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# FOREST URBANISMS

A radical redefinition of occupation of the earth – forests, agriculture and settlement – rearticulates stewardship of the environment through intertwining ecologies and urbanisms.



# FOREST URBANISMS

NEW NON-HUMAN AND HUMAN ECOLOGIES  
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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PRESS

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BRUNO DE MEULDER,  
KELLY SHANNON

## V. URBAN FORESTS AS POST-MANICURE OUTDOOR DESIGN TYPES

Jörg Rekittke

Residing in Berlin may indeed seem a privilege, given the city's remarkable abundance of parkland compared to other European counterparts. However, this numerical advantage fails to mask the stark reality of the city's green spaces. Professionally maintained trees and shrubs have become increasingly scarce, playground sand replacement has ceased, and public trees receive watering only through residents' voluntary efforts, often at their own expense. Sustaining urban parks over the long term necessitates qualified gardeners and robust management, rather than relying solely on well-intentioned volunteers. The once esteemed profession of urban gardener, emblematic of a city described by former Mayor Klaus Wowereit as "poor but sexy", now teeters on the brink of extinction. Professional gardeners have been supplanted by unskilled labor, leading to a reduction in maintenance activities to a bare minimum. The consequences of this neglect are readily apparent. Stefan Tidow, former state secretary in the Senate Department for the Environment, Transport, and Climate Protection in Berlin, lamented the deplorable condition of many parks in the city. Despite Berlin boasting over 2,500 public parks and green spaces covering a total of 1,000 hectares (Hofmann & Hönicke 2019), satisfaction among citizens remains notably low, falling well below the national average according to the German Garden Office Managers' Conference (Deutsche Gartenamtsleiterkonferenz 2022). Austerity measures implemented in post-reunification hit Berlin's green space offices (*Grünflächenämter*) particularly hard, resulting in a significant reduction in staff numbers (Senatsverwaltung für Finanzen 2022). Consequently, the maintenance of gardens and parks suffered, despite the city's proud reputation for its extensive greenery. The prevailing approach shifted towards prioritizing ease of maintenance, leading to a decline in demand for design elements such



*Hausburgpark* in the Friedrichshain district of eastern Berlin. Located in a hip neighbourhood within the urban railway ring, with a high proportion of middle-class property and townhouse stock, its poor condition represents absolute normality in Berlin.

as hedges, bushes and trees which require time and resources to upkeep. The Berlin chapter of the Association for the Environment and Nature Conservation Germany (BUND) has observed a troubling trend in the maintenance practices of external companies contracted by the Parks Department (BUND 2019). Rather than prioritizing careful maintenance, preservation and ecological enhancement, these contractors often resort to radical pruning or complete removal of vegetation, justified under the misleading guise of sustainability. This shortsighted approach disregards the long-term ecological integrity of urban green spaces in favour of short-term cost savings. The result is an unsustainable handling of these vital public areas, driven by budgetary constraints and staffing shortages. This failure to adequately care for Berlin's green spaces

amounts to an ecological bankruptcy declaration, reflective of a broader trend towards minimalistic “savings parks: a bit of grass, a couple of sturdy metal benches, and that’s it” (Hofmann & Hönicke 2019) – prioritizing basic amenities over ecological and aesthetic considerations.

### Rubbish bins as park and forest rangers

In this chapter, our initial focus is on addressing local issues, figuratively cleaning up our own backyard before extrapolating potential lessons for other cities. Our decision is not solely based on our local ties but also inspired by the methodology of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), a revered British naturalist and explorer. Wallace’s approach of commencing his scientific inquiries within the immediate vicinity of his lodgings resonates with our strategy (Wallace 2016). Until 2023, Berlin’s governance was characterized by a ‘red-red-green’ coalition, comprising the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), The Left, and The Greens. In 2020, Oliver Schruoffeneger, the district councillor for Urban Development, Building and Environment, emphasized the need to transform urban planning into a comprehensive urban development strategy, envisioning Berlin as a sustainable, socially conscious, and climate-neutral city of the future (Entwicklungsstadt Berlin 2020). Schruoffeneger highlighted the inadequacy of the allocated budget for park cleaning and staffing, revealing that the funds amounted to a mere six cents per square metre of green space. This stark figure underscores the depth of the challenges facing Berlin’s park landscape and its users. A notable initiative emerged in 2015, spearheaded by Matthias Kollatz, then state minister of finance in Berlin, who enlisted the City Cleaning Service of Berlin (BSR) to alleviate the burden on district green space offices. The BSR, the largest municipal waste disposal company in Germany, gradually assumed responsibility for maintaining various green spaces, starting with the forest district of Teufelssee. By 2020, the BSR Park and Forest Service had been formally commissioned by the Berlin state government, overseeing maintenance in 79 green spaces and priority



Playground *Schleidenplatz* in the Friedrichshain district, East Berlin. The commissioned BSR ensures that the visitor sees bright orange rubbish bins from every angle.

areas across seventeen forest districts. The BSR professionals adopt a responsive approach to cleaning, adjusting their efforts based on weather conditions, visitor numbers and the level of waste accumulation (Berliner Stadtreinigung 2022). While this approach has proven effective in ensuring cleanliness and hygiene, some aesthetic concerns have been raised by users (Bartels 2018). The proliferation of bright orange rubbish bins, while functional, detracts from the visual appeal of the green spaces, presenting an unintended visual disruption. Bright orange rubbish bins are placed in such a large number that the visitors see several of them at the same time, no matter which way they turn their head. In summary, our exploration of Berlin's park maintenance strategies highlights both successes and aesthetic compromises, prompting reflection on the balance between functionality and visual harmony in urban green spaces.



*Blankensteinpark in the Friedrichshain district, East Berlin.*

The overdose principle – a key component of Berlin’s “Overall Strategy for a Clean City” formulated by the Berlin Senate for Economics, Energy, and Public Enterprises – has proven to be effective. In quintessential bureaucratic fashion, the underlying cause-and-effect relationship is articulated as follows: “Enhancement of the city’s infrastructure to provide adequate waste disposal options and improved management of overflowing trash receptacles” (Hoffmann 2021). It is important to note, however, that this concept currently applies to only 79 sites, a fraction of the more than 2,500 public parks and green spaces throughout the city (Berliner Stadtreinigung 2022). The stark reality remains that Berlin’s green space offices are severely under-equipped financially, a situation projected to persist in the long term and likely exacerbate the decline in the city’s greenery (Hofmann & Hönicke 2019).

## City forestation instead of city administration

The title alludes to one of the most iconic artworks of the ‘documenta’ exhibitions and one of Germany’s most captivating artists in recent memory: Joseph Beuys. His masterpiece, *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung* (7000 oaks – city forestation instead of city administration), entailed the planting of trees accompanied by stones at 7000 locations across the city of Kassel, Germany. Initiated by Beuys in 1982 for ‘documenta 7’, the project was completed in 1987 for ‘documenta 8’. Beuys imbued his works with multiple layers of meaning, inviting all to engage with them. Hence, we feel emboldened to interpret his vision of urban forestation. Beuys foresaw the potential for forestation to counter administrative stagnation. *7000 Eichen*, often described as a *soziale Plastik* (social sculpture), stands as the most consequential intervention in the outdoor installations of Kassel’s ‘documenta’ exhibitions. Art scholar Harald Kimpel asserts, “No other artwork intervenes as profoundly and sustainably in the topographical and social fabric of the city, nor does any other commit to the ongoing care and appreciation of this gift to the citizens of Kassel as enduringly” (Kimpel 2022). Beuys himself articulated, “When envisioning a sculpture that encompasses not just physical material but also mental substance, I was compelled by the notion of social sculpture” (Stiftung 7000 Eichen 2022). In an interview concerning the project, Beuys expressed his aspiration to bridge the realms of nature and humanity within their everyday environments, stating, “I aim to increasingly immerse myself in the intersection of nature and human concerns in their workplaces. This endeavour represents innovation; it fosters a healing process for the myriad challenges we currently face. (...) That is my foremost objective” (Stiftung 7000 Eichen 2022).

As an academic landscape architect, we find profound inspiration in Joseph Beuys’ artwork and the slogan “City Forestation instead of City Administration”. Beuys’ vision, seemingly ahead of its time, now resonates strongly with contemporary developments unfolding not only in the German capital but also in other major metropolises. When city administrations are compelled to scale back investments in the costly and labour-intensive



Joseph Beuys at documenta 7, 1982, starting his art project *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung*. Initially, the work consisted of 7,000 basalt steles and was completed in 1987.

maintenance of parks, alternative forms of public space must be considered – spaces that may be less meticulously groomed yet equally vital for urban life. Drawing from Beuys' visionary perspective, we contemplate the following potential trajectories for the evolution of urban parks. When urban administrations find themselves unable to fulfil their obligation and social responsibility to provide citizens with well-maintained green spaces for uninterrupted enjoyment, they may turn to forms of greenery that have existed long before the meticulously designed park became the norm in urban landscapes. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the manicured park lies the natural forest, while its managed counterpart stands as its globally prevalent twin. Managed forests, developed and accessible, serve as havens for relaxation and recreation – much like traditional parks. However, while the historical park represents a luxury afforded by those with means, the managed forest operates as an economic entity, aiming to generate profit and material resources. From the perspective of many a financially strained city administration (*Stadtverwaltung*), the concept of profitable urban

forestation (*Stadtverwaldung*) becomes not only tempting but also inherently logical. Christophe Girot's exploration of landscape architecture in his book *The Course of Landscape Architecture* provides valuable insight into the intricate relationship between natural forests and cultivated parks (Girot 2015). Girot's identification of two archetypes – the forest clearing and the walled garden – serves as a theoretical foundation for our thesis, albeit in a reversed order. The manicured urban park aligns more closely with the archetype of the clearing than with the dense forest. Should investments in maintenance wane, the cultural form of the clearing may regress into a wooded area, giving rise to an urban forest. While maintenance remains crucial to keep such forests accessible and usable for the urban public, the approach can shift from neglect to the provision of uplifting beauty. An exemplary case of this transformation is the Berlin Natur-Park Südgelände, situated in the Schöneberg district on the former Tempelhof railway yard. This 18-hectare park, once an open industrial area, underwent a process of near-complete overgrowth before being redeveloped into an urban forest, illustrating the potential for revitalization and adaptation of urban spaces in harmony with nature.

### An Urban Forest Age

It would not be far-fetched to envision the future of Western urban landscapes evolving into an Urban Forest Age. Urban forests not only represent a flexible alternative to meticulously manicured designs, but also serve as critical assets in combating global warming by sequestering carbon and reducing energy costs (Konijnendijk & Shannon 2022). Moreover, urban forests foster increased biodiversity, accommodate diverse ecological design approaches, and provide urban dwellers with a healthy and multifaceted leisure environment. In regions devoid of human presence or minimal settlement, favourable outcomes are scarce. The ongoing struggle to preserve remote rainforests serves as a poignant example. However, in urban settings where progressive action is more feasible, opportunities abound. The demand for green spaces persists among

urbanites, yet dwindling financial support for extensive park maintenance may precipitate the transition of parks into urban forests. Recognizing the evolving nature of both city parks and urban forests, we sought a precedent for a hybrid model, ideally situated close to home. Our search led us to the seamlessly integrated spaces of Treptower Park and Plänterwald, nestled along the banks of the River Spree in Alt-Treptow, within the Treptow-Köpenick district, south of central Berlin. Spanning 88 hectares, Treptower Park was established from 1876 to 1888 under the guidance of Gustav Meyer, the municipal garden director. It is one of the four nineteenth-century parks preserved in Berlin, alongside Volkspark Friedrichshain, Volkspark Humboldthain and Viktoriapark, providing local residents with ample recreational opportunities. Notably, Treptower Park originated from the reforestation of the Köllnische Heide heathlands (Wikipedia 2021), embodying typical Berlin park characteristics, along with its attendant challenges. Traversing the expansive Treptower Park from north to south eventually leads one into the densely wooded environs of Berlin's Plänterwald. Unlike a park, Plänterwald is a forest in its truest sense, representing a distinct ecosystem within the urban fabric.

In international silvicultural circles, the practice is known as “selection cutting”, a harvesting technique designed to foster an uneven-aged or all-aged stand structure by selectively harvesting individual trees or small groups. This method is believed to confer ecological benefits, such as enhanced carbon sequestration, while ensuring a steady supply of marketable timber (Clarke et al. 2015). Despite its occasional resemblance to a jungle, a selection cutting operation represents a managed forest, overseen not by underpaid park attendants but by skilled and knowledgeable foresters. Beyond its intrinsic beauty, shade and cooling effect, the Berlin Plänterwald is accessible via public paths. However, it also serves a dual purpose as a productive forest, yielding wood for commercial sale. Historically, the Plänterwald accommodated another commercial endeavour during the German Democratic Republic era – the Spreepark. Established as the state-owned enterprise Operation Kulturpark (VEB Kulturpark) in 1969, it operated until its closure in 2002. In 2014, ownership transferred to the state-owned



Plänterwald in the Alt-Treptow district of Berlin, situated alongside the River Spree, south of central Berlin. It is a publicly accessible, managed selection cutting forest, not a park. Biodiversity is high, the possible uses are extremely diverse, and its beauty can be positively overwhelming.

Grün Berlin GmbH, with redevelopment efforts initiated in early 2016 (Busch et al. 2017). Presently, Grün Berlin is spearheading the transformation of the former Spreepark into a new iteration, envisioned as an art and culture park catering to tourists. While we have inspected the project details and peered through the fence, we harbour reservations regarding the current vision (Grün Berlin 2022) for the future Spreepark. The proposed imagery appears overly idealistic, with clichéd design representations exuding an air of naivety. The promotional rhetoric paints a picture of vibrant colours, fun and happiness, proclaiming, “With the new Spreepark, the capital is regaining a place that expands local recreation and leisure activities with the opportunity to experience and discover art and culture in public space” (Grün Berlin 2022). While we extend our best wishes for success to all involved, we cannot ignore the grim



Amusement park *Spreepark*, located in the Berlin Plänterwald. After its closure in 2002, it became a 'lost place'.

financial realities facing the city. Should this optimistic endeavour fall short, nature and the forest will swiftly reclaim what is rightfully theirs. Commercial ventures like the *Spreepark* are but fleeting phenomena in the grand scheme of geological and environmental history. Eventually, this forest clearing will once again be enveloped by nature's embrace.

The origins of the selection cutting in Berlin's Plänterwald trace back to the aftermath of the Ice Age, when the landscape underwent significant transformations. Situated within the Warsaw-Berlin glacial valley, this area witnessed the resettlement of flora and fauna. Until the early twentieth century, extensive portions of the land remained unsuitable for development due to the high groundwater level. Between 1823 and 1840, the forested area was cleared, and faced with unprofitable management prospects, it underwent reforestation as the Plänterwald around 1873, coinciding with the establishment of Treptower Park (Busch, Geyler-von Bernus, Kahl 2017). In the envisioned Urban Forest



Currently, the *Grün Berlin* company plans and promotes a new version of the *Spreepark*.

Age, after the novelty of attractions like the former and current Spreepark fades into history and the site eventually reverts to its natural state, the management of the corresponding urban forest will no longer fall under the jurisdiction of well-intentioned park administrations, whether public or private. Instead, it will be overseen by an urban forestry office staffed with skilled foresters dedicated to both utilizing and conserving this magnificent urban forest. This forest, for once in its existence, will have the opportunity to embrace its true identity and essence, transitioning from a mere park into a thriving ecosystem under the stewardship of urban foresters.

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