

A role model for CITY PARKS



Berlin's planners are renovating the city's parks to provide both space and enjoyment. Peter Sheard reports

During the 19th Century, Britain led the world in the creation of public parks to bring nature and beauty to its rapidly expanding urban conurbations. Decades later the UK's cities continue to expand but their parks are declining. The reasons for this are complex. Increasing privacy within our society has led to the neglect of public life with a corresponding decline in park usage. More and more people prefer to drive out of town for their leisure, while the old parks are seen as unsafe.

Parks, however, should continue to contribute to the quality of urban life by offering a "means of going away without leaving town".

The situation has provoked discussion. The Urban Parks Seminar last year, the Glasgow Cities 2000 Conference and the Parks Conference in Stoke all attempted to address the problems of neglected open spaces. In addition, both the Landscape Institute and the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management have made repeated representations to Government and are trying to define future policy in this area.

A further significant development has been the publication of the think-tank Demos-Comedia's

report *Park Life* based on observations of over 100,000 park users and over 1,200 interviews. It found that many people perceive their parks as being unsafe, unexciting and suffering from neglect. The report also found that people see community and ecology projects as successful ways of updating tired open spaces. It called for an extensive review of funding and management of open spaces.

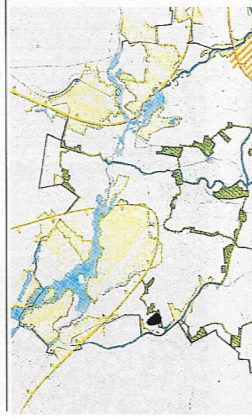
Everyone agrees the UK's parks need renovation and revitalisation, but what should we do? Our European neighbours offer us inspiration and illustrate the advantages of proactive landscape planning. Both Paris and Barcelona are well publicised examples of commitments to contemporary park design with, respectively, their Grands Projets and Olympic parks.

But Berlin, a city undergoing large scale renewal and redevelopment as it faces up to the challenge of once again being Germany's capital, holds the best examples. In fact, the city has become a microcosm of the problems and potentials of today's urban park. And the way they are addressed holds many lessons for Britain.

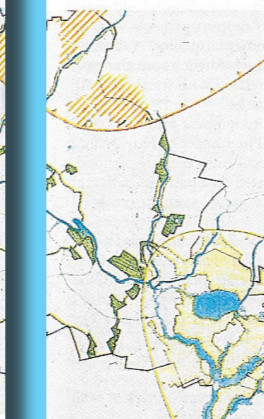
Freed from the limitations of its former walls,



Above: Berlin's Volkspark Hasenheide has been renovated to enhance its ecological impact. Above right: Community groups had a major input into Mauerpark



Right and far right: Berlin's planners are ensuring a balance between building and urban space, such as at Gleintunnel. Below: Map shows park distribution

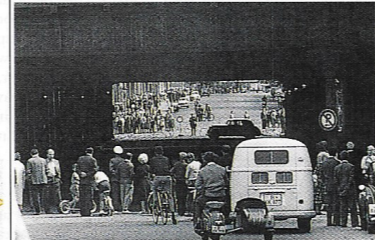


metropolitan Berlin now covers an area of almost 90,000 sq/km with a population of 3.5 million. Rarely out of the news as a symbol of Germany's reunification hopes, the city exudes a sense of being a place where history is in the making.

Berlin is like an anthill with development on practically every street corner. But not all this activity is commercial. The city has an action plan for how to improve and expand its green spaces to balance out its extraordinary level of construction.

The Senate für Stadtentwicklung und Umweltschutz administers and implements these improvements within the city's 23 districts. This central planning body is responsible for all aspects of green space design and management throughout Berlin and undertakes a regular survey, known as Landschaftsprogramm & Artenschutzprogramm, of the city.

The 1994 plan, the latest, is an impressive 160-page report which takes into account macro planning concerns such as the quality of air, water and climate throughout the city; the ecological quality of its open spaces from the historic Schloss parks to the forests on its outskirts; the distribution



of its parks as well as examining who uses them and where a deficit of provision occurs.

Currently, parks and woods account for almost a third of the city's area, but uneven distribution is a real problem and parks vary in quality. Unlike many UK cities, however, Berlin's planning system corrects the situation in a coordinated way.

An examination of the map of Berlin's parks (left) reveals a good provision of urban open spaces, historic parks such as the Tiergarten in the centre, and a string of Volksparks created in the 1920's and 1930's. Additionally, west Berlin has the extensive woods and lakes of the Havel while the east has the Stadforst. However, there is a shortage of open spaces in the Inner Parkring and in the south of the city, and it is this which the

1994 programme aims to reverse with the proposal for nine new parks and more green corridors to connect them together.

The surveys also aim to discover local demands. This is fundamental in those parts of Berlin with a high proportion of immigrants, and has led to the provision of special facilities. Elsewhere, however, the districts contact park users and report back to the senate to assist the formulation of the Landschaftsprogramm.

A good example of this process is the Mauerpark in the north east of the city, where a series of five assemblies was held with schools, old people, community and green groups to ascertain local requirements. Their demands formed an important part of the competition brief.

But the senate is wary about taking this process too far as it fears becoming vulnerable to inappropriate criticism based on trends and social politics. The senate is equally cautious of "inclusive management", where citizens become directly involved in park management, and prefers to focus on long-term management aims.

Even so, demands for such things as city farms,



more nature and easier access are keenly listened to and acted upon.

Closely associated with public participation is politics. In the UK, the president of the LI has said there is "no political mileage in parks" and that reviving them would be "a struggle because of lack of legislation". The opposite is happening in Berlin. In fact, the senate often despairs at the degree to which green issues become political, distort policy and cause delay and frustration.

Nevertheless, political pressure has forced many of Berlin's developers to embrace a greater degree of green provision and ecological sensitivity. This is particularly so for those developing areas of ecologically valuable wasteland stranded during Berlin's division. The senate's message is that ▷

CASE STUDY

The 50 hectare Volkspark Hasenheide in Neukölln is a perfect example of how Berlin's older parks are being refurbished to enhance the city's environment. Carried out under the Landschaftsprogramm 1984, and partly in response to financial constraints, the diversification of the park's habitats via "differentiated management" was aimed at maximising its ecological potential while retaining its heritage value.

The management system adopted means that conservation areas, "sports zones", and ornamental

planting can be found in the same park. A park of great beauty, Volkspark Hasenheide succeeds in preserving its character of "a play and pleasure ground" while serving as a reservoir of valuable flora and fauna within the city.

Since its inception, the ecologically-managed park has educated the public and maintenance staff of the considerable benefits of a park for nature. And local schools and volunteer groups participate in the park's maintenance.



Most of Berlin's parks display green signs to educate visitors and reinforce an open space's status as a protected area

▷ good park provision comes from planning legislation properly executed and not always via political point scoring.

This flows from its legal obligation to provide a proportion of open space per head of population. And, like street maintenance, it has to raise taxes to fund this objective.

All of Germany's cities have the same laws. They ensure against the neglect which UK parks suffer as a result of their non-statutory status. Furthermore, Germany's Federal Government and EU cash supplement local tax to help finance this vitally important legal duty.

Recent debate in the UK has heard calls for parks to be listed and graded to protect them against cuts and make them eligible for grant support. In Berlin, the Landschaftsschutzgebiet system of legal protection not only prevents parks being neglected, but also defines under various categories the main reasons for a park's protection.

Such reasons might be plant diversity, historic importance or its value for nature conservation. Most parks in Berlin display green signs to educate the visitor and, like the National Trust's oak leaf emblem, reinforce a park's status as a protected area. In addition, the senate's programme defines green areas to be kept and managed, thereby offering another layer of statutory protection.

A major problem in the UK has been the introduction of CCT as a way of achieving improved standards with better value for money. But CCT generally ignores changing requirements and raising quality. Nevertheless, financial pressures are often persuasive, and in Berlin the senate sees a move to CCT as being "almost inevitable".

Such a move would be controversial. The districts object vehemently, seeing CCT as a threat to job security and the whole ethos of maintaining parks as a public duty. And the senate itself is worried that CCT would tend to dissipate energy and produce short-term savings at the expense of long-term planning objectives. It

admits, however, that there is room for improvements among the direct labour organisations which most districts operate.

Of greater appeal in Berlin are the opportunities provided by sponsorship. This is largely a result of an active policy of using competitions to define briefs and create new innovative designs.

Although sponsors tend to prefer high profile schemes such as the Lustgarten or Potsdamer Platz, the senate encourages them to help smaller projects such as the Mauerpark.

Over the past five years the senate has hosted over 15 international competitions for open spaces and a greater number of smaller national ones. These competitions are seen as increasing the quality of the city's parks and helping to diversify public taste.

In the UK, the DoE is beginning to sponsor more competitions, but Britain's landscape profession needs to develop more patrons and a higher profile to benefit from private money.

A significant difference between Germany and the UK is that money raised from Germany's national lottery funds cultural events and sports, but not parks. The UK's landscape industry looks toward lottery money with almost a religious fervour. Undeniably, the £9,000m awaiting distribution over the next seven years could finance a lot of the aims of the three seminars mentioned earlier. But what are the policies of the organisations involved in distributing the money?

Firstly, the National Heritage Memorial Fund says "it is keen to look at the area of inner-city parks for support", especially those with "heritage significance", and welcomed bids from local authorities. However, up to June only 7 per cent of funds had been awarded to "land of scenic, scientific or historic importance".

The other funding body, the Millennium Commission, has £1.6bn at its disposal and aims, among other things, to support projects with "a high design and environmental quality". Of the 83 schemes going forward for further consideration over 20 are landscape-related with some exciting proposals to revitalise parks.

These projects need to happen, but we should not rely on handouts. The impact of rejuvenated urban parks will only occur once they are planned, financed and implemented on a national basis and overseen by either a new agency or local authorities.

Berlin proves without doubt that good open spaces which people actually want will only come about when a city is obliged to plan them with the same priority as its streets and housing. Berlin's commitment to its urban spaces is seen as a key part of its revitalisation. It would benefit us all if the UK's cities were able to do the same. □

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