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DELINEATING
A NEW
ECOLOGICAL
IMAGINARY



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How are the 'iron landscapes' of disused railway tracks of the 19th and 20th centuries rejuvenated by encouraging inclusive and diverse uses?

Matthew Gandy, a professor of geography at the University of Cambridge, charts the phased design of the Park am Gleisdreieck in Berlin. He questions whether the design of the park can be considered separately from the politics of housing as he highlights tensions between civic society and urban regeneration.

A somewhat bleak and nondescript area of disused railway lines, marking a boundary between the former West Berlin districts of Kreuzberg and Schoeneberg, has recently become the focus of international attention through the creation of a new public park. Park am Gleisdreieck, the first section of which was completed in 2011, is now filled with people on warm afternoons. The park design is notable for its sensitivity to the independent ecological dynamics of urban nature as well as a degree of inclusivity towards subcultural dimensions to Berlin life such as street art. Yet even the most sophisticated designs necessarily emerge within a specific set of constraints, and in the case of Berlin this wider context includes the steady eradication of marginal spaces of cultural and ecological significance as well as the rapidly rising costs of housing.

The complex negotiations that have enabled this new public space to be created have occurred within a context of increasing financialisation within the housing sector across Berlin and other German cities.¹ The question of park design cannot be considered separately from the politics of housing provision and the impact of rising levels of socioeconomic inequality. An existing form of 'social contract' between civil society and a variety of housing providers, both in the private and public sectors, has become severely frayed.



Atelier LOIDL,
Park am Gleisdreieck,
Berlin,
2013

View of a newly completed section of the park with traces of industrial archaeology and ruderal vegetation.

Track Wilderness

The name Gleisdreieck, meaning 'track triangle', actually sounds strange in German as well as English. The German writer and actor Hanns Zischler notes how Gleisdreieck is a 'strange word, the name of a location without a location, like a technical-geometrical paradox'.² The site originates from a complex track formation created in 1912 to improve the flow of trains through the rapidly expanding city of Berlin. Its brutal functionality was captured in the Austrian writer Joseph Roth's expression 'iron landscape', from an essay published in 1924, where he referred to the space as a 'playground of machines'.³ The array of tracks also features in Walter Ruttmann's classic evocation of Weimar modernity in his film *Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt (Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis)* (1927) and in Robert Steinhilber's Nazi-era film *Gleisdreieck* (1936). In 1942 the railway lines became part of the infrastructure of annihilation that deported Jewish people and other minorities to their deaths. Towards the close of the Second World War the system of tracks and stations was heavily damaged by aerial bombardment. By the early 1950s the site had been decommissioned as a transport hub, along with a series of other connecting spaces, and Gleisdreieck became part of the patchwork of anomalous and abandoned spaces that came to characterise postwar Berlin. The track complex, with its assortment of ruined buildings, became a prominent component in the truncated and marooned infrastructure networks that characterised the divided city.⁴ Over time the site began to acquire significance as a kind of 'vernacular park', imprinted into grassroots forms of collective memory. Gleisdreieck and other ruined spaces became a playground for social, cultural and sexual experimentation.⁵

Located in the former island city of West Berlin, the sprawling Gleisdreieck site became a zone of contestation in the early 1970s as a citizens' initiative was established to oppose the building of a new motorway through the site under the so-called Westtangente ('West Tangent') scheme. This ultimately unrealised proposal reflects the postwar emphasis on the *autogerechte Stadt* ('the car-corrected city') as a leitmotif for urban planning. By the late 1970s local opposition to the road-building scheme had developed into a sophisticated alternative plan for a linear park through the inner city called the Grüntangente ('Green Tangent') that would have connected all the way from Gleisdreieck to what is now the speculative commercial hub of Potsdamerplatz, as well as incorporating abandoned railway lands to the south.

Once a symbol of industrial modernity, the now heavily overgrown landscapes of Gleisdreieck became emblematic of the *terrain vague* of postwar Berlin. In films such as Wim Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin (Wings of Desire)* (1987) the ostensibly empty spaces of Gleisdreieck signal a fracturing of memory within a city cut adrift by geopolitical separation. Yet Wenders's evocation of a time and space out of sync must be read alongside a parallel fascination with the site as a novel kind of socioecological assemblage. A now classic botanical study from 1980 by Ulrich Asmus recorded over 400 different species of plants across the site as part of a newly articulated emphasis on urban biodiversity led by Herbert Sukopp, Ingo Kowarik and other ecologists based at Berlin's Technical University.⁶ For urban botanists, sites such as Gleisdreieck exemplified a kind of *Stadtwildnis* (urban wilderness)

marked by unusual combinations of native and non-native species. Implicitly, therefore, this recognition of new kinds of 'cosmopolitan ecologies' marked a point of departure from existing approaches to the study of plant succession and identifiable vegetation types.

During the 1980s, this scientific lens emanating from the Technical University was to acquire increasing political significance under what the sociologist Jens Lachmund terms an emerging 'biotope-protection regime' that became a distinctive feature of environmental politics and land-use planning in West Berlin.⁷ The eventual creation of a new public park on the Gleisdreieck site marks a kind of cultural, political and scientific continuity with strands of social and environmental activism in the former West Berlin, mirroring other recent projects such as the Südgelände urban nature park, and underpinned by the pedagogic connections between former students on the urban ecology programme at the Technical University and the design studio Atelier LOIDL that won the park design competition held in 2006 after seeing off 85 other design proposals.



Atelier LOIDL,
Park am Gleisdreieck,
Berlin,
2019

The park is traversed by sections of abandoned railway tracks including strips of urban woodland referred to as *Gleiswäldnis* (track wilderness).

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Functional train lines have been incorporated into the park design.

Urban Ecology as Design Motif

Under construction since 2006, and opening in stages since 2011, the prize-winning design consists of a series of zones or 'rooms' reflecting a diversity of different social, cultural and ecological interests. When approaching the site from the Hornstrasse entrance, on the east side of the park, visitors are welcomed by a series of wide steps, along with a ramp that clearly signals a welcoming and well-designed space. At the top of the steps there is a network of paths into an open space called the Kreuzberger Wiese (Kreuzberg meadow). Interestingly, this space is divided between lawn-like areas that become extremely popular on warm days, combined with more lush strips of vegetation enabled by differential mowing regimes. These demarcated patterns are reminiscent of Gilles Clément's design for Parc Henri Matisse (1995) in Lille, and serve a useful role in demonstrating how different vegetation types are intentional rather than a byproduct of neglect or mismanagement: the use of sharply edged contrasts allows different types of spontaneous nature to be aesthetically staged as part of the larger design concept for the park.⁹

Similarly, the park makes extensive use of rubble substrates to foster flower-rich ruderal ecologies, including many classic examples of wasteland or *Brache* flora such as *Dipsacus fullonum*, *Echium vulgare* and *Verbascum densiflorum*. These specially provided substrates are clearly labelled as *Ökoschotter* (eco-rubble) to provide a comparable didactic effect to the kind of ecological zones that one might encounter in a botanical garden. Additionally, there are signs for *Gleiswildnis* (track wilderness) that indicate remaining fragments of the spontaneous urban woodland that developed on the site before its conversion into a park. Dominated by birch trees with gnarled trunks that twist their way around the rusty tracks, these post-industrial woodlands provide a material continuity with the characteristics of the space before its formal incorporation into the Berlin park system.

Dotted throughout the park are a variety of sports and recreational facilities including more niche features such as concrete bowls for skateboarding and an officially sanctioned 'graffiti wall'. These highly popular elements of the park design are indicative of a degree of inclusivity for pre-existing urban subcultures that can be read in parallel to the aesthetic appropriation of the ecological characteristics of the original site. Towards the western perimeter there are further features of interest including surviving allotment colonies that predate the creation of the park and have now been encircled within its protective configuration. There are also 'wilder' zones adjacent to a large sign that illustrates a range of interesting flora and fauna including nine different *Stationen des Rundgangs* (tour points) that encourage visitors to experience urban nature as a series of dynamic zones of ecological transition: progressing further into this wilder part of the park there is a network of didactic infrastructure for these different forms of *Stadtwildnis* (urban wilderness) such as *Birken-Pappel-Vorwald* (birch-poplar early-stage forest) and *Pioneer Gebüsche (mit Sanddorn)* (pioneer shrubs with sea buckthorn). It is striking though how deserted these western areas of *Gleisdreieck* feel even on a warm day when the rest of the park is buzzing

These post-industrial woodlands provide a material continuity with the characteristics of the space before its formal incorporation into the Berlin park system



In the foreground are species such as *Echium vulgare*, *Oenothera biennis* and *Saponaria officinalis* that are growing in the eco-rubble.

with activity, and deeper within the woods there are traces of homelessness along with the presence of other marginalised people who are seeking shelter from the increasingly expensive and inhospitable city beyond.

Ecological Atmospherics

In terms of its usage, the park is clearly very successful and seems to attract a predominantly young crowd of visitors. Proponents for the park such as the cultural geographer Jürgen Hasse describe its success as 'a space of affective dynamism' marked by diversity of 'atmospheres' and 'situations'. Hasse draws on elements of the so-called 'new phenomenology', and especially the philosophy of Hermann Schmitz, to highlight human interactions with nonhuman elements such as weather or seasons to produce a skein of micro choreographies.⁹ Public spaces such as parks have long served as a focal point for ethnographic observations of everyday life, and in particular the presence of what the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart refers to as 'situations' or other kinds of micro-disturbances that ripple through spatial settings. There is now growing interest in 'affective atmospheres' as an alternative vantage point to more narrowly defined conceptions of the human subject encountered in classic accounts of architectural history and design theory.¹⁰

From an environmental perspective the park provides a rich setting for wider reflections on the role of nature in urban design. The ecologist Ingo Kowarik notes how the park successfully combines what he terms 'third nature', encompassing classic elements of garden design, with 'fourth nature' exemplified by traces of *Stadtwildnis* (urban wilderness).¹¹ For Kowarik, this synthesis rests principally on the material configuration of the new park design, but we might widen this field of interpretation to consider whether the park signals a new or distinctive kind of ecological imaginary. The deployment of the term 'ecological imaginary' moves beyond material typologies of human interaction with nature to emphasise cultural projections onto the nonhuman realm. In the case of Park am Gleisdreieck the design incorporates radically different elements of urban nature so that any putative ecological imaginary is best conceived as an experimental synthesis. The didactic features of the park resemble an urban botanical garden, while the more human-oriented recreational features, including the network of paths, provide a kind of late-modern promenade that intersects with the industrial archaeology of the site.

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The design includes popular concrete bowls for skateboarding and other recreational activities.



In addition to a designated graffiti wall, many other surfaces are regularly festooned with various types of street art.



The eastern side of the park includes areas of *Stadtwildnis* (urban wilderness) that have been largely left alone and include a series of didactic signs to show different aspects of vegetation dynamics. This sign indicates Birken-Pappel-Vorwald (birch-poplar early-stage forest) so that parts of the park resemble an urban botanical garden.

Given the scale and sophistication of the public works required for the construction of the park, it is interesting to consider how such a large and complex kind of public space came into being. The funding for Park am Gleisdreieck has emerged out of negotiations for the destruction of open space elsewhere in the city, notably in Potsdamerplatz, and is a prominent example of what can be termed a 'compensation landscape' that has emerged out of discussions between the state, private interests and community organisations.¹² Furthermore, the management of the park, which at times appears highly interventionist, emerges from a hybrid form of public-private partnership through the operation of a state-owned set of companies operating as Grün Berlin GmbH since 1992. The powerful Grün Berlin entity now oversees key elements of design, project management, maintenance and, increasingly, security for a network of over 1,000 hectares (2,470 acres) of public spaces across the city.

Although different stages of the Gleisdreieck project have sought the involvement of civic society, and used various forms of public consultation, there have been significant tensions between the managerial impetus of Grün Berlin and opposition to the excessive use of asphalt surfaces or other types 'non-ecological' interventions.¹³ Furthermore, the security presence appears quite excessive in comparison with other public spaces in Berlin, with regular patrols observable in almost all parts of the park. Above all, the steady advance of high-end housing developments around the perimeter of the park betokens a close elision between urban design and speculative urban development: the sense of a tranquil oasis surrounded by various fragments of *terrain vague* and inexpensive apartments is being steadily displaced by the emergence of an urban canyon not unlike the 20th-century enclosure of Manhattan's Central Park or the more recent gentrification frenzy associated with the High Line.



An example of newly constructed luxury housing developments around the edge of the park.

Park am Gleisdreieck is a paradoxical public space: elements of its design display a high degree of cultural and scientific sophistication, yet its very success has contributed to rapidly rising rents in surrounding neighbourhoods. Since the vast majority of local residents do not own their apartments, any increase in rent may ultimately force many current users of the park to relocate to cheaper parts of the city. These shifts are significant not only in class terms, but also in relation to the ethnic composition of park users, since these areas of former West Berlin had a high proportion of Turkish households as well as other migrant communities. It is instructive, therefore, that a park design that is so sensitive to the cosmopolitan and subcultural characteristics of inner-city Berlin life should nonetheless find itself tangled in the wider dynamics of speculative urban change. The park may succeed in holding relic elements of the original ecological characteristics of the site in a state of suspended animation, but the protection of the social and cultural complexity of such marginal spaces is far less certain. ■

Notes

1. See, for example, Knut Unger, 'Financialization of Rental Mass Housing in Germany: Understanding the Transaction Cycles in the Mass Rental Housing Sector 1999–2015', in Barbara Schöning and Sebastian Schipper (eds), *Urban Austria: Impacts of the Global Financial Crisis on Cities in Europe*, Theater der Zeit (Berlin), 2016, pp. 176–90.
2. Interview with Hanns Zischler in Andra Lichtenstein and Flavia Alice Mameli (eds), *Gleisdreieck/Park Life Berlin*, transcript (Bielefeld), 2015, p. 83. See also Hanns Zischler, *Berlin ist zu groß für Berlin*, Galileo (Berlin), 2013.
3. Joseph Roth, 'Bekanntes zum Gleisdreieck', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 16 July 1924, in Joseph Roth, *Orte, Rhythmen* (Leipzig), 1990, p. 68.
4. See, for example, Sandra Jasper, 'Phantom Limbs', in Matthew Gandy (ed.), *Urban Constellations*, Jovis (Berlin), 2011, pp. 153–6.
5. See, for example, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *In a Cold Crater: Cultural and Intellectual Life in Berlin, 1945–1948*, trans. Kelly Barry, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA), 1998.
6. Ulrich Asmus, *Vegetationskundliches Gutachten über den Potsdamer und Anhalter Güterbahnhof in Berlin*, Berlin Senate, 1980.
7. Jens Lachmund, *Greening Berlin: the Co-production of Science, Politics, and Urban Nature*, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 2013, p. 127.
8. See Matthew Gandy, 'Entropy by Design: Gilles Clément, Parc Henri Matisse and the Limits to Avant-Garde Urbanism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37 (1), 2013, pp. 259–78.
9. Jürgen Hase, 'Zur Atmosphäre eines urbanen Grünraums: Der Park am Gleisdreieck', in Lichtenstein and Mameli, *op. cit.*, pp. 238–43.
10. See Matthew Gandy, 'Urban Atmospheres', *Cultural Geographies*, 24 (3), 2017, pp. 353–74.
11. Ingo Kowarik, 'Gleisdreieck: wie urbane Wildnis in neuen Park möglich wurde', in Lichtenstein and Mameli, *op. cit.*, pp. 201–15.
12. Kowarik discusses the creation of new landscapes as a form of compensation in the documentary film *Nature Urbana: the Straten of Berlin*, director: Matthew Gandy, 2017.
13. Thomas Loy, 'Hauptstadt-Gärtner: das Millionen-Unternehmen "Grün Berlin"', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 26 January 2018: www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/von-marzahn-bis-neukoelln-hauptstadt-gaertner-das-millionen-unternehmen-gruen-berlin/20863736.html.