

THE PLACE OF NATURE IN THE CITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA

Conference at the GHI, December 1–3, 2005. Conveners: Dorothee Brantz (SUNY Buffalo, GHI), Sonja Dümpelmann (Auburn University, GHI), Christof Mauch (GHI), Jennifer Price (Los Angeles).

Participants: Harriet Atkinson (Royal College of Art, London), Thomas J. Campanella (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Peter Clark (Helsinki University), Lawrence Culver (Utah State University), Konstanze Domhardt (ETH, Zurich), Catherine Evans (University of New South Wales), Zachary J. S. Falck (Carnegie Mellon University), Anne Hass (Technical University, Munich), Stefanie Hennecke (University of the Arts, Berlin), Bernd Hermann (University of Göttingen), Sonia A. Hirt (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University), Jens Lachmund (University of Maastricht), Katri Lento (University of Helsinki), Gary W. McDonogh (Bryn Mawr College), Bianca Maria Rinaldi (University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Vienna), William Rollins (University of Canterbury, New Zealand), Jeffrey Craig Sanders (University of New England), Dirk Schumann (GHI), Anne Whiston Spirn (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Jessica Ullrich (University of the Arts, Berlin), Alfonso Valenzuela (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Vera Vicenzotti (Technical University, Munich), Jason Wiens (University of Calgary).

Historically, cities have been identified as man-made environments that stand in contrast to nature. Upon closer examination, however, it quickly becomes apparent that cities have not been devoid of nature, and indeed abound with flora and fauna, which are often purposefully incorporated into urban space. This three-day conference brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars from both sides of the Atlantic to discuss the place of nature in twentieth-century cities. One of the overarching aims of this conference was to investigate how the use of natural elements changed over the course of the twentieth century as many industrial cities were transformed into post-industrial landscapes. The conference's transatlantic focus also led to the question of how cultural and national peculiarities influenced the place of nature in specific cities.

The conference opened with a public lecture by Anne Whiston Spirn. In her engaging talk, in which she shared some of her personal experiences as a landscape designer, scholar, and teacher, Spirn examined how a range of distinct ideas about nature influenced the shape of urban

environments in the twentieth century. She argued that interpreting ideas of nature as cultural products helps to understand human society and nonhuman processes. Spirn criticized the impact the environmental movement had on landscape designers from the 1960s to the early 1990s because many landscape architects adopted dogmatic, preconceived views of nature, which led them to design in a naturalistic style and abandon supposedly “exotic” plant species in favor of the exclusive use of what were considered to be native species. By discussing some of her own landscape projects Spirn showed that what “nature” means can be discerned by taking into account not only its physical manifestations but also its social, cultural, and political context. Quoting Raymond Williams (See Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980), 67–81), she maintained, however, that “nature” is probably one of the most difficult words to explain. As could be expected, the definition of “nature” was, in fact, a question that recurred over the next days of the conference.

The first panel focused on the incorporation of green spaces into large-scale urban planning schemes in twentieth-century Bulgaria and Mexico. Alfonso Valenzuela explained how the physical transformation of Mexico City in the early decades of the twentieth century was inspired by European models like Ebenezer Howard’s garden city and Jean Claude Forestier’s park systems. Examining the work of urban planners like Miguel Angel de Quevedo, Carlos Contreras, and Jose Luis Cuevas Pietrasanta, Valenzuela showed how these planners adapted European ideas to the specific environmental, hygienic, and infrastructural circumstances of Mexico City. In a similar vein, Sonia Hirt explored how the development of Bulgaria’s capital city was shaped by successive political regimes, all of which sought to inscribe Sofia’s urban landscape with their specific ideological visions regarding the use of green spaces in the city. In particular, Hirt compared and contrasted three master plans for rebuilding greater Sofia, the first by Adolph Muesmann, who in the 1930s proposed a scheme reminiscent of Nazi urban planning models that favored single-family homes with individual gardens. Muesmann’s controversial plans were never realized, especially following the communist take-over of Bulgaria, which also gave rise to new ideas about urban planning that favored a polycentric system of multi-family homes with collective green areas. Next, Hirt offered a brief overview of the current plans for Sofia’s reconstruction, which rely on a mixture of public and private green spaces. In general, Hirt argued that the planning history of Sofia oscillated between competing models of Sofia as a compact versus a dispersed city.

The contributions in the second panel all dealt with the ideological implications of open space and its design in capital cities. Gary Mc-

Donogh gave an overview of the concept of “Mediterranean nature” and how it influenced the Barcelonians’ perception of their Catalan city at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century. At that time “nature,” in the form of parks, gardens, and garden cities, was supposed to re-enliven Barcelona, not only as the Catalan capital but also as the capital of a Mediterranean nation. The political importance of the concept of “Mediterranean nature” again showed in the projects for the 1992 Olympics and the Universal Forum of Cultures, which was opened in 2004 and made parts of the coastline accessible while at the same time protecting other parts as nature preserves. In her detailed study of the genesis and reception of Berlin’s Schiller Park, designed in 1907, Stefanie Hennecke showed how the park design reflected the “holistic world view” of its reactionary modernist creator Friedrich Bauer. She elaborated on how Bauer’s belief system influenced his choice of design forms and native plant materials to create the park as a piece of “German nature” in which man played his part but was not considered the protagonist. Although Schiller Park was a progressive design, it was not based on a progressive social view. Like McDonough, Hennecke examined the parallels between ideological beliefs concerning nature and their implementation in urban and open-space planning at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century. Maria Bianca Rinaldi compared the role natural features played in the design of two capital cities built in the twentieth century, Chandigarh and Brasilia. She showed how both urban schemes were based on open space structures and models that were appropriated from Europe and North America; for example, the National Mall in Washington, parkways, and new towns constructed before World War II in Britain and the United States. The emblematic role of nature again became especially clear in the use of indigenous plants. However, while native species were supposed to foster a new national identity, Chandigarh’s planners also suggested that the planting of foreign species could additionally act as a vehicle for international relations.

The third panel shifted focus to the specific use of plants within the urban fabric. Focusing on the extraordinary career of the American elm in the vernacular landscape of the United States, Thomas Campanella examined how the phenomenon of Elm Street emerged as part of the New England village improvement movement. Explaining how Elm Streets spread across the United States, Campanella argued that they fulfilled aesthetic, moral, economic, and nationalist agendas that were linked to underlying notions about the urban landscape as a “pastoral city.” He also pointed out that these artificial planting schemes promoted the devastating spread of Dutch Elm disease, which eventually eradicated most of these trees. Continuing with this emphasis on particular plants, Zachary Falck explored how weeds and vacant lots added an unusual di-

mension to concerns about urban landscapes, in part because people often did not agree which plants should be considered weeds. Drawing particularly on examples from St. Louis, Lincoln, and Chicago, Falck examined the outcome of legal disputes over the use of urban space, the presence of vacant lots, and the eradication of unwanted plants. In the third presentation, William Rollins turned his attention to more conceptual agendas regarding plants in postmodern urbanism. Drawing on examples from art, literature, and advertisements, Rollins argued that postmodern attitudes toward green spaces tend to be less structured than their modernist predecessors. Native plants for example are often used to create a new aesthetic of place even though it is mostly no more than a simulacrum.

“(Re)Constructing Nature” was the fourth panel’s overarching theme. Katri Lento showed how “nature” was constructed in Helsinki according to various foreign planning ideas that were introduced in Finland from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. Models such as the garden city and the allotment garden fit well into the Finnish tradition of venerating nature. However, while Helsinki planners were very active in providing green open spaces, elaborate state regulations imposed many restrictions on how urban dwellers could use those spaces. Harriet Atkinson and Konstanze Domhardt focused their contributions on aspects of open-space planning in the post-World War II era, when the reconstruction of Europe offered a chance for a new place of nature in the city. Domhardt showed how the *Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne* in the 1950s set forth the idea that green space was to serve as the “primary element in city planning, mediating the various parts of the city.” Whereas Domhardt’s discussion dealt with the conceptual planning level, Atkinson presented her thesis that Britain’s postwar planning was characterized by a “new picturesque” aesthetic. Using the Festival of Britain as an example, Atkinson laid out how the “new picturesque” acted as a suitable means to (re)construct Britain’s self-image and its social urban realm, which had been affected not only by World War II, but also by new infrastructural and industrial needs.

The fifth panel centered on private versus public uses of urban landscapes. Peter Clark opened the session with a presentation that compared the incorporation of green spaces in sports facilities in twentieth-century Helsinki and London. Insisting that nature is a social construct, Clark focused particularly on the example of golf clubs and tennis courts to show how these planned spaces were created and how they have contributed to the biodiversity of these cities. Lawrence Culver, in turn, examined how Los Angeles’s natural and recreational spaces became increasingly privatized in the course of the twentieth century. Culver demonstrated that this privatization, closely linked to the growing sub-

urbanization of the greater Los Angeles area, where green spaces were increasingly locked away in the private gardens of single family homes, had, among other things, the effect that access to these spaces has become yet another instance of racial and class segregation. The final presentation, by Jeffrey Sanders, turned to the phenomenon of the Seattle homesteads that emerged in response to the oil crisis and growing environmental awareness of the early 1970s. Describing several examples of sustainable housing and community garden projects, Sanders showed how these ecotopian attempts to turn Seattle into a more sustainable urban environment were meant to link private housing initiatives to larger ecological and political transformations.

The contributions in the sixth panel dealt with wilderness and urban ecology. Anne Hass worked out the commonalities in the theoretical positions of the exponents of the Chicago School and in the late work of the architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg. Hass pointed out that both theoretical positions were influenced by the monoclimate theory put forth by Frederic Clement. She showed that their adaptation of his theory led to a "social ecogism" that seemed to justify racial and ethnic displacements and discrimination. Whereas the theoreticians of the Chicago School and Schultze-Naumburg applied ecological methods and concepts to humankind and its social and physical environments, Jens Lachmund explained how these same concepts also served as a basis for the development of contemporary urban ecological models that equate the city with a biotope for humans, animals and plants. Laying out the development of urban ecology in Berlin, Jens Lachmund explained how the comparatively early emergence and the outstanding role of urban ecology in West Berlin was partly caused by the city's geographical isolation during the Cold War. Forced to work within the boundaries of the Berlin Wall, biologists and ecologists shifted their areas of research to urban open space. The development of urban ecology was later also bolstered by West Berlin's strong environmental and countercultural movements. By introducing ecological criteria into city planning, urban ecologists took an active part in forming the city. Ideas about wilderness and their place in contemporary discussions about the development of post-industrial landscapes and the low-density city, especially in Germany, were at the center of Vera Vicenzotti's talk. Vicenzotti presented the changing concepts of city and wilderness in Germany, beginning with Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl's conservative understanding of the modern city as an "evil wildness," as opposed to the scenic wilderness, which he considered relevant for imbuing society with a nationalistic worldview. Vicenzotti ended her discussion by commenting on contemporary theories, for example those advanced by Thomas Sieverts.

The last panel featured two presentations dealing with artistic representations of nature in urban spaces. Jessica Ullrich discussed the works of several German and American artists who incorporated diverse natural elements into their urban art installations. As Ullrich demonstrated, each of them expressed a distinct vision about the role of nature in the city, viewing it either as a contrast to the built environment, as an embodiment of "otherness," or even as a means of commemoration. Whereas Ullrich focused on visual representations, Jason Wiens discussed the use of nature in the poetry of three Canadian writers: Abraham Moses Klein from Montreal, Raymond Souster from Toronto, and Lisa Robertson from Vancouver. Arguing that each of them took a different stance regarding the place of nature in urban narratives (ironic, nostalgic, or feminist subjective, respectively), Wiens insisted that all of them nevertheless relied on a common theme: namely, the "pastoral city."

During the final roundtable, panelists Catherine Evans, Bernd Hermann, and Jennifer Price commented on some of the main ideas and topics presented and discussed during the conference. Responding to Hermann's critique that in a lot of presentations and panel discussions the question of what "nature" actually meant needed to be tackled further, Evans and Price offered their own interpretations of "nature." In the discussion that followed, many of the questions from the previous two days reemerged: for example, how is nature incorporated into the city? Are urban planners trying to bring nature to the city, or are they hoping to bring people closer to nature? Moreover, can "nature" act as a means of social control, and to what extent does "nature" foster local, national, and even transnational identities? Each of the presenters had addressed these questions in their distinct historical and geographical contexts. A conference volume based on a selection of these essays is currently in preparation.

Dorothee Brantz and Sonja Dümpelmann