

Green Infrastructure – A Future Topic in Landscape Architecture

bdla executive committee sets a programmatic focus

by Till Rehwaldt

At its first meeting on July 16, 2014 in Berlin, the newly constituted executive committee of the Federation of German Landscape Architects bdla addressed current fields of action and placed the focus of the organization on green infrastructure. With the discussion about this concept, a window of opportunity is opened once again to position landscape as a central element in a social strategy.

Increasingly higher demands are placed on the performance of our environment as a result of the more intensive utilization of urban and rural areas. Demographic development, shrinkage and growth of cities, climate change, and the energy turnaround lead to continuously increasing environmental strains. Solar fields and the cultivation of bio-energy crops are characteristic of innovative land use while additional traffic thoroughfares and electric power lines cut through landscape areas. The existing infrastructure is currently being adapted to the changed conditions under considerable effort, with the conversion of entire systems. Parallel to this, particularly as a result of climate change, we observe an inclination to regard original landscape elements as being “systemically relevant” and to assign them with an independent value as “green infrastructure”.

Green infrastructure as social strategy

As a result of these tendencies, it becomes apparent once again that the management of natural resources may not be regarded from a local perspective, but must be integrated in a larger context. In the broadest sense, green infrastructure therefore stands for human activity in the landscape. It comprises both nature-related structures as well as open space elements, which are subject to strong anthropogenic influences – in Germany this term can certainly be used to summarize the majority of cultivated landscape areas.

Green infrastructure therefore appears in the form of very diverse topic areas. These include, for example, flood protection measures, the integration of traffic and energy systems, the development of urban greening, and the design of health and leisure landscapes. The overall objective here is to improve the diversity and resilience of our environment, to limit the effects of climate change and to capacitate the daily living environment for its inhabitants. Particularly in densely populated areas, the range of requirements can only be managed with concepts for the multifunctional utilization of spaces, a key element of green infrastructure.



Image: From 2009 to 2011, the so-called “Isar Plan” was implemented section by section: necessary flood protection, improvement of the ecological situation, creation of attractive leisure space for the residents of the Founder Epoch (Gründerzeit) district. Now the aquatic landscape presents itself more open in the urban section as well – as one can see here at the island Weideninsel. The flattened shoreline and the terraced design of the parcels of land bordering the shore ensure a view of the Isar River into the distance while also enabling direct access to the river.

Green infrastructure as planning opportunity

Do we now also need special tools to create green infrastructure in addition to all the tried-and-tested tools for open space and landscape design? Surely this also includes a wide range of elements, which are always designed by open space and landscape planners – everyday tasks, which landscape architects master daily with intervention-compensation balancing, environmental reports and many other means. But the strategy of green infrastructure goes far beyond this. Within the scope of the current public debate, the window of opportunity reopens to consider the ecological and social functions of landscape in a broader context. If current technically justified measures are often difficult to convey as individual components and are at risk of being “thought away”, these should find a much greater acceptance within the scope of a higher-ranking objective, which above all should be publicly accepted.

So in addition to all the gray, there is now also the green infrastructure! It is an independent system of foresighted existence and public welfare, in which the principles of sustainably-oriented design assumes their built form. Based on these aspects, we should also consider whether our design toolkit contains the right tools or if we need to adapt our equipment to suit the purpose.

After the European Union initiated an innovative development with the strategy for green infrastructure (<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/>), the related objectives are given coverage more frequently. This is already an indication of the strategy's potential. President of the bdla, Till Rehwaldt, sums up the matter for the landscape architects: "When we address the current social developments today, it becomes quickly obvious that the topics landscape and environmental development are strongly advancing to become the focus of public interest. The concept of green infrastructure links spaces of natural and anthropogenic perspectives and thereby represents a balance between humanity and the environment."

Landscape architects and their professional association, the bdla, should therefore be at the forefront of the current discussion. Perhaps in doing so this will enable the fields of work, which have been increasingly regarded as singular entities in recent years, to be reunited more strongly under one common concept. Because after all: green infrastructure = landscape architecture!

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Image: The open grounds of the PHOENIX West blast furnace facility is transformed into a modern services location, surrounded by an extensive landscape park. Technical necessities (development, retention, building management) and ecological requirements are integrated and the banked design forms the basis for the new potential landscape.