

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Section 1: Wasted and Reclaimed Landscapes - Metropolitan Landscapes: Attitudes, Research and Practice

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7g0606dk>

Journal

Places, 19(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Sieverts, Thomas

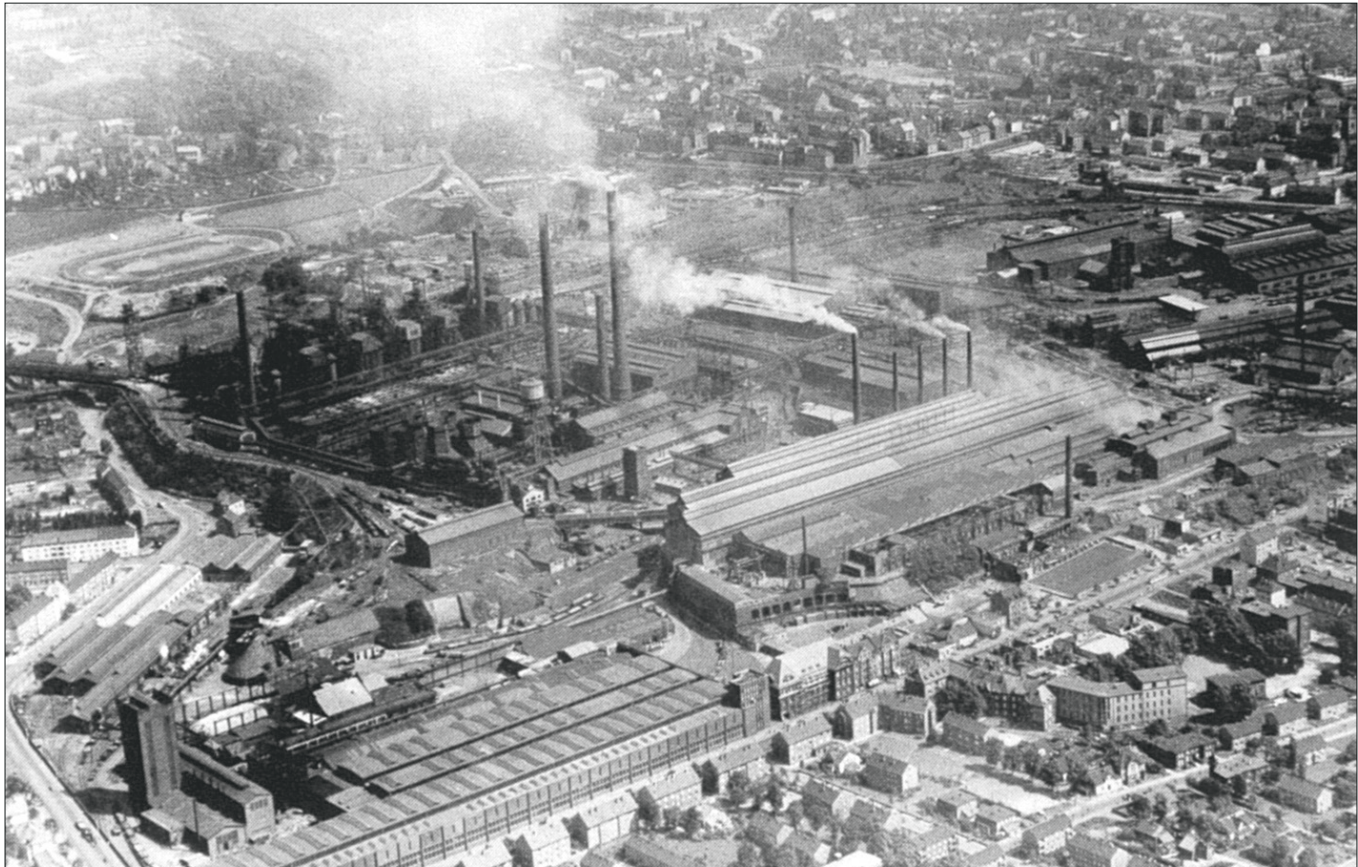
Publication Date

2007-04-15

Peer reviewed

Metropolitan Landscapes: Attitudes, Research and Practice

Thomas Sieverts



Today two-thirds of the German population lives and works in an urbanized landscape of “cities without cities.” Nevertheless, governments, schools of architecture and planning, practitioners, and the media still cling to the image of the compact “old European city.” Starting with the European Heritage Year in 1975, this image of an idealized, compact town has blurred the reality of our metropolitan landscape for a generation.

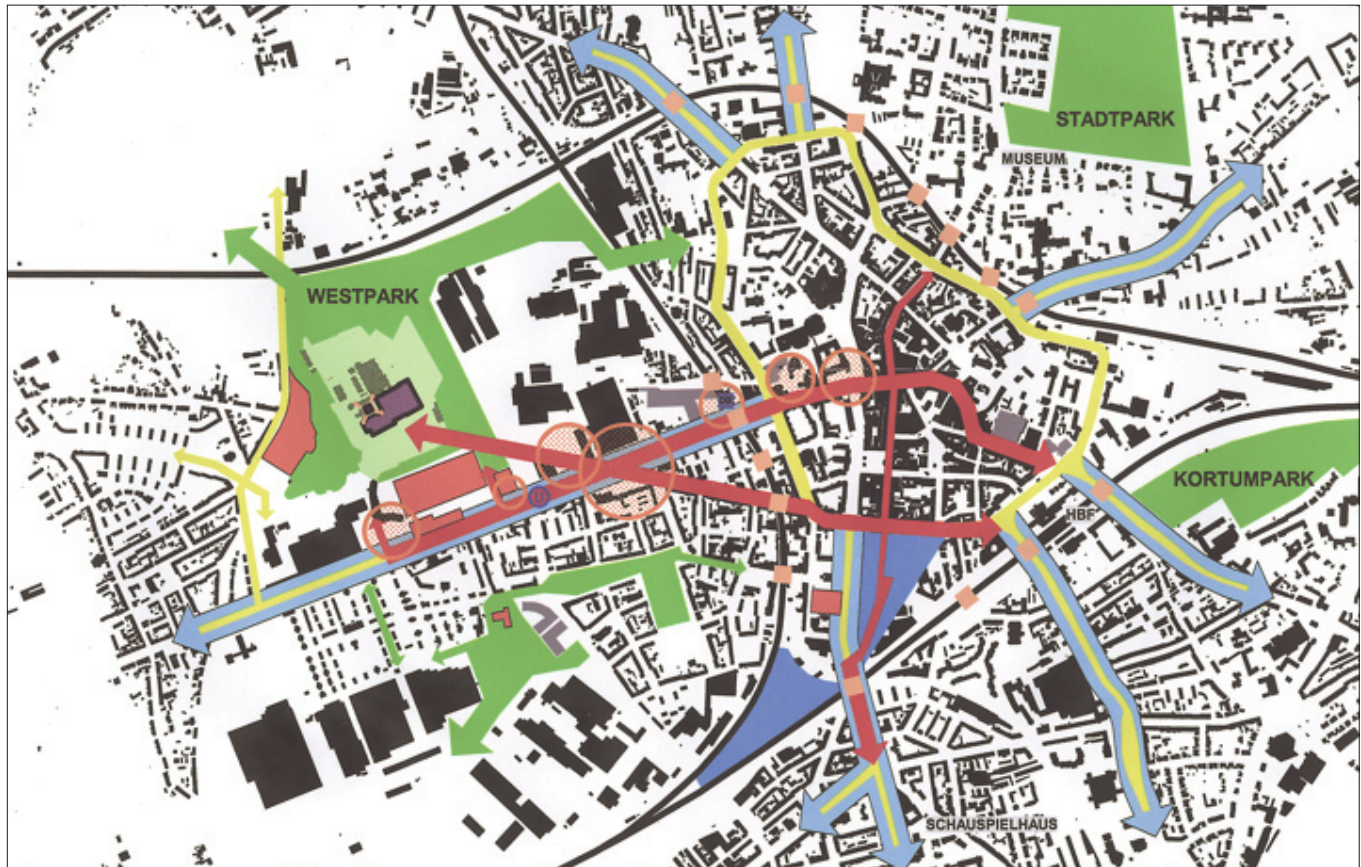
Recently, a new discussion has emerged about the transformation of European cities into urbanized regions. In Italy this city of regional dimensions is a focus of work by Bernardo Secchi. In France it is the subject of François Ascher’s “Metapolis.” And in Germany I have offered the idea of “Zwischenstadt”—now translated into English as “Cities Without Cities,” and French as “Entre Ville.”

The present discussion coincides with a new demographic phenomenon: for the first time since the Thirty Years War and the pestilence-epidemics of the Middle Ages, the population of European cities is shrinking. This fact poses new challenges. Urban planning up to

now has predominantly been geared toward managing growth. Today, considerable uncertainty exists about how to handle the new phenomenon of shrinkage.

Two contrasting attitudes dominate the discussion. For some, the undetermined future appears as a dark room full of fear about further destruction of the compact European city and the old cultural landscapes that surrounded it. This attitude is incorporated in a movement longing for a “timeless classicism,” whose goal is to urbanize the new metropolitan landscape with traditional forms. I called this the “backwards-oriented avant-garde.”

Others believe that the uncertainty of the situation can be understood more optimistically, like a landscape filled with “bright mist,” announcing the promise of a glorious day. Indeed, if one leaves the old prejudices behind, the metropolitan landscape can be seen as a field of opportunities. Such an open-ended view imagines a “terra incognita,” in need of fresh views and new creativity.



A Research Effort

In the spirit of such a new intellectual curiosity, several years ago the Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz Foundation funded a three-year, comprehensive research project, “Amidst the Edge: Towards Qualifying the Metropolitan Landscape.” The work was completed at the end of 2006 with a series of twelve monographs and a summary volume. Participating in this complex research project were colleagues from economics, sociology, ecology, agriculture, landscape architecture, regional science, urban design, and cultural studies and communications. The “testing ground” was a part of the periphery northwest of Frankfurt, including the airport and the city’s first planned tangential metro line.

Prior to receiving funding, this project had its beginning in an open, day-long discussion between members of an interdisciplinary group. Based on the positive outcome of that discussion, the foundation decided to fund a three-year project involving researchers from twelve different disciplines. During this process a “philosophy” emerged,

which warrants reflection. Specifically, the team of scientists developed seven fundamentally different approaches, which complement each other partly, but have their own individual standing.

Predictably, depending on the divergent interests and methods of the various disciplines, different ways of conceptualizing the metropolitan landscape were emphasized—even to the point that basically different models emerged. However, endowed with productive tolerance and mutual interest in each other’s work, all participants agreed that there is more than one truth, more than one legitimate way to conceive the metropolitan landscape. Thus, in spite of the diverse approaches, a product emerged which is more than an assembly of twelve monodisciplinary studies.

Opposite: Historical view of the Bochum steel mill in the Ruhr district.

Above: Plan for the proposed new park on the steel mill site, showing the network of connections within the surrounding urban fabric.



The research group attempted to answer seven basic questions, each having its own cognitive tradition:

- What are the new forms of the metropolitan landscape? How can the essence of such forms be made productive for urban design? The tradition here is phenomenology, the art of unprejudiced cognition.
- How can the invisible forces behind the emergence of the metropolitan landscape be made “visible” through interpretation of statistical figures as “shadows of reality”? The tradition here is empirical social science.
- What does the metropolitan landscape mean for the people living and working in it? The tradition here is hermeneutics, the art of deeper understanding.
- As a prerequisite for public understanding, what are the

Above: This one-hundred-year-old industrial hall is one of the many buildings that were reused in Emscher Park.

appropriate metaphors bridging “form” and “image”? The tradition here is cultural studies, the art of interpreting the metropolitan landscape as an aesthetic object.

- How do we reach understanding that can lead to a “bundling” of political opinions as a basis for action? The tradition here is the theory of communication and learning.
- How can we organize the metropolitan landscape? The traditions here are political and administrative studies.
- How can we improve the spatial structure of the metropolitan landscape? Regional planning and urban design form the traditions here.

In answer to these questions, the research group produced no large, comprehensive theory. Such a “great theory” is presently out of sight. Such an expectation, however, brings to my mind the hope invested two generations ago of developing a mathematical model to predict the future of the city, if only enough research could be done. For good reasons, this hope is lost; and I regard this as productive, since it frees the mind of a one-sided scien-

tific approach, and opens it instead to a richness of metropolitan aspects and characters no longer subject to the search for a common algorithmic denominator.

In our research project, we conceived the metropolitan landscape as a multifaceted entity, a realm consisting of different worlds only partly related to each other: the world of economics, the world of the natural processes, the world of day-to-day life, the world of politics, and last but not least, the world of dreams, symbols, and hidden meanings. This conception includes an admission that we shall never understand the metropolitan landscape in its full richness, and that we need the full array of the combined methods of science and art to approach its essence.

We need to make use of phenomenology to break through old prejudices; statistical analysis to retrieve reality from the shadows of figures; hermeneutics to reach a deeper understanding of meaning; metaphoric thinking as a bridge between “form” and “image”; and metaphors as a tool to better understand and communicate. A generation ago we tried to condense the city to a single model. Now we try the opposite approach: we start from an understanding of the metropolitan landscape as a rich, multidimensional and multifaceted image with open edges.

Questions and Observations

In our multidisciplinary research, the aesthetic dimensions of the notion and image of the metropolitan landscape have been of decisive importance. “Aesthetic” as a purely pragmatic, functional form of cognition without emotion—or even with reduced conscience—is not productive. But “aesthetic” as a sensitive and emotional cognition, as a prerequisite for a responsible and caring attitude, has proven productive. It is not coincidental that cultural studies and hermeneutics are growing in importance in the formation of current urban policy.

Involvement with the research team has, for me, also resulted in personal observations and many open questions concerning the relation of the metropolitan landscape to economics, society and nature.

Quite obviously, the metropolitan landscape is in large part formed as a “landscape of capital.” It serves as effective machinery for capitalist production, distribution and consumption. The main actors and the components of this landscape are industry, shopping centers, corporate headquarters, and other facilities requiring large land areas. Typically, these have a nearly “autistic” character, isolating themselves from their surroundings; and from time to time market competition destroys some, leaving huge, obtrusive ruins.

However, such “autistic” character is not only typical

of overtly capitalist activities. It is also valid for nearly all large institutions—which, along with the ongoing division of labor, are becoming ever more specialized. Institutions of all kinds are also growing larger. This is especially true at locations where great numbers of specialized activities must work closely together, as at hospitals, universities, and government institutions.

There are several questions to the planner and urban designer in this context. Can these introverted institutions contribute to the public realm? Can we build structures for them that can be recycled or transformed for new uses? What kind of legislative and fiscal framework is necessary to support such goals?

When looking at the metropolitan landscape, one must also realize we are looking at a conglomerate, a cosmos of individual realms with their own centers and peripheries.

Many people like to live at the urban edge, where they have access to both the urban and rural worlds. But by living “amidst the edge,” people live simultaneously not just in these two worlds, but mentally in many more thanks to fast personalized transport and telecommunications. As a result, the specific social and spatial systems of reference both of individuals and corporations emerge out of a myriad of unrelated and uncountable decisions—rational for the single case, but irrational in their collective effect. It seems an anarchic, self-producing, evolutionary world, with no conceivable order.

For the urban designer, this poses another set of largely open-ended questions. How can we transform the typical “fractal” form of the metropolitan landscape, where built and open space is wastefully interwoven, into a new kind of regional city of more holistic character? Will lifestyles in connection with the clustering of a knowledge-based economy lead to a new kind of order? What will be the effect of social segregation in this new form of regional city, where different groups have nearly nothing in common? Could landscape serve as a new “commons”? How shall we integrate the dialectics between proximity and accessibility, intimate personal space and automotive space, the “world of people” and the “world of systems”?

If we look at the metropolitan landscape in detail, as urban ecologists do, its “natural” component turns out to be a great wilderness, perhaps the last in our thoroughly civilized world. Here exists a richness far greater than in the surrounding industrialized agricultural countryside, with many exotic species not expected in an urban environment. In addition to parrots in the parks of our cities, we now can observe the flightless nandu in the marshes and plains of northeast Germany.



Conservation professionals do not yet like this new nature; their view is still blurred by preindustrial ideals, and they do not yet value this form of manmade urban nature. Landscape architects also have difficulties with it, especially those trained in the stewarding tradition.

Yet, today one may observe that the metropolitan landscape consists of at least four different types of nature: the now extremely rare, “old,” “natural” nature; the nature of traditional agriculture; the nature of gardens and parks; and nature “gone wild” in former industrial wastelands. There seems no choice but to embrace all these forms, including the new wilderness. Through this effort, it should be feasible to create a new mosaic-shaped urban landscape—recently called a “harlequin-landscape” by a Berlin colleague—with its own beauty. But what about the new species? Are they welcome, and can they be integrated?

Above: Evening view along the pedestrian bridge connecting different areas of Westpark in Bochum.

A Case for Discussion

The key terms “industrial systems,” “edges,” and “wilderness” lead me to an example—West-Park in the city of Bochum in the Ruhr district. The project started with the International Building Exhibition-Emscher Park (1989-1999), conceived as part of a system of interconnected parks and open spaces which will serve as a future “ecological spine” for the Ruhr region.

The work involved the transformation of a former steel mill, active from about 1855 to 1985, into a public park. We composed a new landscape around the monumental remnants of the mill, its furnaces and related structures; and in the process we had to connect to an artificial topography of mounds, accumulated cinder, and ash heaps deposited on the site throughout 130 years of operation. A dense incidental vegetation of birch trees had already covered these sizeable mounds. The addition of several new and technologically advanced steel pedestrian bridges with poles of light gave the park both a historical sense and a future direction.

In the center of the park, a magnificent, more than century-old industrial hall now serves cultural purposes. A new concert hall will soon be added, and other institutions serving the music industry are also proposed.

For more than one hundred years, as the center of life for tens of thousands of workers, the steel mill and its facilities stood as an industrial “Forbidden City.” Our hope now is that this new park will again provide a center of life for surrounding areas of worker housing, and will help renew this part of the town. Remarks by roller-skaters and mountain bikers, and other interesting comments placed on the park’s website, already reflect on the peculiar qualities of this new emerging landscape.

The New InSTITUTE

I would like to end by offering a few observations to guide the newly formed UC Berkeley Center for Global Metropolitan Studies. These are based on my own experiences in California, and on other presentations at “The Future Metropolitan Landscape” conference, held at Berkeley in 2005.

First, differences exist in conceptualizing the metropolitan landscape in different cultures. If one dares generalize, European contributions start from a general, philosophical and abstract, but also comprehensive concept of the metropolitan landscape, even if it is not so strongly based on empirical facts. Contributions from Japan are more likely to be design-oriented and directed toward localized problems, featuring special sites and projects in great



detail rather than larger contexts. And contributions from the U.S. show a strong, vivid, empirical approach, full of realism and detail, focusing on special parts of the city, and meant to influence local decision-making directly. The new institute might try to “cross-fertilize” these complementary approaches as a way to develop extremely different modes of knowledge and integrate these into a wide conceptual framework.

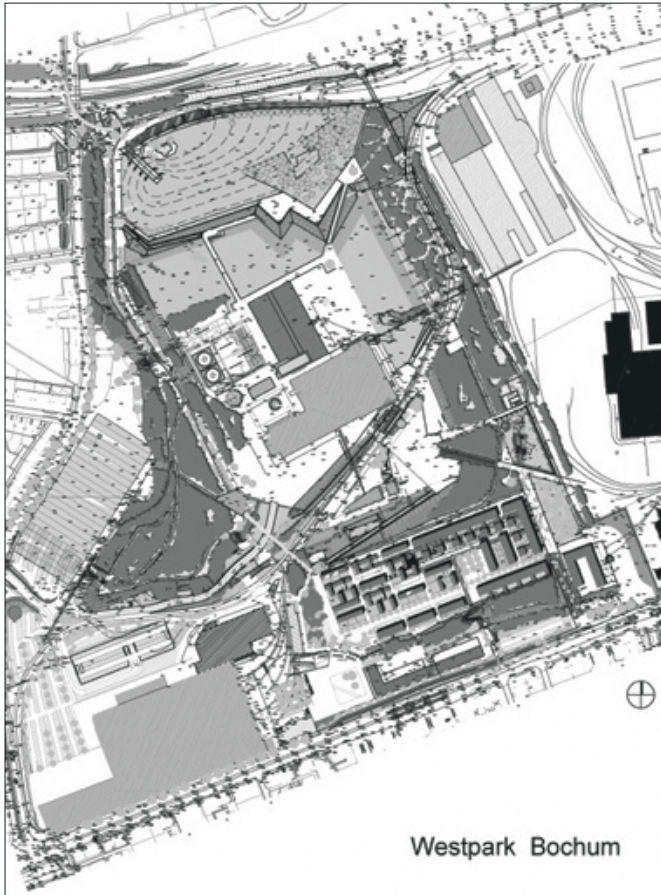
A second observation concerns the scale the new institute should address. It is urgent to revitalize the tradition of regional thinking once displayed, for example, by the Regional Planning Association in New York in the 1920s, and by the “Ruhrsiedlungsverband” of the same time in Germany. These traditions have largely been lost. To revitalize them for our time will mean conceiving of the metropolitan landscape not so much as an “objective geographical entity,” but as a socioeconomic and cultural construct, based on ecological facts and geography.

The metropolitan landscape could, for example, be

conceived as a unity of social and cultural characteristics, pointing to a semi-urban lifestyle. But it could also be conceived as a unity of urban open spaces, viewed by the inhabitants as an integrated part of their settlements, not just a context for economic activities. It is of utmost importance for the new institute to develop a strong initial “philosophical” framework to allow integration of different research approaches; otherwise, the danger of disintegration of effort can hardly be avoided.

A third observation concerns the social role of the new institute. The institute should seek to influence public opinion, lawmakers, and the production of culture. This means involving itself in public affairs from the beginning. I see the institute not only directing research but also serving as a “knowledge broker” between research and the public. In

Above: Visitors relax next to the canals that were once used in the industrial process. The pedestrian bridge shown on the previous page is in the background.



Westpark Bochum



this effort, it must reflect and anticipate the future impact of government regulation. Will this role more or less “disappear,” as conservatives hope? Or will there be a new effort at government intervention, directed not so much toward quantitative growth as qualitative transformation?

In my opinion, the goals of the new institute and its impact on the public should be threefold: to support processes of regional enlightenment; to develop cohesive rules and procedures; and to help create the climate for a “culture of building” in its widest sense.

Support for Enlightenment. It is nearly impossible to force central control on the metropolitan landscape that is both democratic and efficient; the same follows for regional government from “above.” Only a process whereby the communities and public/private bodies that form a region

come to realize the extent of their mutual interests will eventually, and over several steps, lead to a new culture and form of regional government. Therefore, the new institute should conceive of the metropolitan landscape as a “learning region.”

This learning process should lead to a diversification, according to which the sheer size of the metropolitan landscape allows the development of the special “gifts” of different parts to form complementary divisions within an overall regional culture. The emergence of economic specialization in space happens all the time, leading to a clustering of economic functions, which usually have their roots in history. The new task would be to complement this process with a realization and sharpening of the differences of typical cultural characteristics.

Development of Cohesive Rules and Procedures. The metropolitan landscape is more and more a self-organizing body. Therefore, conventional plans alone have less and less influence on real changes to it. Nevertheless, the

Above left: Plans of Westpark in Bochum.

Above right: Nighttime view of the entrance stairs to Westpark.



myriad disconnected decisions forming the metropolitan landscape still have to be controlled by implicit and explicit rules and procedures.

Planning the metropolitan landscape will mean combining principal, long-term plans—setting the general goal as a point of orientation at the horizon, with short-term projects implementing it. At the International Building Exhibition-Emscher Park, we called this method “perspective incrementalis.” An uncountable number of steps will be led by perspective orientation into a general direction needed to transform the region.

Helping create a culture of building in its widest sense. This goal means that the discussion of aesthetics should be an important part of the new institute. This might need some explanation.

Nearly everybody agrees that the normal, everyday environment, especially in the U.S., is ugly, and is becoming more and more so. Some might argue that since most people don’t seem to mind, why bother? However, this

“don’t mind” may also signify that people don’t feel responsibility; they simply “don’t care” for their environment.

It is the establishment of a connection between aesthetics and care and responsibility, rather than between aesthetics and neglect, that is so important for the new Berkeley institute. This is not a matter of style (there are many different aesthetics), but of emotional ties to the environment as a prerequisite for deeper interest, responsibility and care. It is this deep, fundamental connection to care and responsibility which makes aesthetics so important.

All images are courtesy of the author.

Above: A bicycle trail runs the entire length of Emscher Park.