

A park on the banks of the Elbe

This year's garden festival at Magdeburg in Germany will leave a permanent legacy for the future

BY PETER SHEARD



On 16 January 1945 Baroque Magdeburg was virtually obliterated by aerial bombardment in a critical step toward Germany's defeat in the Second World War. The city became stranded in the old east Germany, robbed of its strategic importance as a transport hub. Neglect and decay followed and Magdeburg's principal use was as a Soviet military base.

Since re-unification the city has been re-establishing its previous role and moreover its image: the desire to hold the Bundesgartenschau (BUGA) was part of the drive for restoration and reversal. These layers of history have found expression in the BUGA that's now taking place in Magdeburg.

The 90ha site is located to the east

Top: typical landscape of the Alte Elbe river. Above: plan of the BUGA site

of the city centre by the Alte Elbe River. To the north lie the historic Herrenkruggpark (1818) and nearby Klosterberggarten, which together represent the earliest public parks in the German-speaking world and provide a tradition for the landscape planning of the BUGA itself. The distinctive riverine landscape was neglected, with its floodplains untended, and unrestricted dumping and military activities had left their scars. This daunting picture of stagnation discouraged any proposals to reverse the situation – that is, until the financial clout of the BUGA (DM700m/£250m) brought reality to Magdeburg's aspirations.

During the period of neglect, however, habitats of some value developed and certain areas of agriculture remained managed and intact, so there was a palette of natural features to incorporate into the BUGA design. Although the site was well connected with roads (indeed, a major highway bisects it), a real drawback was its physical isolation from the core of Magdeburg, with the Elbe forming a barrier which only large-scale intervention could address. Barrack buildings littering the north of the

site added further constraints to the development.

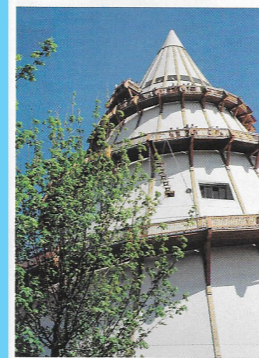
Inspired by the achievements of Bonn's ex-BUGA Rheinauer Park, Magdeburg launched a national competition after the Soviet withdrawal in 1992. The competition's aims went way beyond the site itself, taking into account the 500ha of neighbouring land and zoning it for residential, commercial and educational development. Improved road and rail links, refurbishment of other green spaces in the city, and landfill and restoration works were integral parts of the competition.

Such large-scale planning, although typical of the German garden festival movement, was unprecedented in Magdeburg, which benefited from the federal government and EU grants which then flowed into the scheme. By 1995 the BUGA GmbH (a private company) was established and the winning scheme by Ernst Heckel Lohrer was adopted soon afterwards.

Work started on site in August 1996, which means that the park is the product of just two-and-a-half years – a remarkable achievement. While this period is an unusually compressed one for these events, it is where the administrative expertise of the BUGA machine, built up over 40 years, comes into its own. It's a pity that we abandoned our particular learning curve back at Ebbw Vale in 1992.

The practice of Ernst Heckel Lohrer, based in Magdeburg, produced an esoteric, far-reaching scheme which attempts not just to knit the site into its surroundings but to use the landscape to create cultural and symbolic connections to the city's nature and history. The river's regulation, the sweeping water meadows, the historic parks, the agricultural areas and orchards, and even the old barracks are used as elements to define corridors which draw the visitor into the centre of the site. Boundaries and hard lines are eschewed in favour of a blurred watercolour approach to landscape design, which represents a marked change from previous shows.

These aims are all the more difficult to achieve given the distinct



characteristics of the different parts of the site, but the designers decided to accept and express this diversity in its three major areas. If the scheme has a leitmotif it is in the historical references or quotations each part of the site provides. This challenging concept results in a very untypical BUGA, creating a park which promises great things for the future as it matures but has continual references to its past.

Firstly, the central portion of the site, known as the Grosser Cracauer Anger, contains most of the festival-oriented elements, including the exhibition halls, stages and a sequence of experimental gardens. This is an evocation of the nearby 'pleasure grounds' in the city, with the designers manipulating 'pictures of Classical landscape gardens' (albeit of an English tradition). Built elements are strikingly contemporary: for example, the stage consists of huge cantilevered slabs of concrete and steel. Similarly the new footbridge across the dividing highway is a curving slab supported by tapering steel columns of great elegance: lighting is indirect, while steps and ramps are in smooth concrete, light granite



One of the festival's three main zones - the Kleiner Cracauer Anger beside the Elbe. Top left: sculpture of old industrial remains. Above left: the Stiefen Turm (leaning tower). Above right: a wall made out of the city's ruins. Right and below right: details of two of the zone's theme gardens

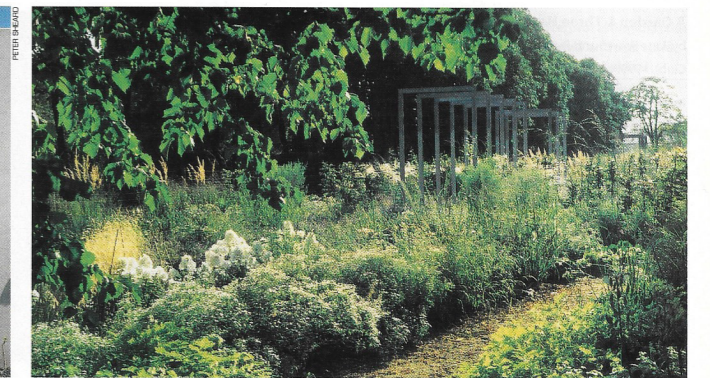
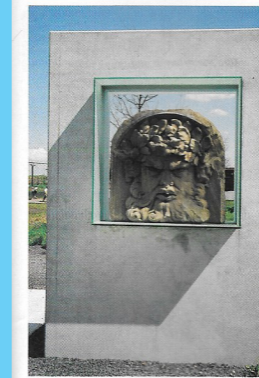


and stainless steel. These features are a deliberate expression of today's materials in an understated fashion.

A curving series of sunken gardens fringe the base of the reconfigured refuse tip, which forms an uncharacteristic boundary to the east of the site. This particular feature seems to represent a lost opportunity to the BUGA. Its physical presence dominates the park and yet it is only incidentally connected to the park via a couple of footpaths and a rather unsightly if enjoyable toboggan run. Perhaps time will correct this miscalculation. In terms of functional benefit, however, if not visual cohesion, the refuse tip provides 73 gas wells which generate enough electric power and heat to supply the exhibition building and sports halls.

The second distinct zone is the Kleiner Cracauer Anger adjacent to the Elbe. This area probably exhibits the concept of 'historical corridors' most eloquently. Previously part of a flood plain of some ecological value, its immediate post-war role was as a dumping ground for the city's ruins. Historic Magdeburg is literally beneath your feet in this waterside

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landscape. A wilder, almost unkempt quality pervades, with broad meadows and flowering trees.

Gently inserted into this landscape are small enclosed gardens, each with a specific theme (colour/ sculpture/ research) but all making some sort of reference to the city's past. More literal are a number of bold sculptures of considerable scale in steel and stone, which remind the visitor of the industrial might once so important to the region. This theme finds even greater expression in works of landscape art like the 'Garden of Memories', where huge chunks of corbels and columns are evocatively displayed among the grasses and herbs. The city has been literally recycled.

In contrast to the Grosser Cracauer Anger, the palette of materials here includes bricks from the ruins, roughened concrete and rusting metals – reminders of the organic, transitional nature of human endeavour. As a fulcrum to this zone is the Angerssee, a remodelled portion of the Elbe's flood defences: overlooking the lake is the Stiefen Turm (or leaning tower), a 60m-high bonded wood sculpture containing in its eight storeys a history of how human evolution has used nature and technology. Its long-term function will be as a broadcasting facility and centre of tourist promotion for the region.

Although undeniably dramatic, its sheer theatricality makes its

Opposite page, top: detail of the 'Garden of Paradise' in the old shooting-ranges. Opposite page, centre: steel walls slice through the landforms in this part of the site. Opposite page, bottom: glass walls do the same. Top left: visitors come across many reminders of the Baroque city of Magdeburg. Top right: perennial gardens in the old shooting-ranges

location among the wilder parts of the park somewhat incongruous. But its simple form, reflected in the lake and complemented by a series of stunning sculptural walls, makes a great landmark.

The third and by far the most successful area is an extension of the northern portion of the grounds, in what was the heart of the old barracks. The buildings themselves and the parade grounds will form part of the city's university, but in what were the old shooting-ranges – long linear trenches lined with old chestnuts and grassy embankments – one discovers a sequence of sublime vistas. Some have gentle lawns, others reflecting pools with irises and lilies, while the most striking are dominated by huge stone sculptures. These linear rooms, evocative of Baroque hedged spaces, are interconnected by metal bridges and pathways via steel-and-glass walls which slice neatly through the landforms. This surreal labyrinth exhibits a peace and calm that totally belies the site's past and is masterly in its understated design.

But then understatement is the hallmark of this particular BUGA. In past festivals the horticultural aspects always competed with the permanent landscape infrastructure. Magdeburg is no exception, but it has an almost dismissive attitude to the 'flower displays' which as a result are concentrated into a very small portion of the site.

All parties involved agree that the BUGA provided a fast-track vehicle

by which to by-pass slower traditional planning methods and to secure the necessary finance. However, despite this dependence on national funds, the resultant park is quite parochial: it is rather like a geological profile, with physical remembrances of the past constantly tripping you up amid the carefully planned structure of the future. The BUGA Magdeburg 1999 could definitely be nowhere else.

The BUGA movement in Germany continues to be criticised from many corners as irrelevant and old-fashioned. In some ways these are valid comments but, unlike sporadic lottery money and Millennium grants, the strong direction provided by the festivals remains a catalyst for change with few peers.

Magdeburg also seems to indicate that a changed approach to design is evolving. It is less of a festival, more of a park; less of a temporary marketable product, more of an exercise in careful open-space design. There is uncertainty in Magdeburg about this new park: although the city has committed DM4m a year to its upkeep, the radical nature of the design has caused concerns. Despite this, the enhancement of Magdeburg's image is overwhelmingly welcomed. Ghosts inhabit the new landscape by the river but its heart is definitely in the next millennium.

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