

Festive reasons

The German Garden Festivals show how open space planning can generate regeneration, innovation and civic pride, writes Peter Sheard

In 1985 Berlin hosted its first Federal Garden Festival or Bundesgartenschau (BGS). It was a horticultural event similar to Chelsea but far more serious, with large-scale urban planning playing an equal role to the gardens and displays.

Ten years later Berlin dropped the BGS in favour of its Olympic bid and the honour went to Cottbus, a small town 100km south east of the capital.

The BGSs have been post-war attempts to regenerate Germany's shattered cities and, since 1951, have grown in stature to the point where their example has been emulated all over Europe. Their legacy is also highly impressive: the Westpark in Munich, for example, is a superb example of a popular urban park, with its sculptural earthforms and woodlands echoing the countryside of the Alps. Berlin's 1985 BGS is now a much loved oasis set within the urban dereliction of the south east part of the city.

Despite the obvious value of the past festivals, there is a continuing conflict in Germany between the landscape profession — which stands for design innovation — on the one hand, and the horticultural industry standing for commercial display on the other.

Nevertheless the BGSs continue to be planned, with shows booked until 2003 and some potentially very worthwhile examples.

The show in 2001, for example, will be in Karlsruhe — in fact, its second festival — and will cover over 160ha of the city. Karlsruhe cites its main objectives for the BGS as being to 'upgrade and restructure' existing parks and to produce 'necessary ecological urban renewal'. This basically involves better streets, less traffic, sustainable development and more modern parks to reflect current thinking and demands.

Other examples exist and all contrast sadly with the situation in this country. Our 'Garden Festivals', deprived of realistic timetables and killed off by political ambivalence (but not, ironically, cash) terminated at Ebbw Vale. Such a loss has not been re-

placed, with the plethora of grants available dissipating the energies of organisations trying to create dramatic new open space on a grand scale with national exposure.

The Single Regeneration Budget, for instance, attempts to co-ordinate over 25 separate grants aimed at urban regeneration. Good schemes do come out of it — such as the Thames Gateway improvements — but a festival offers the chance for a greater degree of publicity and scale.

In the UK over the past few years there has been widespread concern over the future of our urban parks voiced by various professional bodies, and expert views have been produced showing their accelerating decay.

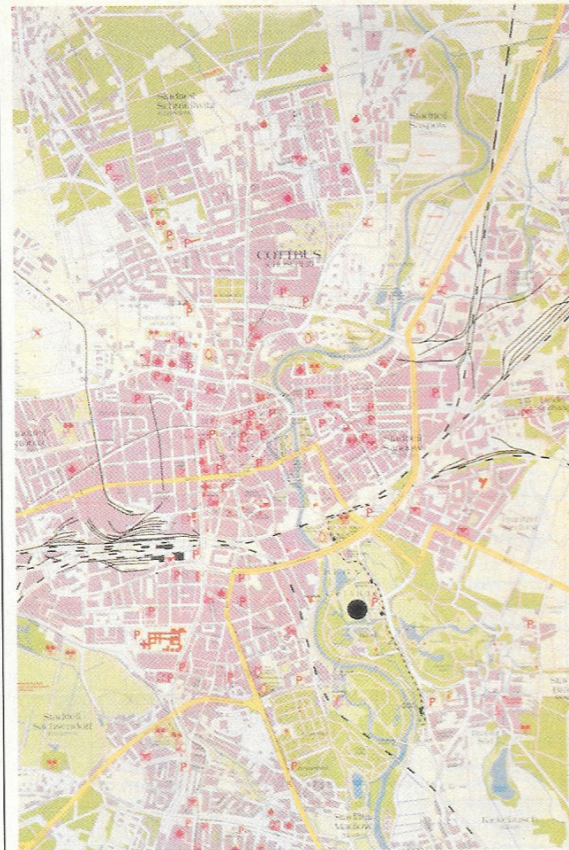
Much evidence has been assembled to illustrate how green space can regenerate and improve quality of life and economic prospects. In Greenwich the proposal for a Millennium Exhibition on a par with the Festival of Britain has revived interest in our defunct garden festival movement.

The prospect of displaying the best UK landscape design financed by seemingly endless Lottery funding has proved irresistible to many seasoned campaigners. The demands for new standards of park design are loud and clear but we will have to look to Europe and the US to find good enough examples.

Our future new parks face many changing demands: an increasingly multi-cultural society, for example, and greater financial limitations and more ecological responsibility. Garden festivals could help with these opportunities and promote experimentation, and the German variety gives us a useful example of how open space planning can be a catalyst for regeneration, innovation and civic pride.

This year's BGS was awarded on the rebound to Cottbus, with the result that the usual long planning time of up to 10 years was compressed into three years with a corresponding knock-on effect on the scope of the festival.

However, the festival did have two important central themes. The first



COTTBUS'S BGS FORMS A WEDGE OF GREEN SPACE SE OF THE CENTRE



MAIN SITE PLAN OF THE BGS WITH THE BRANITZER PARK TO THE SOUTH

was a desire to change Cottbus's image as a provincial town surrounded by urban dereliction, and the second a wish to exploit the town's garden tradition which had left an impressive legacy of green space and urban parks.

Like many parts of the east, Cottbus suffered uncontrolled industrial development during the Communist era with the district being a centre for brown coal production. Almost 70 per cent of East Germany's energy needs came from around Cottbus, producing over 200 million tonnes of coal and causing immense environmental damage in the process.

These operations have largely disappeared, to be replaced by a burgeoning environmental industry helping to create tourism and promote cleaner technologies. In common with other towns such as Leipzig, the Cottbus authorities recognise a 'unique opportunity to incorporate ecological considerations into the restructuring of cities', although this aim is tempered by the need to provide more roads, better energy and water supplies and the need to respond to slowly increasing affluence and expectations.

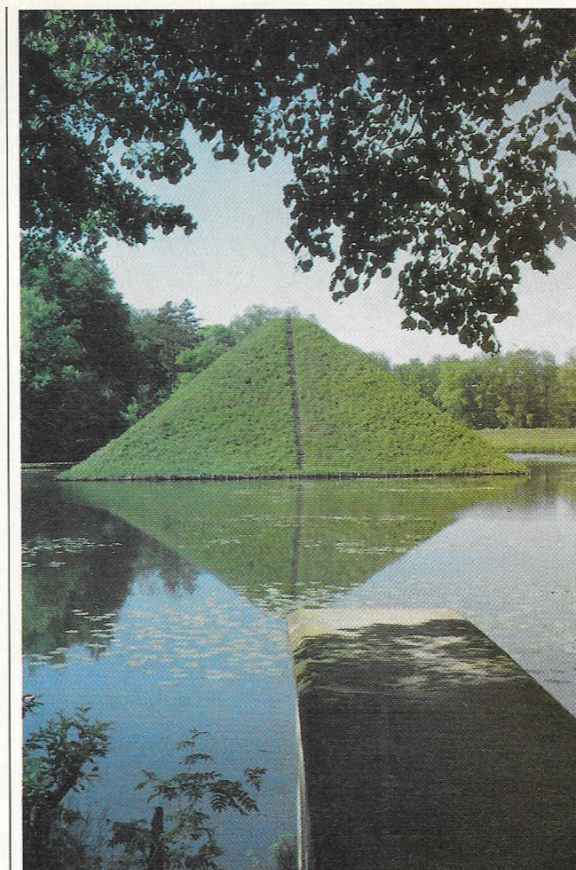
In Cottbus, therefore, safeguarding the green space and conserving those landscapes of value were important priorities of the BGS. These challenges were met head-on with the creation of a large nature reserve along the Spree river on the west of the festival site to coincide with the opening of the BGS.

This beautifully designed and executed feature had a series of stations which allowed visitors 'to be made part of the experience', to help them understand their surroundings better and realise how the landscape came about and needs to be cared for.

Another part of the BGS which promotes the landscape tradition of the area is the 12ha Vorpark which forms the eastern edge of the festival site. An area of recreated meadows, the landscape is managed with appropriately green technologies evoking a pre-industrial scene of considerable beauty. The meadow's original connection to the historic Branitzer Park to the south was also recognised with the preservation of a number of huge oak avenues.

Associated with these elements of the 55ha festival site itself has been a number of improvements to the town's park system which the authorities claim would not have happened without the financial and political impetus of the BGS. Cottbus's 'green ring' has been completed and now connects the town with its surroundings. It includes upgrades to many historic promenades, improvements to sports facilities, more riverside walks and the restoration of the Schloss Branitz and its park.

These beautifully landscaped gardens form the southern edge of the BGS and were restored as part of the festival. They now connect via the festival site more directly to the town centre. Created by Prince von Puckler-Muskau in the 19th century, these gardens possess great significance in the history of landscape design and are most renowned for the famous



THE SURREAL FORM OF PUCKLER'S WASSERPYRAMIDE IS NOW MORE EASILY REACHED FROM THE CENTRE OF COTTBUS VIA THE FESTIVAL (PHOTO: PETER SHEARD)

Wasserpyramide since adopted by the BGS as the logo for the festival.

In addition, a co-ordinated approach has been taken between transport provision and the upgraded land uses caused by the BGS, thereby enhancing employment prospects and development potential within Cottbus. Significantly, Deutsche Bahn, the German railway company, was one of the major sponsors of the BGS, contrasting somewhat with Ebbw Vale's experience back in 1992 when BR couldn't even provide a temporary stop for the festival, despite the existence of a line.

Other improvements to the town's roads and building stock occurred to capitalise on the 'image-effect' of the BGS, and over DM130m was spent on the festival and its associated infrastructure improvements. The organising authorities forced through a new financial model for Cottbus due to the shortened timescale. This left the town's taxpayers only having to find a quarter of the funds, with the rest coming from the State of Brandenburg and the federal government.

The show elements of the BGS itself were a rather predictable mix of theme gardens, ornamentation and floral displays. Their designs were highly conservative and unfortunately did little to promote new or innovative approaches to park design.

In Germany, Cottbus has not received universal praise, with criticisms that the show has nothing new and concentrates too much on short-term impact at the expense of serious

landscape statements. Also, the short timescale meant that the BGS organisation curtailed the usual competition and public consultation stages, causing considerable frustration to the landscape profession.

Nevertheless, Cottbus's successes are notable, if modest. What was the old East Germany (now referred to by Cottbus as 'the new Germany') needs examples of how to recreate its scarred landscapes after 40 years of abuse by Communist central planners. The educational role of Cottbus will bear fruit in the coming years and hopefully lead to other towns and cities restoring their historic parks and also listing and protecting their landscape heritage.

A particularly important player in the organisation of the BGSs is the Central Horticultural Association (ZGV), which is responsible for awarding and co-ordinating the festival's creation. The association's experience extends over 40 years and it has an ability to galvanise activity amongst the public and businesses.

The ZGV tries to encourage political co-operation at all levels and an equivalent here (or perhaps the much called-for 'Open Space Agency') could bring together the various financial and administrative strands of government and concentrate effort towards creating high quality new parks.

Another aspect of Cottbus worthy of emulation is the way in which the festival caused various community, arts and environmental pressure groups to become involved in the process of open space planning.

Significant, too, is the involvement of major sponsors in financing and promoting the new park's development. The likes of Deutsche Bahn as a player in the creation of the BGS at Cottbus shows that commercial patrons can help enormously in future park creation.

The BGS represents a continuity in the provision of open space for the public good, with a recognition that the people that provided parks in the last century are no longer around and that a combination of public and private money is a way forward. However, the emphasis has to be on the former to initiate the process.

Here in Britain, we are at something of a crossroads with such events as the proposed Greenwich millennium festival and new parks for the Thames Barrier establishing some momentum in the provision of open space. This could lead to major rethinking on behalf of designers, local authorities and hopefully even government with its Lottery windfall.

Our garden festivals showed we could reverse industrial dereliction and transform an environment, but they didn't pull off the long-term planning aspects which are the key to a truly successful festival. Like many cities in Europe, Cottbus shows us that new parks and open space can cause regeneration.

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