The road to

The Emscher Park is at the forefront of a bid to reclaim Germany's industrial heartland, writes ***Peter Sheard***

The recovery and restoration of land left physically damaged and derelict by abandoned industrial works is a challenge facing countries throughout Europe.

In the UK, we tend to put our faith in development agencies and joint ventures. These put together funding packages from a plethora of grants and convert disjointed development schemes into a set of loosely structured plans.

This is in stark contrast to the German approach, where landscape planning is the core of regeneration schemes. Perhaps the most ambitious example of this is the work being carried out in the Ruhr region of North-Rhine Westphalia, between Duisburg and Dortmund, on the River Emscher.

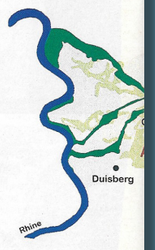
In 1988, the local authorities in the area resolved to establish the "International Building Exhibition – Emscher Park". This scheme would last for a decade, showcasing innovative and practical ways of repairing damage to land caused by industrialisation. The fundamental aim was to "tidy up the Ruhr's backyard".

The use of the word "park" in the project's title was deliberate. The 17 local authorities involved in the development of the scheme planned to put ecological and landscape intervention at the heart of all its activities.

The Emscher Park area is 300km long and takes in some of Germany's worst post-industrial land damage. Now halfway through its development process, it is not an exhibition in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a work in progress, revolving around five central themes: the Emscher Landscape Park; the ecological regeneration of the river systems; "working in the park"; urban developments; and new uses for old buildings.

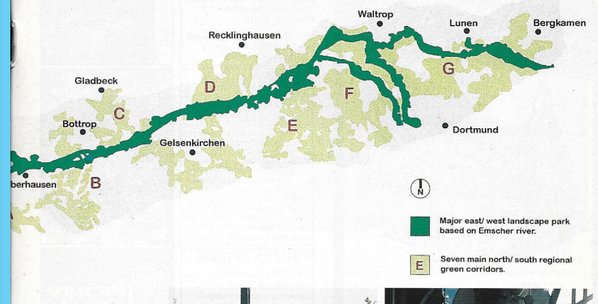
The exhibition's organising body is a subsidiary of the North-Rhine Westphalia regional authority, operating as a private company. It has around 100 projects up and running at present, and is guided by the principle that ecological renewal can change the perception of an area, which is, in turn, vital for economic revival.

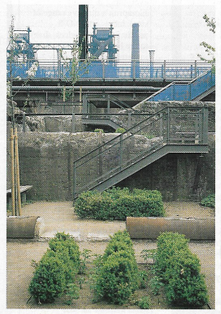
The exhibition sets up projects with towns, companies and potential developers working in ▷



The dramatic shapes of industrial structures rise above the trees (left) in the International Building Exhibition – Emscher Park (above)

RECOVERY





In the Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park, amenity plantings may be found among the remains of the steelworks (right), while elsewhere nature is taking over (far right)

◁ the North-Rhine Westphalia region. It continues to influence all the schemes in the area via its various committees – which include members from local councils, industry, trade unions, community groups, nature conservation organisations, and planning and architectural associations. This widespread input constantly breathes new life into the planning process.

To date, DM3 billion (£1.2 billion) has been invested in building exhibition projects, two-thirds of which has come from the state – of this, 60 per cent is supplied by North-Rhine Westphalia and the remainder comes from the EU.

So, with such vast amounts of time, energy and cash being invested in the Emscher Park, how is the "building site of the future" shaping up? Although many Germans think of the Ruhr as a mining region, the visible transformation of the area is forcing a change in perception. The "ecological assault" of the Emscher Landscape Park is a very important factor in this and offers some useful lessons for our own reclamation problems (see panel, P24).

The landscape park takes its name from the River Emscher which links the whole project together. Over 300sq km are to be regenerated, taking in the 17 towns running along the river from Duisburg to Bergkamen. This will create a landscape core to unite the entire region.

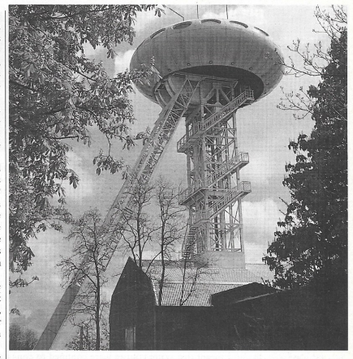
The aesthetic and ecological quality of the countryside is being improved to form "green stepping stones" through the region. These are interwoven with miles of cycle and footpaths connecting urban and rural areas.

The building exhibition has been directing the local authorities involved in the planning of these green corridors. Each of the routes includes a "model project" to represent the ideals of the exhibition as a whole. Without such a highly co-ordinated strategy in place, it is doubtful that the ambitious Emscher Park project could reach its full potential.

Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park is one of the "model projects" and will be of interest to anyone concerned with landscape design. First started in 1988, the site of this prize-winning scheme, which was designed by Peter Latz & Partners, is an old, disused steelworks.

The design of the park pays homage to the historic importance of the steelworks – a symbol of past wealth – while focusing on the functional aspects of the site. Rather than erasing the echoing chambers, enormous tanks, pipes and railways, these dramatic emblems have been incorporated into the design. This creates a modern park which caters to the needs of the local community.

The cavernous remains of the steelworks at the site have been converted into stages for music venues. Rusting towers and gantries are lit and bannered to form art displays. Huge slabs of metal and slag have been set into the ground to form the ▷



New, high-technology industries are attracted to the revitalised areas of the Emscher Park

Piazza Metallica – possibly the most modern take on a public square anywhere in the world.

The concrete walls of old storage tanks are used by human climbers, while once-filthy tanks and reservoirs are now serene and relaxing walled gardens. Ash and cherry trees have been placed between the enormous steelworks structures, and formal hedges and flowers have been delicately arranged around the rusting remains to add a slightly traditional touch.

Although the basic design of the park has been set, it still has four more years left to evolve and reach its full natural history potential. Visitor numbers are growing steadily, and it is hoped that Duisburg's steel heritage will eventually be represented by much more than a sad, derelict site.

This amazing park did not come cheap – the organisers have quoted figures of around DM80 million (UK £32 million) for the finished project, most of which has come from state funds. But its cultural contribution to the area and its potential to influence other landscape projects could prove far more valuable than the cost.

The exhibition scheme puts restoration of the River Emscher second only to the creation of the landscape park in its list of priorities. The company is planning to convert it from its status as an open sewer into a symbol of the region's ecological regeneration.

At the turn of the century, a huge increase in effluent production effectively killed off the ▷

THE BRITISH EXPERIENCE

The UK's experience of regional development has been somewhat fractured during the past few years, set against a background of decline in the planning process and an often misplaced faith in the ability of private funds to bring about improvements like those seen in the Ruhr region of Germany.

Admittedly, many enterprising development agencies, assisted by tax breaks and grants, have done a lot of good work – but often only within the confines of "on-plot landscaping" and disjointed infrastructure improvements. Opportunities for major improvements can get lost in the process.

For example, at Ravenscraig, in Scotland – a once proud symbol of Scotland's steelworks industry which is now a massively damaged site – funds are being sought for an attempt to restore the area into a clean, green community space.

British Steel is spending millions of pounds eradicating all traces of the steelworks before a master planner is appointed to discuss the potential of the site. Achievements such as those at the Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park will soon be unattainable, and the British taxpayer will have footed the bill.

As a major portion of the site's redevelopment will be subject to Millennium Commission funding, it seems unlikely that the opportunity to address these issues will be presented. The Millennium Commission has no remit to initiate projects like the International Building Exhibition – Emscher Park, and public sector leadership is not encouraged.

Thames Gateway is an example of local authorities working together to produce development controls, but then being forced to compete for the development work. It would appear that against this background, landscape is going to be left a long way down the priority list.

◁ watercourses, while subsidence caused by mining precluded the use of sewage pipes. This meant that water courses were confined to concrete channels which blighted the landscape.

These conditions are now in the process of being changed – sewage plants are being decentralised and water courses have been redesigned in more "natural" forms. The building exhibition, typically, commissioned the construction of some high-quality architecture and invested in new technology to ensure that the waterways will be aesthetically pleasing as well as fully functional.

The gradual improvement of the Emscher environment is, ultimately, meant to encourage an ecological and an economic renaissance. It is hoped that clean, green sites will attract new, high-tech companies which focus on environmental products and research.

This aspect of the project falls under the "working in the park" theme. The exhibition body consults with any business wanting to move into the area, promoting the use of high-quality design as well as indirectly providing financial subsidies and ensuring that any development fits in with the high standards. The exhibition organisers insist, for example, that 40 per cent of a business site area remains as open space, and that sustainable design and construction methods are adopted.

Good examples of these strict rules abound. The Rheinelbe Science Park, in Gelsenkirken, for instance, is a new technology centre located on a former steelworks site. It will only house energy efficiency companies and is almost entirely dependent on solar energy. A landscaped park not only provides recreational space for adjacent residences, but its lake acts as a passive heat store.

The exhibition also exerts its influence over urban development, in an effort to ensure that good living conditions come first and foremost. Vacant sites and disused land are, where possible, chosen for such schemes, and the same rules apply as for business developments.

Furthermore, the exhibition insists on what it describes as "citizen participation" from the planning stage through to implementation, to ensure that everyone has a say in the final development.

It is also the task of the exhibition organising body to find new uses for the old industrial buildings which are scattered liberally throughout the region and tend to dominate the landscape.

Such architectural monuments were often viewed as evidence of disappearing employment during the 1980s. However, the exhibition has made these dinosaurs a lot more acceptable, and many of them are listed in recognition of their contribution to the landscape.

The open space settings that surround such old buildings are often transformed as part of the on-going development programme, existing as living proof that innovative thinking can create harmony between industry and nature.

The once derelict Waltrop Canal Lock, for instance, forms the centrepiece of a new park. In addition, the Rhine-Herne canal has been restored, with its leisure use and ecological value being greatly increased in the process.

Although the Emscher Park is following a long tradition of building exhibitions in Germany, it was the first to embrace a whole region with a view to providing comprehensive renewal.

This is now being repeated in the Bitterfeld-Dessau region, in the east of Germany, which has suffered from similar dereliction and damage. And a Korean delegation visited the Ruhr region as part of a fact-finding mission – there are plans for renewal of a Korean river system on a similar scale to the River Emscher.

The exhibition will wind up in 1999, and it is anticipated that enough projects will have been completed to ensure that regeneration continues long into the next millennium.

The Emscher Park's enormous success seems to be in its ability to promote and follow through new ideas. Action on this scale needs a catalyst and a champion – an institute which is outside the political sphere but is capable of using political influence. Such projects also need to be able to work outside the constraints of standard planning procedures. Money is another essential factor.

The Emscher Park building exhibition seems to have found a perfect balance. It has set an example for post-industrial regeneration that the rest of the world should seek to follow. □

Peter Sheard is a landscape architect and is an associate at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, London

Article on the regeneration of the Emscher Park region, Germany (1996)

Peter Sheard CMLI
Chartered Landscape Architect