Park Politics

In June 2018, professionals and scholars, from various fields dealing with public open spaces, put politics up for discussion. In the conference series "x–LArch" at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, BOKU/Vienna, issues are raised that are relevant for the profession of landscape architecture and have a direct impact on our environment, be it urban or rural. In the 2018 conference entitled 'Park Politics', practitioners and academics were invited to present findings and projects in order to gain a range of perspectives from which to consider and discuss the topic of politics behind the built environment (www.x-larch.at).

Urban Landscapes are Political Spaces

"Urban public spaces are a site of constant negotiation and struggle, concerning not only their material design, but also and foremost their access, regulation and symbolic meanings. Urban public spaces are political all the way down", German geographer Bernd Belina stated in the opening session of the Conference x–LArch 2018 – Park Politics. Urban landscapes mirror the dynamic histories of planning approaches, design concepts, and, through these, world views. Every design and programme reflects the period of political, technological, and social conditions within which it was conceived, while simultaneously reflecting later societal transformations. The changes reveal an ongoing and dynamic process of professional questioning and criticism, based as much on experiences of success and failure as on the ebb and flow of ideas and ideals. These ideals are never neutral, but framed by relations, practices, and interactions embedded in structures of power. The processes of shaping, managing, and using urban landscapes must therefore be understood to have a direct relationship with the political, economic, and cultural conditions of society, in which the built environment both signifies and influences power positions, social orders, and hierarchy. Most of our work relates to public parks, spaces that we design for the public, and with the public, which places our work at the core of society. Doreen Massey (2005) has argued that space "poses the political question of how we are going to live together".

As landscape architects and scholars, we design open spaces and often discuss the aesthetics or poetics of park design, examine design processes, and look at how space and programme have evolved over time. Designed spaces are visible; they are physically present. So, there is always something real to talk about, to embrace or reject, that might be blurring or even hiding the societal intent behind it.

Ideas and concepts of how society would work best are not only the content of political manifestos but are also – if more subtly – expressed in specific aesthetic approaches that shape our environments as constitutive models. Although these are often framed as technological necessities and neutral aesthetic developments, ex-post investigations have enabled us to identify the true nature of such models, their ideological backgrounds, their implementation in political institutions, and not least their effects on the design and programme of urban open spaces (Blanchon-Caillot, B. et al., 2012; Baur, & Ruedi, 2005; Egoz, Jørgensen & Ruggeri 2018).

This evident nexus is partly blurred by the global development of urbanisation, on the one hand, and the constantly growing influence of so-called market forces on the other. These global developments have sneaked in through the back door and are presented as a given. In an era of post-politics, envisioned and criticised by a number of radical thinkers, not least Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek, it is described as a starting point for post-democratic governmental structures. We see these predictions being realised now, step by step, with many of the relevant decisions taken behind the scenes. Unpacking and surfacing the political frameworks underlying the design and programme of contemporary and historical urban landscapes contributes to discourses on the - obvious and more covert - negotiation processes between diverse actors who shape our collective environment. Since we are, with David Graeber (2015), convinced that there has never been an "Inevitable Tide of History" we want to understand how the rules and regulations for our society are made, as expressed in urban public spaces. We don't accept that rules and regulations become given facts that we have to incorporate or follow, without them even being questioned. We take issue with the apolitical understanding of planning and design, linked either to technical and objective expertise or to artistic licence. As such, we see urban open spaces as being not only the domain of planning and design professionals, but both a medium and an outcome of an amalgam of influences, be they economic, cultural, social, or political. Therefore, we recognise the investigation of the built environment and why it looks as it does as an intrinsically multi-disciplinary undertaking. Thus, we argue that this discourse must take place among and between the diverse players engaged in the politics of urban landscapes, to include designers, planners, politicians, and community advocates.

Ideas, Ideals, Rules, Regulations

We take public urban parks as an example of urban landscapes in which - over time - ideas and ideals of how we should live together have manifested particularly well in changing design styles, programmes, and regulations for use, as well as in financing models. Public parks have been provided by firstly opening royal amenities to the public, and later by financing through public private partnerships – namely in the United States – and by public authorities as a result of politics inclined to paternalistic ideas of social welfare and health, as both Alan Tate and Karsten Jørgensen exemplify in their papers. However, apart from the question of how to finance parks, they also work in the opposite direction - creating money. Tate shows that some parks have a direct economic impact in two different ways: The 1934 re-design of New York's Bryant Park was launched to commission out-of-work architects. Creating work at that time also was the intention behind the Amsterdamse Bos in the same year, Tate states. The other quite opposing economic effect of parks is the rise of revenue for property owners, with the Manhattan Highline being one of the most recent explosive examples. Wicked problems also occur when it comes to financing maintenance, with underfunding leading to a downward spiral of neglect. Here, concepts of private contributions are also at hand, especially in the US and to a much smaller extent in Europe. Those represent, as Tate puts it, "a recurrent pattern of politicians outsourcing the funding of nominally public facilities and, very likely, decreasing their democratic qualities." (Tate, 2018) In reverse, badly maintained public parks can be an argument in municipal elections. There is another dimension to these different concepts, which directly implies different designs for the parks. While first, formerly royal, public parks are formed by pastoral ideas, rising (social) modernist programmes have led to a more functional, pragmatic design. In any case, park politics are part of larger urban development ideals, as shown in the 1920s and 30s in Norway's capital city of Oslo by Karsten Jørgensen. Seeing parks in a spatially larger context also means taking a rigorous look at their impacts on the urban environment as well as on social agendas. Here, so-called green gentrification has to be discussed. This economic effect of rising property prices and rents as a consequence of the implementation of parks that upgrade the urban environment leads to the displacement of the low-income population, as Naama Meishar elaborates very clearly in her paper on Jaffa, Tel Aviv. She accuses the

profession of landscape architecture of rarely taking into consideration the mutual dependency between ecological projects and socio-political, in contrast to other fields like geography and urban studies, who "recognized a recurring phenomenon of supposedly apolitical, beneficial urban environmental improvement which is accomplished at the cost of displacing long-time local residents." Meishar argues that in landscape architecture, both in terms of research and practice, there is a limited understanding of and interest in social dynamics and social change. Things natural and things social are two sides of the one coin. A close look and a thorough design discourse analysis of the implementation process of Jaffa Slope Park reveals that not only are there economic and thus social impacts of placing the park at this site but that it is used to disguise the political intention to push Palestinians out of this area. The decision to follow a housing policy of displacement, and to embellish the site with a park, is part of an overall ideological and political strategy. Designing our living environment and putting it into reality is a process of successive decisions. If taken at all as a deliberate and discrete decision, and not merely as the result of a general mindset, it stays behind the scenes.

Decisions concerned one of the major questions we posed at the conference: how are these decisions taken, who is involved in the decision making, what is the actors' agenda, and how is it translated into models and legal programmes, and finally the built product of a park or an urban landscape? In Western Europe, development plans, guidelines, and planning missions show a strong intention to guide public behaviour and to allow and further some actions by encouraging activities of public bodies, e.g. when it comes to enlivening streetscapes. How these activities are dealt with is part of a bureaucratic structure in the city, brought about through administrative decisions. Professionals in public administrations not only follow the political order from above but are also driven by their personal priorities. Their task is to decide and allow or deny on a legal basis, in a precise way that is objective and comprehensible for everyone. Even if the basic questions leading to those decisions are kept as simple as possible, they can't be taken other than on the grounds of a clear political position. To Jürgen Furchtlehner and Georg Bautz, when elaborating upon a guideline to decide upon activities and interventions in public spaces together with Vienna's department of architecture, it became clear that decisions on design cannot be taken without relating them to both social and functional arguments, thus comprising the whole complexity of urban practice. We design spaces and we use them. The way we use open spaces is also shaped by cultural codes that are determined by laws and controlled by officials and those in power. Design could be made quite powerful by spatially allowing for certain uses or impeding activities or even access especially when spatial scarcity is at hand. However, numerous rules dictate our daily professional practice. Not only from a professional designers' point of view, life is well regulated. In addition, people who use open public spaces are strongly subject to regulations and laws of how to behave and what to omit. This implies the communication of a clear stance on what kind of society is aimed at, on top of artistic, spatial, and aesthetic criteria.

Individuals and diverse communities are often addressed as constituents of society when parks are conceived, developed, maintained, or restored. In order to enhance people's identification and to further stewardship of their recreational environment, their direct involvement in planning or even construction and maintenance is part of planning and building processes. Wolfram Höfer and Beth Ravit have been negotiating with a wider public in a participation process for an environmental master plan for the Bergen County parks in New Jersey, outside New York City. A number of issues within the long-term planning processes are connected not only to ideological backgrounds but to pragmatic realities such as election cycles of politicians or property tax rates which influence peoples' readiness to agree with government spending. The hesitation by politicians to make binding decisions supports the importance of community engagement. However, a common challenge is to get people engaged not only with their closest living environment but even for processes on a larger scale, both in space and in time. Furthermore, an accurate design process is needed to reach all social groups equally and to resolve conflicts between diverting interests and redirect them into collective efforts, as Höfer and Ravit state, even though they do not, along with de la Peña, consider conflict a dirty word.

While conflicts in such participatory processes are at a very concrete and often personal level, the aftermath of highly political and military conflicts produce a vague terrain. Verena Butt takes a close look at post-military landscapes in Germany and reveals the remembered and forgotten narratives of these 'fascinating' sites where nature has taken over and hides most of the historic traces. Abandoned large-scale landscapes became extremely rich in terms of biodiversity, leading up to natural heritage status and the conclusion of the "military being perfect environmentalists". This seems to be more present than the fact that they constitute a strong political heritage carrying traces of an extremely changeful period of power relations and conflicts. Research by historians reveals the meaning of material relicts, while ecologists, with the help of instruments for preservation, strive to protect newly developed habitats. Political sites are apt as places of political education and remembrance if a discussion about the societal meaning of a past full of conflict and its traces is led in public. Through design research, Butt exemplified how both political and ecological aspects can be developed further into future landscapes "perceivable both as sites of fascinating nature and of historic depth".

To conclude, research is necessary looking in both directions - back as well as into future processes and developments - to fully understand the agenda of park politics; on the one hand, analyses of landscapes, their traces, and changing past reveal effectual political forces. On the other hand, we can discover the underlying plan by exploring the designs, and their making, and put it up for discussion. Once they are decoded and laid open, agendas can be influenced. This is crucial to support and secure spatial justice and to enable open spaces for an open society.

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