almost stereotypically linking and synthesising often adverse disciplines and polarities. The project negotiates biotope protection versus public park uses, ecological value of untattered natural processes versus the necessities of maintenance work, design and art versus nature.

1.5. Where are we going?

Thirty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the city finds itself in a situation in which the presence and utilization of urban nature are, to a large extent, accepted without question and has become part of the essence of the city. ‘StadtNatur’, urban nature, may be a figure of thought that holds much of Berlin together. This ‘StadtNatur’ is made of many components of which urban ecology is but one. Individual and concerted initiatives and participation [15] are driving factors and – not least – a specific design language in landscape can be found.[16] It seems as if Berlin has – until now – been able to make good use of its underlying structure. The city is livable, viable ecologically and still retains a unique social and cultural structure. At the same time, the city is undergoing accelerated development. 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 economic order. The historic otherness of the city has been wearing off; like in so many other places around world.. Against this background and in the face of current challenges to city life, it is important to remain aware of the exceptional quality and potential of Berlin’s urban nature.

Acknowledgement

The findings above were developed in the context of the 2022 International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche. I here draw on the contributions and rely on the knowledge and statements of those involved: a great number of diverse protagonists in Berlin and internationally. The initial research was summarised in a publication in an Italian and an English edition.[17] Also a dedicated documentary film of some 40 minutes was made by Italian director Davide Gambino and a large exhibition was conceived and shown in Treviso, Italy in 2022.[18]

References and Literature

- [1] An interesting example in this context is Christophe Girot comparing Mauerpark (1994), Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände (1999) and Tilla Durieux Park at Potsdamer Platz (2003). Girot, Christophe: Eulogy of the void. In DISP 156, Zürich, January 2004
- [2] Examples here may be Ökoprojekt Block 6 Dessauer Straße, 1987 (landscape architecture and water management by Hans Loidl, Christoph Luz, Harald Kraft and AG Ökologischer Stadtumbau. Part of a sensitive handling of the site is also the consideration of its 'social morphology' (pathways, spatial organisation), the consideration of the aesthetic relationship between ecology and design as well as the use of simple "natural landscape" design themes, which had a great aesthetic proximity to the then ubiquitous "undesigned" wastelands of the time. Another example is the residential ensemble Wohnpark am Berlin Museum/Block 33, 1984–86 centrally featuring a spontaneous locust grove. (Landscape architecture by Dieter Frowein, Gerhard Spangenberg, Holm Becker. Consultation by Falk Trillitzsch.)
- [3] Tiergarten was redesigned as a public landscape park, a development from its representative aristocratic predecessors (such as in Sanssouci, in Potsdam). The urbanistic aspect of interplaying city and landscape was shared and developed together with the architect Karl-Friedrich Schinkel. In his late years Lenné went on to shape urbanistic concepts of the city's rapid extensions.
- [4] Jens Lachmund, 'The greening of Berlin'. MIT, Boston 2013
- [5] Matthew Gandy, Sandra Jasper, 'Natura Urbana – The Brachen of Berlin'. Documentary video, 72'. Germany 2017
- [6] Matthew Gandy, 'Natura Urbana'. MIT, Boston 2022
- [7] Among Sukopp's innumerable publications see: Herbert Sukopp (Ed.), 'Stadtökologie. Das Beispiel Berlin'. Reimer. Berlin 1990
- [8] Senate of Berlin, Umweltatlas. (see www.berlin.de/umweltatlas). The cartography of biotopes began in the early 1980s and decisively contributed to Berlin's 'Landscape and Species Protection Program' of 1984.
- [9] Lorenza Manfredi, Jannis Schiefer, Laura Veronese. Through Berlin: Urban Natures In: Patrizia Boschiero, Thilo Folkerts, Luigi Latini (eds.), Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände and Berlin's Urban Nature, International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2022. Benetton Foundation, Treviso
- [10] Mauerpark was expanded to the originally planned size of 14 ha, finally, in 2020
- [11] Conversation with Harald Fugmann, September 2021.
- [12] Ursula Wilms (Ed.). Topographie des Terrors / Topography of Terror. Gestaltung eines Erinnerungsortes / The Design of a Memorial. Jovis, Berlin 2021
- [13] "With the new Spreepark, the capital is regaining a green open space for all citizens that harmoniously combines art, culture and nature with the unique history of the area. Relics from the amusement park era, such as the Ferris wheel, are being artistically reinterpreted with a special focus on sustainability and thus revitalised for new uses. We have been implementing this concept step by step since 2020. The area around the Eierhäuschen has been open to visitors again since 2023." www.spreepark.berlin, acc. 14.07.2024
- [14] Ingo Kowarik, 'The "Green Belt Berlin": Establishing a greenway where the Berlin Wall once stood by integrating ecological, social and cultural approaches'. Landscape and Urban Planning. Volume 184, April 2019, Pages 12-22
- [15] See Andra Lichtenstein, Flavia Alice Mamei, 'Gleisdreieck / Parklife'. Transcript, Berlin 2015
- [16] For a reflection specifically on the design of Park am Gleisdreieck see: Leonard Grosch, Constanze A. Petrow, 'Designing Parks: Berlin's Park am Gleisdreieck or the Art of Creating Lively Places', Jovis, Berlin 2015
- [17] Patrizia Boschiero, Thilo Folkerts, Luigi Latini (eds.), Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände and Berlin's Urban Nature, International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2022, 32nd edition. Benetton Foundation / Antiga, Treviso 2022
- [18] Davide Gambino, Natur Park Südgelände, Documentary video, 40', Italy 2022



[fig 20] Spreepark Berlin. Overgrown gardens of the fun-park (c) Thilo Folkerts, 2021