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Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord—Duisburg, Germany

Latz + Partners

For two centuries, urban parks have been perceived and understood as public green spaces. Naturalistic or formal in appearance, they provided for recreational activity, and often featured attractive or romantic scenery.

Located in the heart of Germany's densely populated Ruhr District, Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord (North Duisburg Landscape Park) makes a clear break with this history. A milestone in landscape design, it epitomizes an innovative approach to the urban cultural landscape, one characterized by acceptance of its industrial heritage and dramatically altered natural conditions.

On the site of a former industrial blast furnace, Latz +



Partners have created a place of great beauty that will perpetuate the story of these industrial facilities for succeeding generations. At the same time, through a concerted program of bioremediation and on-site materials recycling, the design manages to neutralize or reverse much of the ecological damage done by those facilities. To complete the conversion of the site, the design also introduces a program of public activities which will allow it to develop new relevance in people's lives.

The jury praised the project as exemplary of the emergence of a new era of postindustrial parks, a trend that is currently more in evidence in Europe than in the United States. In the U.S., there have been many studies of devastated landscapes—including Alan Berger's *Reclaiming the American West*, a previous EDRA/*Places* award winner (*Places*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 14-17). But the ability to move from research to planning and design has too often been hampered by a lack of political will and government funding.

IBA Emscherpark

Duisburg Nord park cannot be understood apart from the larger reclamation effort of which it is a part. Until the early 1970s, Germany's Ruhr area, particularly the Emscher District, was one of Europe's largest coal-mining and steel-manufacturing centers. The decline of these heavy industries, however, precipitated an economic and ecological crisis as well as social change and a loss of cultural significance in the region. Left behind was a bizarre landscape of rail beds, smokestacks, slag heaps, polluted soils, industrial ruins, and reengineered waterways.

Inspired by a series of earlier "International Building Exhibitions" (IBA) in other parts of Germany, a partnership between the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, local municipalities, and private companies was formed. This commission proposed the IBA Emscherpark, a ten-year effort from 1989 to 1999 to revitalize the area. The goal was to develop a program of renewal for the densely populated region along the Emscher River, stretching from Duisburg on the Rhine in the west to Dortmund in the east, and including approximately 115 square miles and many important cities in between. The "exposition" proposed to accomplish its goal by catalyzing structural, economic and social reform through a number of exemplary and innovative integrated design projects.

From 1989 on, the IBA Emscherpark authority staged a series of competitions and issued a number of calls for proposals for carefully selected sites within the region. These ranged from cutting-edge residential developments to cultural and educational facilities, art projects, and open-space systems. In one way or another, all have attempted to address the ecological and economic regeneration of former industrial land. Over the course of ten years, the IBA sponsored approximately one hundred projects at various scales.

At Duisburg Nord, the land development authority of North Rhine-Westphalia, supported by a real estate fund, purchased the grounds of the former Thyssen Steelworks manufacturing plant. Subsequently, the City of Duisburg changed its zoning to allow its conversion into a public park. It was in this context that landscape designer Peter Latz developed a plan that reflects many of IBA's overall goals and objectives, and that has become the basis for one of IBA's key projects.

The steel plant as an active industrial site in 1952. Photo courtesy of the Thyssen Krupp Corporate Archives.



Conceptual Considerations

In a 2004 lecture, Latz explained some of the difficulties the site presents. “The park is not a park in the common sense, not easy to survey, not clearly arranged, not recognizable as a whole. According to its situation amidst chaotic agglomerations and infrastructure lines, it appears as a torn figure with numerous different aspects.”¹

Nevertheless, when the idea for a park on the site of the former steel plant was born in 1989, he was struck by the power of its remnant patterns of infrastructure and industrial relics—an aesthetic of gigantic objects that could potentially function as landmarks and nourish the *genius loci* of the site.

The abandoned colossuses of steel production also spoke a language of the sublime. “A blast furnace is not only an old furnace. It is a menacing ‘dragon’ frightening men and rising above its surroundings,” Latz has said.²

In their groundbreaking concept, Latz + Partners

attempted to reveal the unique qualities of this place. Historic layers of use had left their physical marks through industrial imprints, altered conditions, and environmental contamination. However, the goal was to consider these disturbed and complex conditions for their creative potential rather than as a nuisance that should be erased or camouflaged.

Based on thorough site survey and analysis, the designers were ultimately able to keep and reuse most of the existing industrial structures at Duisburg Nord. By transforming them in subtle and sensitive ways into parts of a new design, and by reprogramming their functions, they have successfully converted this former industrial site into a revolutionary new landscape type, one that is attracting more than 500,000 visitors per year.

Overall plan of the new landscape park. Drawing courtesy of Latz + Partners.



Park Systems

The 230-hectare (approximately 570-acre) project was developed in phases over the course of thirteen years, from 1989 to 2002. It consists of several layers of design elements that operate independently as park systems, and help create a sense of orientation that makes an extremely complex site interpretable at a human scale. Among major elements are a railroad park consisting of the raised ribbons of old rail-beds and other structures of a formerly manmade topography; new footbridges and promenades; a water park at its lowest level; and fields of vegetation—woodland-like groupings of trees, pioneer plants, and prairie meadows—situated between more linear elements.

Many memorable places, all unique in character, are interwoven within this spatial framework: the Sinterpark and its large multifunctional plaza used for events; Secret Gardens hidden in former storage bunker structures; and a central Blast Furnace Park with elevated observation plat-

forms, climbing walls, rock gardens, and public spaces. The Piazza Metallica, situated at the symbolic heart of the park serves as its central event and gathering space. Here, a total of 49 recycled iron plates, each weighing seven to eight tons, were carefully arranged in a square, defining a plaza that is completely enclosed by looming industrial forms.

With its unconventional appearance and unique new recreational opportunities, the park has become popular with local residents, making a great contribution to the surrounding lower-middle- and working-class neighborhoods on the north side of Duisburg. New activities range from hiking, biking, and exploring the park's hidden corners, to social gatherings and large-scale cultural events.

Much of the project's charm results from the innovative reuse of individual site structures. For example, the park is home to the Gasometer, a former gas tank that has been filled with water and is now the world's largest indoor diving center. Rugged concrete bunkers provide excellent

training facilities for rock climbers. And landmarks such as smokestacks and old furnaces are illuminated at night with colorful spotlights that attract visitors.

Restoring Ecological Awareness

From the beginning, principles of ecology and sustainability guided the design and implementation of this new landscape. Remnants of demolished structures were reused in planting substrates, recycled concrete, or new paving materials.

Creative ways were also found to treat runoff on site and integrate resulting new physical forms in the overall



design. Most important has been the transformation of the Emscher River, which runs through the park from east to west. Previously, the river had served as an open sewer channel. The new design culverts and diverts wastewater, while converting the Emscher into a collector for pre-treated runoff and rainwater.

Significantly, Latz + Partners decided not to convert this reclaimed industrial channel into a pseudo-naturalistic, romantic, meandering waterway—as proposed by conservationists and other groups. Nevertheless, they managed to reestablish its ecological functioning as habitat for aquatic plants and wildlife. Platforms extending out over the water also make this new environment accessible to park visitors.

In contrast to these highly designed interventions, other large areas of Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord were treated in ways primarily intended to reduce maintenance costs and keep energy inputs low. Disturbed soils on site

often have high concentrations of slag, cinder, and the remains of coal or coke. Such extreme biological conditions have resulted in “natural” vegetation growth that reflects the site’s industrial history. Moreover, over the years, seeds from all over the world were introduced along with industrial shipments, leading to a great present variety and mix of native and exotic species—as many as 450 neophytes. These plants now appear at many early stages of natural succession.

Many publications have already referred to Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord as one of the most intellectually rigorous and successful examples of postindustrial park design. Perhaps most significantly, it was featured in the 2005 exhibition “Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. According to the exhibition catalogue, the project is “one of the most significant new parks of the last decade.”³

Without a doubt, this seminal work has expanded our definition of urban parks, and begun to influence the thinking of a new generation of landscape architects. Among its lessons are to be aware of the importance of thorough site analysis; to give equal weight to social and ecological considerations; to respect the *genius loci*; and, most importantly, to allow the form of a park to evolve from the past use of a site.

— *Judith Stilgenbauer*

Notes

1. Peter Latz, “The Metamorphosis of the 20th Century’s Landscape,” March 1, 2004, at the University of California, Berkeley.
2. Ibid.
3. Peter Reed, *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005). See also Lisa Diedrich, “No Politics, No Park: The Duisburg–Nord Model,” *TOPOS, European Landscape Magazine* 26 (March 1999); Niall Kirkwood, ed., *Manufactured Sites, Rethinking the Post-Industrial Landscape* (London: Spon, 2001); Arthur Lubow, “The Anti-Olmsted,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 16, 2004; and Alan Tate, *Great City Parks* (London: Spon, 2001).

Opposite Left: Cowper Place, a multifunctional plaza for events and gatherings. Photo by Christa Panick.

Opposite Right: A big slide deposits children in a play area at the mouth of a former ore bunker. Photo courtesy of Latz + Partners.

Top: The gardens of the Sinterpark occupy an area that once held a mix of fine-grain ore and other supplements used in the smelting process. Photo by Michael Latz.