



Town and country

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IGA 2003: The International Horticultural Exhibition, Rostock, Germany
Until mid-October 2003

Rostock is a place proud of its history: an old Hanseatic city, an ancient university site, a regional centre for agriculture, trade and industry. However, this status applied rather more effectively before reunification and, like many post-Communist economies, Rostock has been trying to reinvent itself while retaining its identity and traditions.

Situated on the Baltic coast within the rather isolated state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Rostock faces something of a challenge in order to 'rebrand' itself. One strategy has been to build on tourism, selling the city as a seaside resort surrounded by unspoilt landscapes and beautiful beaches. Hosting the IGA is part of this attempt to change people's perceptions of the city, and reverse some of the environmental decline that has dogged it.

Held every 10 years, the IGAs are similar to the biennial Bundesgartenschau (BGSs), which combine altruistic landscape improvements with a commercial horticultural festival. The honour is bestowed by the Paris-based Bureau International des Expositions, and brings with it €70 million (£50 million) of state and federal grants.

This year's site comprises 100ha or more: a complex mixture of urban fringe, semi-natural woodland, industry-scarred watercourses, and the coastline of the huge Warnow River,

which to all intents and purposes is the sea. (At least it is for the organisers, who play up Rostock's maritime connections at every opportunity, going so far as to theme the festival 'The Ecological Park by the Sea'.)

The site is an irregular sprawl, and the competition-winning designer, WES & Partner from Hamburg, has attempted to unite the disparate elements by creating three distinct parks – a transformation from 'town' through 'country' to the 'river', as the visitor travels west-to-east from the festival entrance to the coastline, via a wide swathe of protected woods and ponds.

This layered plan was a bold idea, given the impact of existing roads, which, despite the best of efforts, are still divisive. However, the subtle changes in atmosphere and character between the three landscapes do provide a stimulating understanding of their history and natural richness, which the IGA is at pains to preserve for future residential districts that will surround the site once the festival is over.

For the visitor there are other distractions, with the national gardens, horticultural exhibits and cable cars providing a now expected range of entertainments, which do little to clarify the overall strategy but bring in the numbers (an anticipated three million), while letting the German horticultural industry display its talents.



Above left: site plan. Top: restored watercourse with connection to the sea. Above: the 'rose hill' which contains the 'town' zone of the IGA

Nevertheless, Rostock has taken full advantage of the funding and embarked upon an impressive range of infrastructure works: a new Warnow tunnel, a rebuilt main railway station, an extended tram system, improvements to the local motorway network, and a programme of residential improvements. The city lobbied hard for the IGA, beating off considerable competition (including Dresden) back in 1997, and undertaking an ambitious five-year construction programme to bring the idea into reality.

So what of the reality? To adhere to the original concept, it is worth describing the sequential nature of the IGA as it journeys from 'town' to 'river'. Broadly translated, the 'town' at the easterly edge refers to the new stations and buildings around the festival plazas and the impressive world exhibition hall – a 10,000m² timber and glass structure with matching rotunda by von Gerkan, Marg & Partners.

Framed with boulevards of mature chestnut and lime trees, well-proportioned and detailed and obviously very popular, these piazzas are enlivened by linear pools and fountains, which help promote a lively and suitably urban welcome to the festival grounds proper; and given the hall's long-term role as a conference facility, they should continue to be used and enjoyed.

Such formal spaces have a drama, scale and impact wholly appropriate to the event, and are pleasingly contrasted with the first of the restored watercourses which criss-cross the festival site. The Schmarl creek defines the festival edge, and has been completely reconfigured from its canalised and polluted past and reconnected to the sea, allowing brackish water with its valuable habitats to be re-established. Eventually, new sustainable housing projects will be located next to these visually rich pools and reedbeds, as part of the urban park replacing the degraded landscape that had been a barrier to development on the north-west edge of the city.

Horticultural displays are abundant here, as is the more commercial side of the IGA. This 'town' zone is contained by a large sloping 'rose hill', which offers extensive views over the grounds and allows visitors to cross one of the re-routed highways. But the landscape design is flawed: the dominant axis set up by the plazas and fountains leads nowhere, and the links across the road are mean and poorly sited. There is no grand gesture here to rival the bridges at Hanover Expo or, 10 years ago, the investment in inspiring engineering at Stuttgart IGA.

The disjointed feeling is not improved on

the other side of the road, where the exhibition grounds appear to be populated by every possible inflatable castle in northern Germany, with little clarity as to how one should negotiate the funfair to reach the 'river' to the west. Lively, if rather chaotic, this area will form the focus of the new urban park, and will benefit from the festival's departure.

Ironically, it sits next to the IGA's highlight. Bounded by an old footpath, lined with historic pollarded willows, lies a segment of surviving woodland dominated by willows and birches. The footpath is an old link between the pre-industrial fishing villages, and has a series of boardwalks and tracks leading off to numerous pools and channels, many a legacy of former quarrying. These routes are surrounded by softly rustling reeds and surfaced with gently crunching shells, which, when added to the emerging smell and sounds of the sea, give these green rooms a wonderful sensory quality unmatched in the rest of the festival.

An almost surreal curiosity of this 'country' zone is a small church constructed entirely from the surrounding wickerwork. This open-air 'living building' hosts services and even weddings, and was funded by the local state's four main denominations, proving their green credentials as well as their religious ones.

The 'river' is reached by broad raised walkways with extensive views over the Warnow. Again, this part of the festival is a curate's egg. Its focus is the new and impressively detailed promenade along the river, where – in place of years of dereliction – are elegant stone paving, broad, tree-lined routes, and a man-made beach. Open to the elements, and bracing, these walkways have a dramatic windswept character.

Rivalling the best kitsch of any English seaside resort, the IGA's floating gardens – an area of over 4,000m² – are a series of pontoons that represent the evolution of plants from steaming geysers, via gigantic metal and timber stamens and ovaries, to fountains and pocket-sized woods. The engagement of the river as part of the festival is adventurous and symbolic, resulting in an installation that is as much about garden art as it is about botanical history. The presence of a 20m-high golden Neptune only adds to its unnerving appeal.

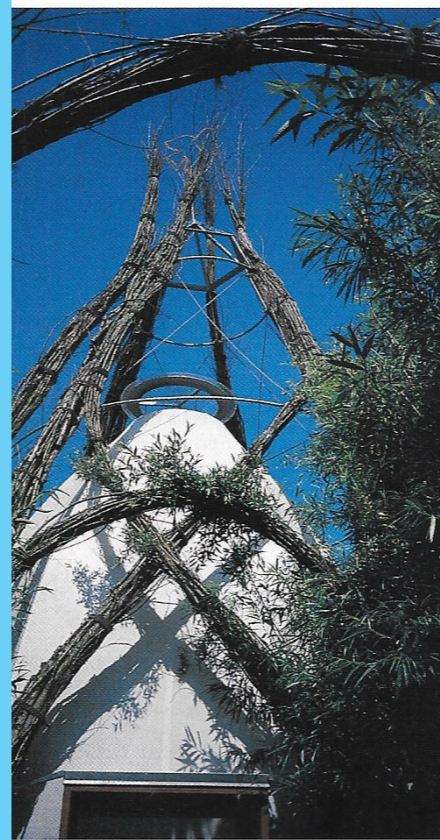
In contrast, the national gardens are disconcertingly average, badly sited and more dedicated to selling tourist goods than to

horticultural aspirations or garden design. The German pavilion, with its ecological exhibitions set in and around an impressive segmented timber pavilion, is an exception, and is guaranteed a long life as the centrepiece of a travelling exhibition. Also, the Dutch pavilion, a high-rise arrangement of Cor-Ten boxes clothed in ivy, has a distinctive and innovative aesthetic.

As a festival the IGA 2003 is filled to capacity with events, shows and frippery; but, by contrast, its credentials as a piece of environmental education are undeniable, and its long-term ambitions are faithful to the tenets of the first show in 1953.

Fifty years later these festivals are still relevant, if a little repetitive and perhaps in need of innovation. Dual sites, for example, or several towns sharing the event, could provide a different emphasis. Any alteration to the more overt commercial slant of the IGAs or BGSs will be resisted, but recent Bundesgartenschauen have challenged established thought. Nevertheless, what Rostock proves is that the unique spirit of the place should dictate the final product – the festival is just a means to an end.

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Left: the 'almost surreal' wickerwork church. Right: detail of one of the floating gardens by which the river becomes part of the festival

