



Berlin's walled garden

After 25 years of experience one would have expected the Bundsgartenschau in West Berlin last year to be an impressive display of horticultural and landscaping skills.

This was undoubtedly the case, but it was also apparent from visiting the event, that our German counterparts placed more emphasis on the Bundsgartenschau (or BGS) to be a valuable long-term addition to the city's open spaces, and less importance on the dual role as a temporary flower show.

In the past the BGS's had been criticised for failing to concentrate resources on the long-term aspects, which had resulted in too many successful horticultural shows becoming rather characterless and bland parkland. Avoiding this was an overriding factor in the planning of Berlin's BGS, where the main aim was to provide a large, naturalistic parkland within the City; and to use the machinery

Can we learn from the success of German garden festivals? Peter Sheard went to Berlin last year and found that we may still have some way to go

of the BGS to promote the park to its future users and channel significant sums of money from central government funds to realise the project.

But how successful has this been and what influences have shaped the finished result?

Berlin itself is ideally suited to the whole concept of a BGS; not only environmentally but also politically. Throughout its 12 years of development, and despite changes in the city government (Senate), the project has remained a highly publicised and somewhat controversial topic. This marked public interest is due to a combination of factors.

Firstly, it is a product of Berlin's isolation within the Eastern Block, causing the average Berliner to show great interest in

his city in the form of an exaggerated sense of civic pride; hence the BGS has been scrutinised by an attentive public since its conception in 1975.

Furthermore the mixed populace, consisting of almost any racial and political minority you care to mention, has resulted in a bewildering range of demands being placed on any future park and has made the challenge of satisfying public opinion very difficult.

Finally Berlin's open spaces are very unevenly distributed, and in the south east districts around the BGS, with their poor housing and social problems, the provision was especially inadequate.

As well as public opinion, the BGS had political aims. In an overcrowded city like Berlin,

with its limited space, to be associated with active 'green' policies was a valuable asset. Added to this the BGS is an established tool for promoting the image of a city that is alive and well behind the wall.

Another important influence on the BGS was the activities of the green pressure groups in Berlin, which ensured that the whole affair was placed firmly in the political forum.

Along with Germany's Green Party these groups advocated an ecologically based approach to ameliorating the otherwise hostile environment. They wanted the finished park to be radically different from past efforts and to a certain extent their opinions prevailed.

From the Senate's point of view the BGS, was the flagship of its 'green policies' and was to show the importance it placed on upgrading Berlin's dense urban areas. It was to provide 80ha of parkland for about

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600,000 people, with the recreational value of the park being the primary motive.

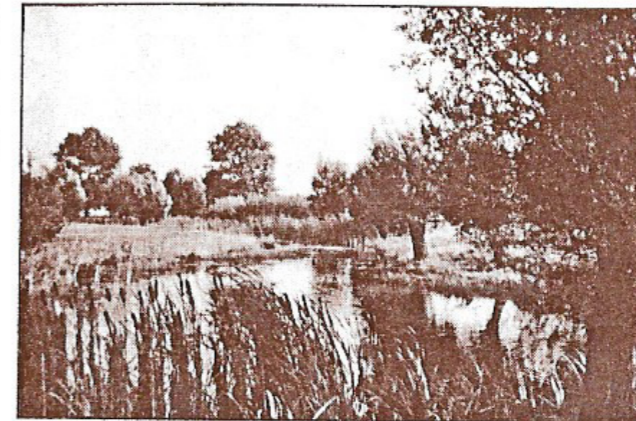
The design chosen was by Herr Miller, a landscape architect from Stuttgart, whose approach was to provide a variety of landscape elements and characters.

The park focuses on a large lake, with numerous rivers feeding into it from the surrounding hillsides created from the excavated material. The land modelling is superbly handled and together with the heavily planted thickets of trees and shrubs, already give the site a sense of enclosure and maturity.

Much of the planting is naturalistic, with large areas of marsh, water meadow and reeds around the lake giving a wild open feel. Major footpaths wind in from the three entrances and around the lake, with lesser paths taking you around the horticultural events nearer the edges of the site.

There were scores of gardens and exhibitions on subjects as diverse as rhododendrons and cemeteries, but all were presented to the highest standards and deftly laid out to lead the visitor through to the centre-piece of the lake itself.

Throughout the BGS, the dominant features were the quality and maturity of the artificial landscapes, which were achieved after only five years of

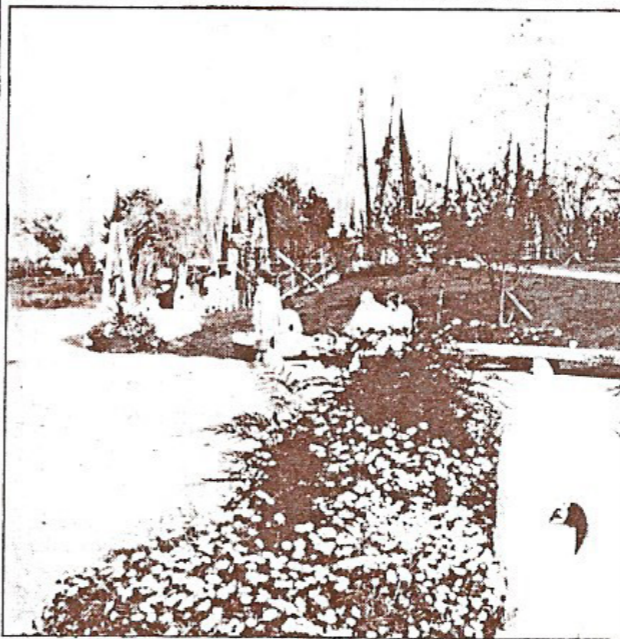


Berlin's 12 year advantage resulted in a natural parkland

establishment - largely a result of excellent horticultural practices. This was already producing a strong framework within the parkland around which the temporary elements of the BGS were arranged.

So as a visitor it was easy to be impressed, but how has this park measured up to the task of satisfying its creators and users?

Firstly, the Senate was pleased. The BGS stayed roughly within budget at 180 million DM; provided jobs and a healthy flow of visitors; and has been a worthy publicity exercise for Berlin. Also by the formation of a management company for the park, and by using the BGS to start many annual events such as music festivals, the future of the park seems assured.



Theme gardens and entertainments were kept to the edges

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decision to think long-term from the start was the right one.

It means that the process of developing the intended landscape from the very beginning takes full advantage of the capital while it is available, rather than depending on dwindling or non-existent resources once the exhibitions have gone.

The dual functions of garden festivals, with their opposing time scales, are the most difficult problems to resolve: in Berlin it was a design decision to relegate the exhibitions to the entrances and the periphery of the site following secondary routeways. Doing this meant less disruption to the main body of the site following the removal of these exhibitions.

Logical

Although in many ways the exhibitions were not conspicuous enough, in Berlin the logical distribution of priorities at the planning stage will pay dividends, and is worth bearing in mind as we plan our own garden festivals over the next few years.

Berlin also demonstrated how essential it is to allow sufficient time to plan and construct festival landscapes, and we must not go back to the impossible time scales imposed on Liverpool's IGF. The Germans allowed themselves 12 years from start to finish, thereby accepting the dynamic nature of landscape work.

We have a long way to go. On Berlin's timescale we should already know what the 1992 Garden Festival should look like, and before the end of the decade be finishing its construction. Only then will our festivals do full credit to the professions involved and ideas they represent.

Berlin proved that many important and complex issues concerning the environment can be communicated to a wide audience in an entertaining way. To help public awareness of the environment is always desirable and such events as these festivals offer a golden opportunity to spread interests and ideas which are important to us all.

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Here it seems there are lessons to be learnt for the future, to avoid such situations as Liverpool's IGF site becoming the subject of a viability study.

However, dissenting voices have been heard, with claims the BGS was unoriginal, too highbrow and out of date in its design. A major criticism has been the decision to close the park at night and charge an entrance fee. Some felt this contradicted the idea of creating a people's park.

On the basis of questionnaires, most visitors seemed to have enjoyed the BGS, but there have been justifiable complaints by some local inhabitants regarding the narrow range of activities available.

For instance the central lake is there only to be looked at, and swimming, boating and fishing are not allowed; which is something of a pity when one considers its size and expense.

Passive

This emphasis on passive recreation was too overwhelming in Berlin, because although it did contribute to a calming atmosphere, a park of such a size should have been able to have absorbed some more active pursuits to suit a wider range of tastes. After all if the water serves only one purpose it merely becomes a barrier.

Regrettably this lack of activities is not likely to be relieved by expenditure in the future so it will require careful site planning if the park is to adapt to changing public demands.

Overall, it would seem unlikely that the BGS would satisfy all its critics and fulfill all its chosen aims, but the broad