Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord

Peter Latz

HIRMER

RUST RED

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FOREWORD

Karl Ganser

Tree Plaza with the logo of International Building Exhibition (IBA) Emscher Park 1994.

It is only now, after a period of 25 years, that Peter Latz has written this book about the Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord, about "his" park. Latz waited for so long to make sure time and again what impact his chosen method would have. So this book is the fully fledged experience in terms of knowledge, as well as his legacy.

The park attracts well in excess of one million visitors per year. It is advertised by a colourful variety of leaflets and brochures. News items about the Ruhr Region are simply not complete without striking images of the park. It certainly is popular. But is it really understood?

Familiar images of Baroque gardens or English parks, of public parks or horticultural shows, of nature parks or nature conservation areas do not fit a landscape that still looks industrial after 25 years. Latz has transformed the abandoned iron works without resorting to established examples. In the process he has created both a monument to the iron industry and a cultural biotope, all on the scale of the landscape.

Five chapters dissect the chaotic-looking landscape into organised components. The first part of this book "layers" the landscape in five strata. In the second part the objects are inserted. The last part is about the correlation of past and future. It is an extraordinary experience if you walk each layer separately, one after the other, with the book in your hand and Peter Latz as the narrator.

"We had to learn to walk how the locomotive runs". The rail harps of the industrial railways characterise the structure. He calls them the Railway Park. If we then follow the watercourse we walk from rainwater sources along channels, reservoirs and canals. This is the nature of water in a transformed industrial landscape. Unexpected outlooks and insights are provided by the paths up to the hot blast furnaces and through the sunken bunker gallery.

This basic linear structure of the park can be overlaid in our mind's eye as well as on plan. In reality it can be connected with numerous paths and bridges (there are 37 bridges in the park). The vegetation is scattered in fields of unusual habitats. We look on in wonder at the diversity and forms that wilderness produces when left alone, and how Latz the gardener used spontaneous imagination and images from many eras to turn it into garden art. Only in the middle of his book does Latz offer a theory for the park: "This project, like no other, has shown that when working in an existing context, the methodical differences between analysis and design dissolve. Decisions must be made about what can be designed and what should be left unchanged. These decisions arise in deliberations and thereby assume the character of a design process".

The site survey is central to this working method. Here we learn what the things used to be, what they are now, how they will change and whether their retention or transformation will be worthwhile. Latz repeatedly states that the consideration of the existing site concurrently becomes the design process.

The unchanged existing is a prerequisite for the landscape to save its history and ensure future opportunities for still further and continuous transformations.

The iron works started operations with three blast furnaces in 1903. By 1985 the last of the former five blast furnaces had stopped. The industrial site comprising 230 hectares then passed into the ownership of the property fund of the federal state of North Rhine Westphalia which held many disused industrial sites in trusteeship for their future development by the municipalities. The planning brief for the iron works was to develop a simple form of "green space" that did not incur follow-up costs for maintenance. Thyssen, the previous owner, wanted to hand over the property including its contamination to the public authorities but collect as much revenue as possible from scrap sales. This meant demolishing the entire works. A citizens' group called IG Nordpark, led by Wolfgang Ebert, argued for its conservation as an industrial monument. Amid the conflict

of interests the City of Duisburg made the "project" a component of the Emscher Landscape Park within the International Building Exhibition (IBA).

What does "green" mean if it is made the objective of an international building exhibition? This was to be resolved by an international competition. That was in 1990; at the time postmodernism had just reached landscape architecture. Parc de la Villette in Paris was the star of this new movement. English "garden festivals" became a talking point as a floral precursor for business parks. Borrowed from fine arts, park designs were treated and marvelled at like avant-garde pieces of art. At that time, German landscape architecture was not a part of this, but was preoccupied with plain concepts for derivatives of the Volkspark (people's park). And a few outsiders of the Nature Conservancy had discovered industrial wasteland as refuges for rare species.

The competition was held as an open design workshop with one landscape architecture practice from each different school of thought. Among them was Peter Latz because of his River Port Island in Saarbrücken. The jury chose Latz, perhaps because he proposed an appropriate working method rather than a figurative and conspicuously coloured overall design. The City of Duisburg did not want this "park" because Latz's presentation drawings did not look like a park. Thyssen, influential in the background, insisted on complete demolition and scrap proceeds.

IG Nordpark presented the case to Christoph Zöpel, Minister for Heritage, who had a great passion for conservation and also the preservation of industrial monuments. The IBA Emscher Park wanted something special and seminal. The iron works was to be retained. The property fund acted as the memory which besides monument conservation also guaranteed the process protection of the Latz methodology. The City of Duisburg renounced the project even years after works had begun.

North of Duisburg a landscape emerged which does not fit the terms "landscape" and "park" and which has no real precedent in the history of landscape architecture. It is a piece of land between wilderness and art, which is given over to careful transformation.

May this book by Peter Latz support the appreciation of a unique and equally outlandish landscape and in doing so promote the continued protection of processes in the future.

FOREWORD

Marc Treib

AN INDUSTRIAL SUBLIME

We call Duisburg-Nord a park, a Landschaftspark, although many visitors may wonder just why. It is not a pretty place in the usual sense of a park: it has very few flower beds, no calculated meandering paths, and none of the playground equipment that has become standard around the world. It is a rough landscape, to a large degree filled with derelict factory buildings and broken concrete walls. Admittedly, as entropy and oxidation consume its buildings over time, the impact of this immense wasteland of production will decline and in its place a forest of birch, willow, hawthorn and other vegetation will cover more of its grounds. But today, some twenty-five years after the park's first realisation, construction in steel and concrete still dominates the visitor's view and imagination. Is it a park only because its terrain is not the city, that it does not share its urban plan, that it stands as a void removed from the surrounding development? Was it a political act that defined Duisburg-Nord as a park, a declaration of a new Germany resurrected from the collapse of heavy industry and free from its lingering residue of polluted soil and water? Or is it not construction but the human presence that makes this land a park? Recreation has replaced production. Where blast furnaces once roared, we now encounter facilities for diving and places for hiking and unstructured play. Or is it, then, the combination of all these factors, material and human, that makes Duisburg-Nord a park?

The place of Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord in the history of Western landscape architecture is secure. It is a landmark work that has become a model – evident in the conversion of many industrial sites that followed in its wake – for resurrecting a productive site, and as a prototype approach for mitigating the poisonous relics of manufacture. Its design took an optimistic stance that saw in detritus and decay the possibilities for recreational grounds to serve the region and a significant work of landscape architecture. The Latz + Partner design integrated a grand approach with areas of focused intervention, recognising that the superannuated iron furnaces and their support facilities must remain the prime elements of any new landscape. The remaining buildings, polluted river, and "harp" of rail lines shared in determining the park's structure with the remedial systems that converted spoilage to amenity. An ambitious planting scheme paired enclosed gardens with an invading army of woods. In places the elements of the park are tough, even brutal; in other areas they are purposefully delicate and gentle.

The story of Duisburg-Nord has been told many times since its beginning in the 1990s as part of the ambitious IBA project for the Emscher Valley. The victorious design by Latz + Partner was radical in its idea for transforming what remained, rather than clearing the site of all industrial traces. There were years spent remediating its soil and water, to the extent that a hopelessly contaminated river was channelled beneath a canal to offer clean water for human use. A passerelle set parallel to the canal created the spine for the area of the site that has been most noticeably designed. In the process of realisation a gasometer structure became a diving facility; the walls of a concrete bunker now support climbing. The design strategy enfolded acceptance with intervention: the colossal structures would remain, accessed by a network of catwalks and stairs. The idea was "not to change these features but their context, incorporating them in a new phase of park use," wrote Peter Latz.[1] Giant slabs of iron would become the floor of a Piazza Metallica. Structures formerly productive would become mountain ranges for exploration and the revelation of views. In all, the "lion" of industry would lie down with the "lamb" of nature in a biblical harmony; together vegetation and the rusting remains of industry would marry – and become a park. As Peter Latz stated as construction began, "This is to become a historical park, but the history starts now and goes forward as well as backwards."[2]

The history of ruins in parks traces to ancient times, when the spoils of war were transported to the victor's homeland to glorify military and political achievements.[3] In eighteenth-century England, ruins of the monasteries confiscated by Henry VIII were incorporated into the design of gardens either visually (the remains of Rievaulx Abbey became a feature of Rievaulx Terrace) or physically (as Fountains Abbey was enfolded into the fabric of the garden of Studley Royal).[4] At its extreme, where ruins did not exist, they might even be constructed. In France, for example, the Marquis de Girardin's Ermenonville included a ruined fabrique honouring philosophy; the villa at de Monville's Désert de Retz was constructed as a giant broken column.[5] The ruin not only provided formal interest, but also served as a vehicle by which to consider the passage of time and the processes of nature and entropy – and perhaps even as a vanitas reminding us of the brief span of our life. Precedents for the inclusion of industrial remains also exist, in the United States for example, where Richard Haag argued for their retention in his design for Gas Works Park in Seattle, Washington.[6] This was the first American effort to retain industrial structures, but more significantly, to recuperate a horribly polluted site and convert to a public amenity.

At Duisburg-Nord, however, the dimensions of the structures and their recent removal from production prompted a different interpretation and approach. In the English landscape garden the ruin was only a small physical element within a wide landscape; Duisburg-Nord's colossal structures, in contrast, dominate the immediate landscape and the landscapes surrounding them; in fact, colossal production facilities and their wastelands remain throughout the entire Emscher Valley. There was little question of removing these structures or returning the site to what it had been before industrialisation took hold. The design for the park announced that the clock cannot be turned back, that a mythical (natural) Golden Age cannot be regained, and that the solution lies in using – through transformation – the resources now at hand.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the political theorist Edmund Burke categorised and distinguished two types of aesthetic reaction in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.[7] There was the "beautiful:" art or nature controlled, polite, reflecting a pursuit of perfection. And there was the "sublime," the experience of which suggested the unfathomable, the infinite, a condition filled to some degree with a sense of terror. In the decades that followed, William Gilpin and Richard Payne Knight formulated a third category, the "picturesque."[8] Eschewing any pursuit of the beautiful, they sought roughness and imperfection as the source of desirable allure. At Duisburg-Nord we find all three categories of aesthetics, if that word can viably be attached to decaying construction and a landscape always in flux. Beauty is found in small moments: in the design of the children's play area, the gardens that inhabit a former bunker, the platforms that afford contact with the canal. The picturesque governs the site: in the rusting hulks of crude iron plants, the unstoppable flow of planted and volunteer trees over both fertile and inhospitable terrain, and the disposition of the buildings in the landscape that now appears without logic. Yet despite these readings, perhaps it is the sublime which most appropriately characterises the park at Duisburg-Nord. The volumes of the industrial remains are vast; the limits of the park are unapparent. There is a slight feeling of terror in mounting the oxidising structures with stairs and catwalks of only minimal construction. Within us are almost always thoughts of those who until rather recently worked amid the brilliant light of the blast furnace and the acrid fumes of industry. And perhaps we may even wonder how those workers might regard the transformed industrial landscape today.

The photographer Edward Burtynsky has recorded industrial decay around the world. His photographs are uniformly stunning as well as revealing; to me his most moving works comprise a series called "Shipbreaking," which captured derelict ships brought to India to be dismantled – almost entirely by hand.[9] In these photographs the colour of rust prevails, coating the shore, the ships and the people who dissemble them. One writer characterised the setting as illustrating a "toxic sublime," a certain visual magnificence that draws our admiration despite our knowing of its environmental dangers – like the imposing sunsets created by conditions of smog that rival in beauty the light-filled paintings of J.M.W. Turner.[10]

In its initial phase Duisburg-Nord represented a toxic sublime, but over time the implementation of the Latz + Partner design triumphed over pollution. Yet despite the plethora of chemical and functional issues which the design team had to address, it is the park as a place for contemporary activity that most impresses us today. Some visitors may not read all its elements and zones as components of a park, but there are already sufficient "natural" areas to suggest that interpretation to most people who use the site. Duisburg-Nord is a landscape in flux, and its landscape architects wisely accepted the dynamic nature of nature as the basis of their design. Their achievement has been considerable, even monumental, as a place, a park, and a stimulus to the sublime.

1 Peter Latz, "'Design' by Handling the Existing," in: Martin Knit, Hans Opus, and Peter van Sane, eds., Modern Park Design: Recent Trends, Nessus, NL: Thoth, 1993, p. 92.
2 Ibid., p. 91.
3 Christopher Woodward, In Ruins, London: Vintage, 2001; and Marc Treib, "Remembering Ruins, Ruins Remembering," in: Marc Treib, ed., Spatial Recall: Memory in Architecture and Landscape, London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 194–217.
4 See The Rievaulx Terrace, North Yorkshire London: National Trust, 1978; and Mary Mauchline and Lydia Greeves, Fountains Abbey & Studley Royal, North Yorkshire, London: National Trust, 1988.
5 See Marquis de Girardin, An Essay on Landscape and a Tour of Ermenonville (1785), reprint New York: Garland, 1982; and Diana Ketchum, Le Désert de Retz, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.
6 Thaisa Way, The Landscape Architecture of Richard Haag, Seattle: University of Washington Press, pp. 147–168.
7 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, London: Robert and James Dodsley, 1757 (Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
8 On the picturesque see John Macarthur, The Picturesque: architecture, disgust and other irregularities, London: Routledge, 2007; William Gilpin, Observations on the River Wye (1782), reprint London: Pallas Athene, 2005.
9 See Edward Burtynsky, Manufactured Landscapes, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
10 Carol Diehl, "The Toxic Sublime (Edward Burtynsky)," Art in America, February 2006, pp. 188–123.

INTRODUCTION

… The world of myths and fables took possession of the old iron works with its bewildering bundles of pipes and stairways, underpasses, ramps and walkways, and the gigantic bunkers, more rocky outcrops than built structures; a city of blast furnaces and hot blast stoves with three chimneys towering above – widely visible mega signs of the past …

To this day, the site of the former Thyssen iron works carries the name "Landscape Park". Landscape: the term is generally associated with wide open spaces, streams, rivers, forests; and the term park with people strolling and children playing. Neither of these mindscapes could be reconciled with the terrain, as it lay before us then. We found 230 hectares of devastated land from which overwhelmingly large, outlandish shapes loomed.

The blast furnaces, now cooled down, are simultaneously symbols of the decline of an epoch and the development of a new era. They are the historical evidence of a dramatic change in society, of the most modern production methods and their dereliction. The economic sectors in the Emscher Region began to change, slowly but drastically. "No one ever had to be friendly at the blast furnace", but the goal of tourism required different educational career paths and different modes of behaviour. Almost imperceptibly investments in open space became focussed on event culture. This required innovative, high standards for the construction and maintenance of public spaces, fast responses to necessary repairs and short intervals of reinvestment in buildings and equipment. These complex challenges could only be met by seeking robust structures and materials, which ideally could be recomposed from existing elements.

During the site analysis stage, various elements were discovered bit by bit. Rough sketches showed the first resilient structures that seemed to be appropriate for joint use. Abstraction of their system characters allowed us to arrive at uninterrupted geometries. Five information layers were abstracted for the project, three linear ones, one planar and one of isolated points. By coincidence the linear layers are at three different heights which overlay one another and provide fascinating and partly perplexing objects.

My deliberations on motivation, design and development come late; the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park is long over. Management and maintenance in the park are based on experience. Now, 20 years later, the actors are changing, experience must be replaced by knowledge, the development of ideas geared towards the preservation of structures. The book is my contribution to this. Another reason is to show a "grown up" park, in the way that only existed in our heads and in coloured drawings during the design process. It is the consideration of time that distinguishes landscape architecture from our neighbouring discipline architecture. When an architect presents his finished building, it is at the highpoint of its life. For landscape architects it takes almost another two decades before the envisaged spaces become spaces and bushes have grown into trees.

The chapters 'Approach' and 'Structures' consider the five information layers and the three levels with their structural aspects; the chapter 'Places' describes the objects and their design. The chapter 'Visions' risks a glance towards the future. The "In Focus" contributions give in-depth information on various specialist subjects. A separate section, the chapter 'Methods', addresses the theoretical and methodical basis of the scheme. This is done from a highly critical perspective. For the past 30 years, the rules of Modernism have influenced us, which in fact had lost their validity but were reintroduced by architecture. We can only hope that we have successfully reversed the paradigm "form follows function" at the Landscape Park and have generated memorable images again.

To speak of parks or gardens is to speak of beauty. This book also brings visual appeal to the fore. Perhaps one day we will have books that can make us actually experience music, scents or the sun on our skin.

… For a long time, the elder of the two men has relied on sounds and scents, touching and feeling his way around. As he is almost blind, he asks the younger man: "Are the falcons still flying above the blast furnace?" They've done that for years, ever since the blast furnace was blown out and no one knows why. "Oh yes, Father, I can see the dark shadows of the large birds, elegantly gliding in circles around the blast furnace." "I'm relieved to hear that", says the old man and continues onwards, feeling his way with a cane until he gradually merges with the cool twilight of the bunker shadows …

I. APPROACH

TAKING A STROLL

When you enter the Landscape Park at the main gate on Emscherstrasse the first thing you see are two tank wagons, evocative of molten iron being transported. On our very first visit to the site and for those early years in the planning period we could watch tanks filled with molten ferromanganese at 1,300° Celsius cross over the entrance to the defunct blast furnace works. Now those tank wagons are cold.

A first impression of the site's dimensions is no longer possible at this point: a dead straight line which disappears on both sides into the distance of the green landscape. If you start by following the line in a north-easterly direction you pass through a grove of false acacia trees with views of a farm through the gaps in the tall hawthorn hedge on the right and tracks on the left clad in colourful blooms; then maybe horses in the meadow or a dark gate far ahead. You are sure to see cyclists or be overtaken by them and you will wish you had your own vehicle to cover the distance to the far gate and the vastness of the meadow park. With your curiosity aroused as to where the gate leads you can follow the line and stand on a bridge; but then will be slightly puzzled because it spans another. The lower bridge crosses a stream; the upper bridge spans a valley and falls towards a gorge. You then reach a wide tunnel, and if you walk through it you emerge abruptly into the ordinary world of traffic and roads. The path though crosses a tramway, which is elaborately secured, as well as four lanes of traffic and seems to continue onwards. This appears to be the end of the park. And so you turn back to the column-framed panorama of chimney stacks in the distance.

If you follow the line straight back to the bridge you will detect the end of tracks which have converged together into a bundle. Behind it tall gantry cranes loom. You pass storage areas the size of football pitches, paths on black sand accompanied by light birch trees and walk towards the black rocks. Sparse mosses and lichens grow in the cracks. Lone birch trees and willows survive in the hot, black sand, at whose origins we can only guess. A tract of land around some black buildings is fenced in – probably due to contamination. Crossing Emscherstrasse along the tracks we stand in the Tree Plaza, in the middle of the blast furnace works. There is a particular challenge in store. On this beautiful day it is a somewhat arduous pleasure to climb to the top working level of Furnace 5 and look down on the world through a tangle of rods and pipes. It takes a lot longer to decipher it.

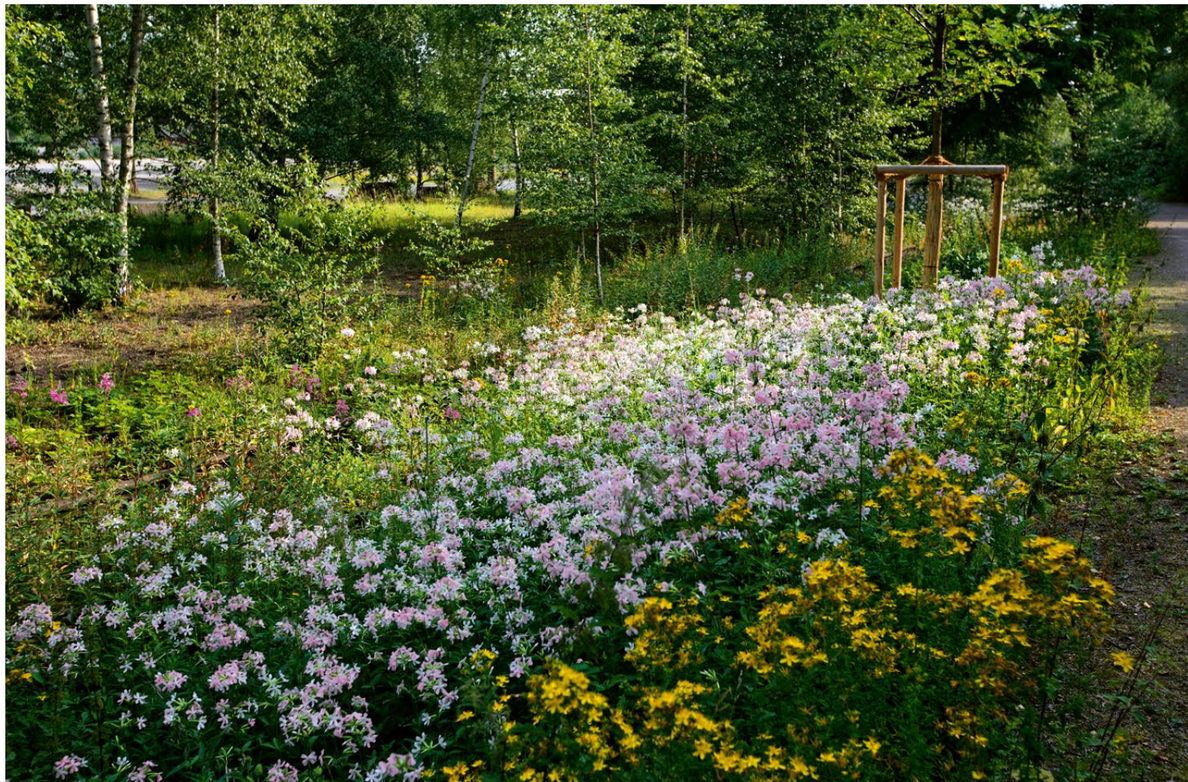
Once on the platform, giant coal and ore bunkers – concrete compartments without apertures – and tracks on massive supports running above the rows of bunkers in front of the blast furnace plant come into view, as well as the smoke of the still-operational industry in the distance. Near and far, was that the challenge?

2 Two tank wagons, evocative of molten metal being transported to the foundry.

Previous page
1 On the dead straight line of the Goods Railway Promenade.

3 At the level of the railway one bridge crosses another, which in turn spans a watercourse.

4 Tracks running alongside the goods railway are covered in the colourful blooms of tall herbaceous vegetation.



5 At Neumühl Gate we turn back towards the panorama framed by ‘columns’.

6 Tall gantry cranes loom above acres of stockyard.

7 We cross a strange world of black rocks on whose back birch, perennials and grasses survive.

9 From a vertiginous height we look across giant coal and ore bunkers at the silhouette of the power plants and blast furnaces in the distance.

8 It is an arduous pleasure to climb the highest platform of Furnace 5.

GARDEN AND WILDERNESS

Several coincidences led to the first project in the Landscape Park: a garden which we built in cooperation with visitors and neighbours. This garden bore special significance for our project as it confirmed that the transformation of the Thyssen plant, which had been announced, would actually go ahead; not some day in the future but now.

The garden on Wittfelder Strasse, better known as the **TOWN GARDEN** (Stadtrandgarten), is reminiscent of a time when houses surrounded the iron works. When the competition was launched, the brief gave no clues as to what we might uncover bit by bit during the baseline survey in the wilderness of the site, back then when it was still untouched. The dense thicket changed from the commonly found willow and birch to sweet mock-orange (Philadelphus coronarius) which was planted in every other garden in the 1930s and 1950s. This was a surprise discovery and led us to search for other garden fugitives. We found crab apples (Malus species) almost smothered, and a peculiar linear arrangement of hawthorn stems (Crataegus monogyna), then another one. It was clear to us that the arrangement in parallel rows was no coincidence. We had come across an overgrown garden.

The distinguishing feature of the Town Garden does not fit the image of a typical garden and it was our working together from the outset that stood out. We recognised the chance to say "here we go" together with people from the Interest Group (IG) Nordpark, the umbrella organisation for myriad citizens' action groups, all with different agendas. We spent one weekend with the men constructing planting frames, like a type case made from recycled L-beams. Then the insiders, former steel workers, collected everything that could pass for soil, even including fire bricks and screws: **"all soils are habitats".** This method was a whole-hearted appropriation of the spaces; the joint work helped develop

10 The gardeners love this garden and ensure it is the best-maintained place in the park.

11 On our rambles after winning the competition, we found a row of hawthorns on a completely overgrown plot on Wittfelder Strasse. A hedge or an arbour, it was certainly a garden.

12 The first intervention after the competition made use of the symbolism that gardens possess. Former Thyssen workers constructed beds from recycled steel to resemble letter cases. A particular form of citizens' participation had arisen.

13 Together we filled the beds with unusual substrates which were taken from the iron works.

14 One of the man-made substrates (a ceramic raw material known as chamotte) has developed a fur-like coat of moss after a short period of time.

a new approach to handling elements which had previously been rejected.

Alongside ongoing **participation** we pursued another goal with the construction of this garden: confrontation with wilderness. **WILDERNESS** in the garden – is it achievable?

Gardens come in many different forms and guises. Gardens have always implied exclusion and the encircling of an inner habitat. Ever since man has become sedentary the garden has had significant meaning for our history of language and civilisation. An important step is the distinction between private and public, which is one of the fundamentals of our social system. The physical effect of fences and walls, to keep out the wild, led to the dualism of exterior and interior, **the wild and the tamed**, **wilderness and garden**. Even if the wild becomes the subject of the garden, the contrastive pair remains.

The separation of gardens and their surroundings seems normal; the fence post delineates the line of confrontation: "gardens" for culture and built forms, "wilderness" for nature and the untouched. Both these symbols form a simple contrast that defines many value systems.

Following page
15 An archaic principle: walls and fences form a strict division between garden and wilderness.