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The World of Landscape Architecture

20 Years of Topos





Regine Keller

DEMOCRATIC GREEN

The Olympic Park in Munich, designed by landscape architect Günther Grzimek, opened 40 years ago. Working together with architects from the firm Behnisch & Partner he created a symbiosis of architecture and landscape. His vision of a user-oriented park appears modern even now and many of Grzimek's other projects also display a vision that is still compelling.



In planning the Olympic Park in 1972, German landscape architect Günther Grzimek achieved his vision of creating a park for users (page 55). The contoured landscape of lakes and hills reflected visitors' needs for "... privacy and communication, openness and intimacy, group interaction and separation, movement and rest".

In 1972 the XXth Olympic Games were held in Germany. Munich, where the games took place, was called the "Capital of the Movement" by Hitler in 1935. The 1972 games were therefore seen as an opportunity for Germany to clearly distance itself from the games held in National Socialist Berlin, and to take a political stance that would be visible around the world. In contrast to Nazi Germany's demonstration of power, the 1972 games were intended to be cheerful, democratic, and free. These goals were reflected in the design of the Olympic Park, which embodies a great symbiosis of architecture and landscape. The bold transparent tent roof architecture created by Stuttgart architects Behnisch & Partner served as the setting for these free games and has since become a symbol of Munich. This listed architectural structure is inextricably linked to the park landscape ingeniously designed by landscape architect Günther Grzimek. Nothing about his design appears to be heavy or built for eternity. Everything is light and transparent, and almost looks temporary. Even after 40 years the Olympic park's function and design is extremely modern, especially in view of current park design. Grzimek succinctly described his project as a "users' park". He was already fifty years old when architect Günter Behnisch suggested he help develop this huge project. At that time he was a professor at the School of Art and Design in Kassel (he later taught in Munich) and could look back at a remarkable body of work, for instance planning projects in Ulm and Darmstadt.

Functional landscape architecture

One of the key elements in Grzimek's work was his open space-oriented view of urban development. He was convinced that the long-term and systematic development of urban areas should be carried out according to landscape architectural principles. Urban growth could only be designed functionally and properly through the use of a sophisticated open space system. He developed structural models of the surrounding landscape, for example in the city of Darmstadt (1960), in which he integrated forest areas into the open space plan as an active element of recreation. In his planning projects satellite settlements were created in the forest to relieve pressure in the inner city. He proposed an urban region structured according to large-scale open space areas, using the principle of the functional segregation of living, working, traffic, and recreational areas, thus separating settlement areas from one another. Although overspill cities are nothing new in the modern era, Grzimek's approach of looking at things from a landscape architectural perspective was unusual for the 1950s. The strategy of decentralised urban growth and the use of open space to limit growth were expressed in Grzimek's planning projects in the early 1960s. His seven-point *Green Concept* programme for Darmstadt, for example, incorporated principles that are now taken for granted in urban planning and conservation principles as well as in German regional and urban planning law. The seven points are as follows: 1. The creation of a climatic and ecological balance; 2. The assignment of residential areas and recreational landscapes; 3. The creation of a regional system and the classification of urban units; 4. The use of green corridors to connect the landscape with urban centres; 5. The creation of an open space network of urban social services at an optimal distance from one another; 6. The integration of traffic systems; 7. The development and complementation of open space concepts in adjacent communities.

Grzimek elaborated on his criticism of modernist postulates in his 1973 treatise *Gedanken zur Stadt- und Landschaftsarchitektur seit Friedrich Ludwig v. Sckell* (*Thoughts Concerning Architecture and Landscape Architecture since Friedrich Ludwig von Sckell*): "The garden city and the Athens Charter both contained benevolent visions of open space in cities and the landscape that were almost completely formulated by architects. In addition to this, landscape architects neglected the phase of functionalism, and functional derivatives would have been especially important for public open space. [...] A review of the typical layout of open space in public housing led me to the following analysis in a model study in 1959: The areas that were designed to be decorative were unusable, and they were of little therapeutic value because they were too small. They did not have the insulating effect that vegetation can have in the third dimension, that is from window to window, and they were too expensive to maintain."

Günther Grzimek (seen here at the Olympic Stadium, designed by Günter Behnisch) felt that landscape architects in post-war Germany had the particular task of improving the usability of open space in the country's cities. He considered people's needs to be of the utmost priority.



Performance-oriented open space

In the further development of post-war German cities Grzimek felt that an especially important task was to improve open space. The devastation that many cities had experienced due to aerial bombing campaigns was a unique opportunity for a fundamentally new type of open space planning. He pursued the idea of maximising the potential qualities open space had. He introduced the concept of performance-oriented open space and advocated the idea of planning for more trees and orchards in residential developments, and of only creating mown lawns where they could actually be used. He repeatedly emphasized the necessary therapeutic qualities that open space has for users, qualities that he described using the terms air, light, peace and quiet, and contact with the soil. In 1962, in an article in the magazine *Bauen und Wohnen* entitled *Das Leistungsgrün (Performance-oriented Open Space)* he wrote “In addition to botanical qualities, the prerequisites for a high degree of performance are the hygienic qualities of the plantings, namely their ability to function as noise and dust filters, to generate oxygen, and to promote evaporation.”

Taking possession of the lawn

The knowledge Grzimek gained from his many years of work at public planning departments, i.e. how to create usable open space, was put to use during the planning of the Olympic Park. Regarding the design process, he wrote the following in *Gedanken zur Stadt- und Landschaftsarchitektur seit Friedrich Ludwig v. Sckell*: “The effectiveness of the Olympic Park was derived from an analysis of the landscape that looked at the general behavioural patterns of people seeking recreation. This is how we arrived at a typification of certain landscape elements: mountains, lakes, entrances, parking areas; they were all planted with certain plants to fit the situation. [...] The transplantation of a marshy meadow from Lake Starnberg to the Olympic landscape as well as gravel, stones, and tree trunks makes it obvious that this constructed landscape aspires to give both people and plants more freedom. Wild flowers can be picked by everyone because they were planted in such great numbers”. He described the utilisation of the park landscape he had designed as follows: “In landscape architecture it is important to find, use, and strengthen a continuous dialectic juxtaposition and opposition of significant fundamental topographic elements, or to create new ones. The formal polarity of these elements corresponds to the implication of privacy and communication, openness and closedness, grouping and isolation, and movement and rest that become comprehensible in a landscape and enable, or even provoke, analogous social behaviour.”

In order to meet various recreational needs Günther Grzimek developed a landscape for the Olympic Park consisting of a range of elements such as hills, meadows, paths and lakes. These individual areas were then planted with vegetation that fit the particular situation.



The idea of the “park for users” that Grzimek sought to build at the Olympic Park was a result of his deep convictions and vehement demand that functions in open space not be determined prior to use, but should have a stimulative nature and be made available to users as an offer. In promoting this, Grzimek formulated a harsh criticism of the elitist garden design of his day, and he took an oppositional stance within his own profession that had begun with his critical commentary in *Das Leistungsgrün*. In his 1983 publication *Die Besitzergreifung des Rasens (Taking Possession of the Lawn)* he once again expressed his critical view of the profession.

As early as 1973, at the *Demokratisches Grün (Democratic Green)* exhibition in Kassel, Günther Grzimek critically examined the socio-political relevance of open space. In his thesis in 1996 Andreas König discussed this exhibition, “The subtitle, *Vom Schlosspark zum Volkspark zur Erholungslandschaft (From Palace Grounds to Peoples’ Park to Recreational Landscape)*, focuses on the parallels between social and historical garden development and discusses the Nymphenburg Park, the English Garden, and the Olympic Park as a current, logical continuation and as a historical garden triptych on the way from a feudal to an enlightened absolutist to a democratic society. This demonstrates that the form of government and open space design are related in function and form.”

Günther Grzimek proclaimed that the way parks function should not be pre-determined, but should instead stimulate visitors by offering them a variety of activities. In this way everyone would be able to find their own niche in the park, for instance a good place to have a picnic.

In his 1983 publication “Taking Possession of the Lawn”, Günther Grzimek demanded, among other things, that vegetation “... in a park for users not be an overbred and arranged kind of nature”, but that it should be able to regulate itself. He had put this idea into practice at the Olympic Park years before.



In the *Die Besitzergreifung des Rasens* exhibition in 1983 Grzimek presented seven provocative theses that served as clear criticism of garden design that he considered as being outdated and not oriented towards users (see bibliography page 110). He criticised open space that was merely created to impress or that was “over-managed” and demanded that “the grass be walked on” and that “better open space for less money” be created. He continued to argue for an “aesthetic of the self-evident” that was oriented to the needs of users, for design from the grass roots up, and for the use of spontaneous vegetation. His stance drew strong reactions from the professional community that led to a passionate debate.

Grzimek in retrospective

Grzimek’s socially oriented approach to planning appears to have anticipated the current demand for participation that continues to grow within the populace. His seven theses from the *Die Besitzergreifung des Rasens* exhibition continue to provoke as much as they did in 1983. His urban planning ideas about large-scale open space that he implemented in planning projects in Darmstadt and Ulm are fundamental ideas that were revived in the late 1990s by Peter Connolly and later by Charles Waldheim as part of the theory of landscape urbanism. Urban planning that begins with the landscape was a matter of course for landscape architect Grzimek. His approaches were both functional and user-oriented.

In addition to his social and functional attitudes, Grzimek always integrated an ecosystem-based approach into his work in which he, in the spirit of resilience, sought to develop open space that met the requirements of sustainability. He often articulated his approaches in a pragmatic fashion, and even today his treatises are plausible and easily understood. It is therefore quite amazing just how difficult it is to implement these ideas. Günther Grzimek can be described as a visionary to whom the future viability of cities was a lifelong pursuit. His attempts at reform were often met with great animosity both within the profession and at the university level, but his ideas continue to be highly relevant.

A conference on “Democratic Green – 40 Years Olympia Park Munich” will be held on October 25 and 26 at the Technical University Munich.

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