

Emscher Park, Germany — expanding the definition of a “park”

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In Emscher Park, Germany, the creation of a “landscape park” has been used to drive the restoration of one of the most degraded landscapes in Europe. It has become “a symbol as well as a stimulus for urban, economic, social, and environmental change” (Brown 2001, 66). The experience suggests how powerful the concept of a “park” can be once we move beyond the boundaries of the traditional American definition.

Setting the stage

The Ruhr Valley in western Germany was once the country’s industrial heartland. Its coal mines and iron and steel mills powered the military-industrial machine during two world wars, and was the engine for the German “economic miracle” during the 1950s and 1960s.

However, by the 1970s the international markets had begun to change and the region’s industries were becoming less competitive. Mines began to close. Factories that had operated night and day fell silent. Their gates closed and they became “brownfield” sites in need of restoration.

The extensive mining in the area had created the danger of subsidence, so rather than install underground sewers that might be breached, authorities had channelized and canalized the Emscher River creating, in essence, an open sewer carrying both industrial and human waste.

The landscape through which the Emscher River flows is basically flat. The main features are human: the industrial buildings that rise for ten stories or more, and slag heaps the size of small mountains.

About two million people live in the region, and in the late 1980s the unemployment rate exceeded 15%. The ecological degradation was mirrored by psychological resignation among much of the population.

In 1989, the Land (roughly equivalent to a state in the USA) of North Rhine-Westphalia created the International Building Exhibition – Emscher Park (“IBA” in the German acronym). It was to be innovative in many ways, including:

- Using ecology as the central organizing focus for the regeneration of the region’s economy as well as its environment;
- Turning industrial wastelands into a regional network of open space, recreation, and cultural resources; and
- Being the largest renaturalization project in Europe, and one which is rare in the world for undertaking brownfields restoration on a regional, rather than site-specific, basis.

This was a highly complex initiative involving the creation of an entirely new administrative structure with a ten-year “lifespan,” which used seminars and international competitions to generate innovative ideas.

Although little has been written in English about the Emscher Park experience, increasing numbers of American professionals are making the pilgrimage to see this

project for themselves. Given the scope, complexity and unusual nature of the project, it is not surprising that most of us have only scratched the surface—and each of us has seen the project through our own prism. Nevertheless, I would like to focus on a few main ideas that relate to the special interests of the George Wright Society and the conference theme of “Crossing Boundaries”:

- The power of ecology as a central focus and integrating concept for a regional redevelopment initiative;
- The impact of using art in the landscape to signal a new policy approach; and
- How the creative re-use of industrial buildings can play a powerful role in changing the mind-set of local residents. This may have been Emscher Park’s most impressive accomplishment.

The power of ecology as an integrating concept

Within the Ruhr region, the IBA focused on the Emscher River which, with its tributaries, flows for about 218 miles. This shared resource provided a common focus for 17 local authorities in an area of approximately 200 square miles. A central aim of the project was to clean up the river. Now that mining has ended in much of the region, underground sewers are being installed to carry waste, and the river is being renaturalized. The concrete channels are being removed and natural vegetation is being restored. This is important for water quality and management, and for habitat. Perhaps even more importantly, it provides a highly visible symbol of positive change.

Another central aim of the project was to integrate and develop existing open spaces to create a regional park system that would include seven green corridors running north–south and east–west through the region. The audacity of this plan becomes clear only when one realizes that the open space at the heart of this network comprises former industrial sites, their connecting transportation system, and the old slag heaps. This was to form the basis for a park system intended to be of “European significance.”

Several thematic tourist driving and biking routes were created, including the “Route of Industrial Culture” which includes routes with themes such as the “Route of Industry and Nature.” These routes serve several purposes: to create and improve green infrastructure, provide more recreational opportunities, appeal to tourists, and increase the understanding of the region’s heritage among local residents as well as visitors.

It is important to note that many of the sites that have become features of interest for both tourists and local residents were surrounded by residential areas, but that the residents were only allowed within the walls if they worked there. Many people had lived in the viewshed or within earshot of these facilities all of their lives and never been on their grounds until the creation of the landscape park.

The ecological theme was integrated into economic and residential development as well—with a pronounced emphasis on energy efficiency and, in particular, the use of solar technology. A prime example is found in Rheinelbe, where a stunning building, which incorporates state-of-the-art solar technology, serves as an incubator for new solar technology businesses. It is a beautiful space unto itself, but serves the additional purpose of providing an internal walkway connecting the former colliery (which now has public open space and offices) with the town.

The Duisberg docklands, which have been falling into disuse as the industrial activity in the region declines, are also illustrative of this theme. A major urban redevelopment initiative has been undertaken with the goal of “bringing water back into the life of the city in an active way.” Among the ways this is being done are creating a multi-use urban waterfront, including energy-efficient offices, creating side canals (with naturalized areas) as the site for new housing (Figure 37.1), and damming the canal to provide an area for swimming.



Figure 37.1. New housing along newly created side canal in Duisberg. Photo by the author.

Adaptive reuse of industrial buildings

The region's identity—historical, economic, and cultural—was associated with industrial plants, collieries, foundries, slag heaps, and the like. So immense efforts have been made to preserve and reuse them as “industrial monuments.” It was important to help the local residents understand that the ecological devastation of the region had been a function of a particular set of geographic, political, and economic forces, and that the people who had created and sustained these industries were inventive, skilled, and strong. Rather than questioning the past, IBA challenged residents to consider how to use those valuable qualities to take the region into the new economy.

A few examples of the manner in which industrial sites were reused will provide a sense of the inventive and imaginative power brought to bear by the IBA.

The Oberhausen Gasometer, which had been used to store gas produced by nearby blast furnaces, closed in 1988. Over 385 feet in height and 220 feet in diameter, it has become Europe's largest, and perhaps most unusual, exhibition space.

An internal elevator allows visitors to see the interior of the space as they ascend to the roof, from which they have a sweeping view of the entire area. The windows in the ceiling form a pattern not unlike the “rose window” of a cathedral, and changeable colored panes are used to enhance the effect. Residents and visitors alike are awed by the scale and unexpected beauty of the interior of this behemoth.

The Zollverein Colliery was actually known as the “cathedral of labor.” One of the most famous symbols of the mining industry in Germany, it closed in 1986. Its Bauhaus-inspired buildings have been adapted for many new cultural uses, including a museum of coal production, a center that features exhibitions of the best industrial design, a citizens’ center, and a fine restaurant. A solar-powered Ferris wheel carries visitors through part of the plant and high above it to catch the view. Hiking trails connect the Colliery to the nearby community.

The Duisburg-Nord Industrial Landscape Park (*landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord*) contains well over 500 acres, most of it open space. Here visitors can explore a blast furnace, where one cannot help but be awed by the skill and strength demanded of the men who once produced iron and steel here.

But this is not a static monument. Imaginative steps have been taken to provide recreational uses that would entice visitors. Walls are used to provide rock-climbing lessons. A large metal tube curves out and down and back through a wall—becoming a slide provided for children (that attracts not a few adults as well; Figure 37.2).



Figure 37.2. Children using slide in the Duisburg-Nord Industrial Landscape Park. Photos by Jennifer Petramale.

Perhaps the oddest feature to a visitor is the multi-colored night lighting. However, then one learns that the plants had been operational 24 hours per day—and when they closed, residents said “it was as though the night sky had died.” This new lighting, created as a result of an international design competition, was not intended to replicate the old. Rather it is another example of the ways in which Emscher Park

helps bring the past through the present into the future. It is also an example of the project's innovative use of art.

Use of art in the landscape

The IBA conducted several international competitions to select art to be placed in the landscape. This was not uncontroversial. Many people questioned whether the money used to pay artists to design night lights for former industrial buildings or sculptures atop slag heaps might not be better spent for housing or other social needs.

However, the art has helped to signal the forward-looking nature of the initiative and to provide a system of new landmarks through the landscape. Several large sculptures have been installed atop slag heaps, including the towering Tetrahedron at Bottrop (Figure 37.3). Lighted at night, they provide new reference points in the night landscape. Smaller, more intimate sculptures have been created in areas newly used for parks and recreation. They serve to draw the visitor into a landscape that had hitherto been off-limits and foreign. Some are composed of industrial artifacts found on the site, providing a more intimate connection with the site's history.



Figure 37.3. The Tetrahedron atop a slag heap in Bottrop, with active plants in the background. Photo by the author.

This is consistent with another underlying theme of the project: the importance of building and site design, which are regarded as critical factors in the regeneration of the economy and the environment. Examples abound, ranging from the former coal mine headquarters in Bottrop, which has been restored on the outside and redesigned on the inside to house a business incubator, to the bridges constructed throughout the region to provide pedestrian connections, each of which is innovative in terms of design and function.

Summary

In Emscher Park, the concept of a landscape park was used to drive the regeneration of a heavily degraded region. In so doing, it also helped to introduce residents to their culture in a new way. Many to whom we spoke felt that changing the mind-set of local residents was perhaps the IBA's greatest accomplishment—particularly important during a time of economic restructuring. Now, we were told, residents are “aware, appreciative, and hopeful.”

Emscher Park can help us expand our own sense of what is possible—and suggests the powerful potential of new concepts of “parks.”

Reference

Brown, Brenda J. 2001. Reconstructing the Ruhrgebiet. *Landscape Architecture* 4/2001, 66.