The Garden in the Machine the Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park

Miriam Engler
miraengl@iastate.edu, miraengl@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/landscapearchitecture_pubs

Part of the Construction Engineering Commons, Environmental Design Commons, Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons, and the Landscape Architecture Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/landscapearchitecture_pubs/6. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
The Garden in the Machine the Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park

Abstract
One hundred and fifty years after the sound of the machine broke the silence of the garden, as examined in Leo Marx’s seminal book, The Machine in the Garden, the gardens of Latz-Partner at the defunct steel plant in Duisburg-Nord Landscape park just north of Duisburg, German, sound a new note in the silenced machine of the postindustrial landscape. The gardens, each with its own unique character and color—a bright green spiral fern garden, a pink-green parterre garden, a silver-gold roof garden, a climbing rose garden, and a tranquil water lily garden—set within obsolete coal and ore bunkers and cooling tower pools and framed by dead industrial fragments, transform the ruin into a reliquary, a sacred container of memories, myths, and fantasies. They conciliate yet provoke the scarred, aging concrete containers and rusted steel vestiges, triggering the kind of intense dialogue between culture and nature that Latz+Partner seek to engage in all of their derelict postindustrial projects. A recurring gesture in Latz+Partner designs, the garden is deployed as an entry, opening up the formidable landscape to reinterpretation in ways that “could never be engendered by either an artist or nature alone”.

Disciplines
Construction Engineering | Environmental Design | Historic Preservation and Conservation | Landscape Architecture

Comments
This is an article from Land Forum International; 5(April); 78-85. Posted with permission.
One hundred and fifty years after the sound of the machine broke the silence of the garden, as examined in Leo Marx’s seminal book, *The Machine in the Garden*, the gardens of Latz+Partner at the defunct steel plant in Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park just north of Duisburg, Germany, sound a new note in the silenced machine of the postindustrial landscape. The gardens, each with its own unique character and color—a bright green spiral fern garden, a pink-green parterre garden, a silver-gold roof garden, a climbing rose garden, and a tranquil water lily garden—set within obsolete coal and ore bunkers and cooling tower pools and framed by dead industrial fragments, transform the ruin into a reliquary, a sacred container of memories, myths, and fantasies. They conciliate yet provoke the scarred, aging concrete containers and rusted steel vestiges, triggering the kind of intense dialogue between culture and nature that Latz+Partner seek to engage in all of their derelict postindustrial projects. A recurring gesture in Latz+Partner designs, the garden is deployed as an entry, opening up the formidable landscape to reinterpretation in ways that “could never be engendered by either an artist or nature alone.”
When describing their project, Peter and Anneliese Latz prefer terms like “metamorphosis” and “resurgence” over the more commonly used words “restoration” and “reclamation.” For the Latzes, engaging devastation does not entail restoration, defined as the process of alteration or repair leading to a return to an original form or to an unimpaired or perfect condition. Similarly, the idea of site reclamation as the making of land fit for cultivation and use, rescuing it from impurities, or calling it back from wrongdoing does not match the Latz+Partner tenets. The Latzes offer a daring, guilt-free, and fresh approach to postindustrial sites with the Duisburg project (1989-1999), Burger Park in Saarbrücken, also known as Hafensiel or Harbor Island, (1985-1989), and the Volkingen steelworks plant in the Saarland (1995). These works transcend three prevailing approaches: the modernist tendency to break away from the past by razing all obsolete industrial evidence; the historicist impulse to freeze the site into a stagnant museum emptied of active program; and the restorative thrust to heal the damage with cure-coded “natural” scenery. As the Latzes explain, “The task of dealing with run-down industrial areas and opencast mines requires a new method that accepts their physical qualities as well as their destroyed nature and topography. This new vision should not be one of recultivation, for this approach negates the qualities that they currently possess and destroys them for the second time. The vision for a new landscape should seek its justification exactly within the existing forms of demolition and exhaustion.” In their projects, however, freedom and imagination are coupled with a responsibility to treat contamination at the site and reduce potential user risks. This presents a key question: How can one mend the hazards and accommodate new uses, yet retain the awesome devastation and the uncanniness of the site?

Seeking a departure point for the design, the Latzes spent hours among the ruins of the Duisburg plant, immersing themselves in the fantastic, monstrous structures, deciphering their rich, latent narratives. Unlike their predecessors, the eighteenth-century rustic contrivances in English landscape gardens, the German industrial ruins are neither romantic nor symbolic of liberty. Rusted though upright, they confront complex emotions and afford powerful associations. For a proud nationalist they are visible testimony of past political power. For a longtime local resident they are forlorn reminders.

Latz+Partner labored to evoke this extraordinarily loaded history and considered it raw material for the park program. They conceived of the industrial vestiges of railway tracks and embankments, canals, towers, buildings, bunkers, and underground caves as the armature of the 200-hectare park and introduced selective and responsive interventions amidst untouched (or barely touched) areas and structures. “The working method is one of metamorphosis of the industrial structures without destroying them,” say the Latzes. Overgrown, gray, and rusted structures are juxtaposed and woven with new, brightly painted constructions that touch lightly on the site. Memory and use, decay and growth, machine and plants partake in dynamic, often bizarre formations. Imagination, interpretation, and adaptation become engaged.

The structures are activated according to their own daring prescriptions and meanings, lending themselves to new adventure and play. Instead of common sports fields and relaxing recreational activity, the site engenders challenge and exploration, affording a 60-meter ascent to the menacing Thyssen blast furnace for a spectacular view of the surroundings and a dramatic descent to the bunkers below ground. Like mountain terrain the scarred walls of former ore bunkers serve as rock surfaces for practicing mountainers. The underground corridors and deep caves are practice grounds for a diving club. Access is permitted and signaled through color-coded bluish staircases and catwalks that create safe, unique, and intimate experiences. A new 300-meter footbridge installed on old railway piling across the tops of the sinter plant bunkers provides views of the labyrinthlike walled gardens below and the roof gardens above. In one of the “foreparks” near a neighboring town, a park is built around parts of the old buildings of a former miners’ dormitory. The remnants are transformed into playhouses and playgrounds. A pigeon loft is built into the ruin because pigeon breeding was the miners’ hobby. Here Latz+Partner secure the memory of both the place and the occupants.

Retaining the fragmentation and disjuncture of a landscape crisscrossed by pipes, ditches, railroads, transmission lines, and expressways is another underlying concept respecting the particularities of the site. The park was conceived as four independent programmatic layers linked with occasional physical, visual, and symbolic elements. The upper layer is a railway park comprised of linear promenades and footbridges tracking old railroad embankments. The lower layer is a water park consisting of water drainage canals and reservoirs. A scheme of plantings of intermittent gardens, tree groves, and grass fields along with street-level promenades and activity centers comprise the two intermediate layers of the park.

The pedestrian and bicycle corridors of the railway park link nearby towns with the center of the park. Gathering spaces and activity nodes are niched among the ruins. They are to be discovered without designated paths or directed sequence. Cowper Place,
embraced by the drama of the ominous blast furnace and planted with a placid grid of ailanthus, serves as the official area for information and entrance into the park. Deeper amidst the steel furnaces and foundries one encounters Piazza Metallica. Paved with a grid of 49 large steel plates, it serves as the centerpiece and symbol of the park and is a site of a yearly festival. The piazza’s steel plates, originally used in the process of casting molten metals, “represent the process of iron manufactured in both its molten and hardened states.” Rainwater flows, settles, and freezes on its uneven surfaces, activating them and exposing the process of erosion. An outdoor theater built at the foot of a slag heap near the former sintering plant provides another large space for festivities.

The planting and water-park layers are the guardians of the site’s main hazard, making secure the interface between rainwater and poisonous land and cleaning contaminated water. Latz+Partner deploy retrofitted and new structures as well as plants to make visible and facilitate the monitoring of the fragile conditions of the natural systems of water, earth, and air. Plants are indicators of soil conditions, waste deposits, and underground cavities: prime cures of the toxic substrate and, at the same time, pigments in a grand composition of bold shapes and colors. Concrete bunkers serve as safe storage for poisoned upper soil layers brought from central park areas. For example, the poisonous slag and demolition debris from the sintering plant site are placed in the nearby ore and coal bunkers and covered with “roof gardens.” Fresh impermeable soil and plant-cover seal and blanket the lower contaminated stratum and guard it from rainfall. In contrast, large heavily polluted peripheral areas, such as coal-mine spoils, contaminated ashes, and rail-track grounds, are placed off-limits without treatment, seeded with hospitable neophyte plant species, and left to grow with only casual monitoring. These pioneer plants, which were brought to the area from around the world and proved adaptable to the highly acidic and alkaline substrates, are studied, classified, and nurtured in the conditions they prefer. Beginning in February, a dazzling yellow covers the railway areas, a marvelous variety of blossom and fruit that cannot always be found in indigenous vegetation. Lichens and mosses grow on slag heaps, and birches colonize the tailings, those piles of dead soil extracted along with the coal. Tailings are left in their recurring configurations at regular intervals to become clear indicators of the slag deposit patterns across the region. Throughout the park new clumps of trees and vegetation fields join existing forms to compose a new palette of postindustrial ecology.

Rainwater, which previously conveyed polluted substances to the main sewage channel, the Emscher Canal, and then deep into the soil and aquifer below, is now collected throughout the park from buildings and surfaces and conveyed via a new system of drains, open channels, and settling basins. Water percolates through gravel and plant “filters” before it reaches the main canal, which now hosts a closed sewage pipe at its bottom, occasional islands of flora and fauna, and platforms and seats at its banks. A giant wind pump and a restored purification plant circulate, aerate, and clean the water in the main canal. On rainy days, tributaries, streams, waterfalls, and pools magically animate the place, as the silent machines roar and bustle with life.

For Latz+Partner a garden is the means to understanding and interpreting the postindustrial landscape. Reposing among the machine vestiges, the gardens give ample scope for moralizing on the vicissitudes that spare neither humans nor their proudest work. The vision of Latz+Partner enables the new park to continue to rust and erode as well as regenerate; to reverberate meanings through the depth of old and new layers of history; to engender an ongoing conversation between past, present, and future. In the Latzes’ words, “We are not changing the abandoned industrial sites. Instead, these sites are changing our way of thinking and the philosophy of our profession.”