

The Critics



REVIEW

Blumen marvellous

Since 1951 Germany's biennial garden festival has left lasting impacts on its respective host cities. Peter Sheard reports back from this year's 'Bundesgartenschau' in Koblenz, and argues that the German approach provides a useful model for the UK to follow



Germany's biennial 'Bundesgartenschau' (BUGA), or Federal Horticultural Show, started in 1951 as an exercise in park and urban planning to reinvigorate shattered post-war cities. They proved highly popular, not least because they were launched as a festival, a celebration of landscape, colour and horticulture in a dull world. In contrast to the UK's brief and unsuccessful flirtation with garden festivals (see page 44), they have proved enduring, because they have left a legacy. This year it is the turn of Koblenz, a pleasant city situated at the meeting of the Moselle and Rhine rivers, to host the event. Koblenz has a long historical association with landscape since the days of the Grand Tour and later the Romantics and first Victorian tourists. The BUGA takes place in three different parts of the city: the historic centre (the 'Blumenhof') overlooking the rivers' confluence; and the Ehrenbreitstein Fortress on its cliff-top above the Rhine.

Achieving a balance between the permanent park and the commercially vital, although temporary, horticultural festival is always a challenge and one that has not always been resolved without some painful compromises. Happily, Koblenz seems to have pulled

it off with aplomb. Overall, the BUGA covers 30 hectares and, under the motto 'Koblenz changes', lays out a complex series of parks, promenades, gardens and squares.

One of the most successful interventions has been around the 18th century Electoral Palace, which used to be isolated and under-used. Its environs have been entirely remodelled and integrated into its surroundings: the forecourt has been divested of its parked cars – thanks to a new underground car park – and turned into a public garden with tapestry gardens, lawns and pleached trees; the palace has been re-opened and the riverside terraces have been restored to their original Peter Lenné glory. The spirit of the place is one of landscape and reflection, even Romanticism.

To the north, the Blumenhof is less well defined, or better integrated, depending on your point of view. This is partly a result of its morphology on the promontory over the rivers, and its historic elements, including a church, a museum and a colossally oversized equestrian statue of Kaiser Wilhelm I. The layers of history here are spiritual, cultural and artistic and the resulting spaces are deftly laid out as a series of intimate courtyards, which weave their way around the buildings and spaces. The Blumenhof's simplicity is deceptive: prior to the BUGA this >>

Clockwise from top left: New vantage point overlooking the Rhine at the Ehrenbreitstein Fortress; restored river terrace at the Electoral Palace; sculpture garden at the Blumenhof



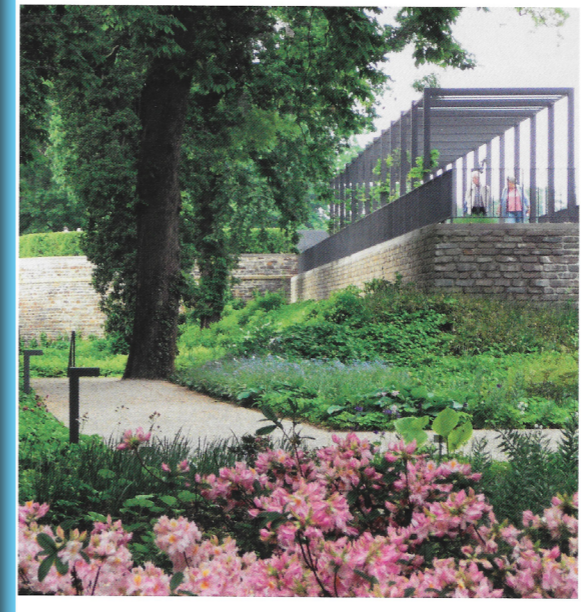
was one of Koblenz's largest coach parks, serving the river cruiser embarkation point.

It is in the 'transition areas' where the real legacy value of this year's BUGA is secured. The embankment and promenade along the Rhine has been comprehensively rebuilt and a handsome, traffic-free corridor stretches more than 1,200m around the city, shaded by mature plane trees and enlivened by cafés.

Interestingly, in Germany there are dissenting voices about the BUGAs, with claims they are predictable, unadventurous and too commercial. Critics also point out that, while they revitalise areas, their distribution is often skewed towards those bigger cities that can pitch more successfully to host them. While some of this is

justifiable (especially in terms of their design content), one cannot help but admire their continuing relevance. One key to their success is the method by which each festival is organised by a private company (this year, the Bundesgartenschau Koblenz 2011 GmbH). This entity garners Federal, State and private monies into the event; co-ordinates sponsorship and the private horticultural businesses within Germany; and launches the whole festival. Given that this process can take up to 10 years, the presence of the BUGA GmbH overcomes political vicissitudes, maintains enthusiasm and ensures continuity. Basically the whole thing gets delivered and, via trust agreements, is maintained. Predictable they might be, but they are effective in delivering the goods.

Below: New perennial gardens laid out in the grounds of the Electoral Palace in Koblenz



UK GARDEN FESTIVALS

Conceived by then Conservative environment minister Michael Heseltine, the festivals were intended to revitalise tourism. The last (not pictured) took place in Ebbw Vale in 1992.



GATESHEAD (1990)

The festival attracted 3 million visitors and the site is now used for housing.



GLASGOW (1988)

By far the most successful, the festival attracted 4.3 million visitors and the site now hosts BDP's Glasgow Science Centre.



STOKE-ON-TRENT (1986)

Managing director David Hancock predicted the festival would 'widen the industrial base of this historic city'.



LIVERPOOL (1984)

The first festival, it attracted 3.38 million visitors to a formerly derelict 1 sq km industrial site.

Koblenz was selected in 2005 as the host city with a substantially planned design; construction then took three years and cost 102 million Euros, with 6.5 million Euros coming from sponsorship and entry charges.

Learning from Germany

Back in the UK, the Comprehensive Green Strategies that are de rigueur in German cities – and the enthusiasm to plan – are conspicuous by their absence. And though recent reports published in the UK attempt to place a monetary value upon open spaces and parks and offer a glimmer of hope, the question whether the UK will be able to provide what is, apparently, a valuable resource remains moot.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) report of June

Sadly, UK garden festivals had only the briefest of flowerings

concluded that the economic and social value of living close to rivers, coasts and wetlands is worth up to £1.3 billion a year. Another recent report, Open Space: An Asset Without A Champion, by the architectural practice Gensler (for which I work) and the Urban Land Institute concluded that companies not only desire close proximity to open space but would gladly pay at least 3 per cent more to achieve this.

Although buoyed by this good news, commentators, including the Landscape Institute, go on to express doubts about how such benefits are going to be accrued, given that emerging government policy indicates that actively planning this valuable green infrastructure is not to be pursued so vigorously in future, at least, not at a national level.

Historically, many of the country's parks have emerged as a consequence of private patronage, visionary local

councils or accidents of history. But, in their own differing ways, they have been planned or had a vehicle that allowed their gestation and implementation.

In the same spirit, the new Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in Stratford is being created on the back of a major event, resulting in the largest new open space the capital has seen for decades: potentially a seismic change in attitude to park formation.

Sadly, the UK garden festivals had only the briefest of flowerings between 1981 and 1992 before falling out of political favour and, owing to their rushed and botched delivery, left little behind. Indeed they were mostly remembered now as being the site of a garden festival rather than anything more tangible. Take Liverpool, where the remains of its 1981 festival are now being regenerated after only 30 years via a National Lottery grant (a valued source of funding for many a historic park) but even that is seen as providing a useful framework for new housing. Given the overtly commercial times we live in perhaps the occasion is ripe for a revival in regular festivals in the UK as a way of creating new parks in cities with expanding populations and a real risk of under investment. The Gensler/ULI report mentioned above found that private companies would be willing to invest in open space provision if the mechanisms for collaboration existed.

A final, sobering thought is that, by 2031, it is reckoned that in London, without some change, there will be a 1,100 hectare deficit in open space provision, or the equivalent of five Olympic parks or 36 Koblenz BUGAs. It is unlikely Stratford's green infrastructure would have occurred without this rare sporting extravaganza, so do regular festivals represent a realistic alternate of channelling pent-up commercial involvement and public enthusiasm? Koblenz is the latest German city to suggest that they just might.

It is unlikely Stratford's green infrastructure would have occurred without this rare sporting extravaganza, so do regular festivals represent a realistic alternate of channelling pent-up commercial involvement and public enthusiasm? Koblenz is the latest German city to suggest that they just might.

It is unlikely Stratford's green infrastructure would have occurred without this rare sporting extravaganza, so do regular festivals represent a realistic alternate of channelling pent-up commercial involvement and public enthusiasm? Koblenz is the latest German city to suggest that they just might.

Peter Sheard is a landscape architect and senior associate at Gensler, Aldgate House, London