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## autumn 09

### Editorial

4

### Articles

**Stefan Körner, Florian Bellin-Harder**  
The 7000 Eichen of Joseph Beuys –  
experiences after twenty-five years

6

**Elisabeth Clemence Chan**  
What roles for ruins? Meaning and  
narrative of industrial ruins in con-  
temporary parks

20

**Jyoti P. Sharma**  
Mughal gardens of the Indian Sub-  
continent and the colonial legacy:  
the treatment of Delhi's Shalamar Bagh

32

**Shelley Egoz, Racheli Merhav**  
Ruins, ideology and the Other in the  
landscape: the case of Zippori National Park,  
Israel

56

### Thinking Eye

**Andy Clayden, Jenny Hockey,  
Trish Green, Mark Powell**  
Living with the dead

48

### Under the Sky

**Hayriye Öztürk**  
The Sadabad Park project in Istanbul –  
balancing garden heritage conservati-  
on and contemporary park design

70

### JoLA Lab

**Alexandre Chemetoff / Versailles Lecture 2008**  
The projects of Grenoble and Allonnes  
or the economy of means

82

### Book Reviews

Small Town Sustainability

On Landscapes

Gardens, City Life and Culture:  
A World Tour

Land and Natural Development –  
(LAND) Code

Stolo

Unbounded Practice:  
Women and Landscape Architecture  
in the Early Twentieth Century

90-95

Notes 96

Submission guidelines 98

Subscription and imprint 99

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# The 7000 Eichen of Joseph Beuys – experiences after twenty-five years

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## Abstract

This article arose from a study made on the occasion of documenta 12 (2007), looking back after twenty-five years to the planning and subsequent maintenance of Joseph Beuys's work of art 7000 Eichen (7,000 Oaks) in Kassel. Within the framework of Beuys's understanding of action art and social sculpture, the care of the trees was understood to be an integral part of the planning of the piece. Observations on the trees' current condition provide an opportunity to trace the history of the idea through to its consequences for the theory and practice of tree planting and maintenance. In this way, we see that the work of art reads less as a coeval entity; rather, the trees tell different stories of the project's development with lost trees and new plantings, trees that have been neglected for twenty-five years contrasted with examples reflecting meticulous, age-appropriate arboricultural maintenance. Even during Beuys's lifetime the 7000 Eichen campaign provoked a strongly polarized debate about urban vegetation. This article is a reflection on the relationship between art and nature, planning and politics, neighbourhoods and administration – not in an attempt to see which side was right or wrong, but rather to determine the condition of the piece today, and also which planting and maintenance techniques have proven to work and which have not.

documenta / Beuys trees / social sculpture / maintenance

## Introduction: the artistic concept of the 7000 Eichen [1]

During documenta 12, as part of a student project at the University of Kassel, [2] we looked closely at a project that twenty-five years earlier (Fig. 1) within the framework of an art campaign had catalyzed a discussion about nature in cities and about urban trees and their planning and maintenance in particular. The debate was groundbreaking in the greening of German cities. Our focus is the 7000 Eichen planted by Beuys and his assistants in Kassel. The planting was not only bound up with discussions of the contemporary understanding of what a city is, but also with hefty, even acrimonious, disagreements in professional circles about the technical aspects of tree planting in cities. The discussion included not only whether trees even belonged in cities – particularly in Kassel, with its car-centered development following World War II – but also specific planning and maintenance aspects such as the substrate the trees should be planted in, their spacing, and the timing and height of proper pruning. documenta 12 was not the only reason to study the 7000 Eichen – in 2005 they were formally recognized as an historical landmark. Although today the Beuys trees definitively embody the image and urban quality of the city, at the time of documenta 7 they were not on Kassel's 'wish list', and therefore we wanted to reassure ourselves of their condition. Our objective is not to fight old battles over again but to reconstruct the history and continuing relevance of a work of art that had been planned with the ecological and social quality of the city in mind.

According to Beuys's understanding of art, the 7000 Eichen were to incorporate both the effects of time and also and in particular, as 'social sculpture', to be connected with the "life of humanity with the social body of the future" (Fig. 2). This means that Beuys believed that art was to be integrated into all areas of life to promote human creativity ("Every person is an artist.") and thereby a spiritual and truly democratic society (Stachelhaus 1989, 72). Art was thus always also social and political action, which meant for example setting up the "Office for the Organization of Direct Democracy by Plebiscite" by Beuys in Kassel (Ermen 2007: 80), where he spent 100 days discussing with various people the question of how a direct democracy could work (Bodemann-Ritter 1977). Beuys was also a founding member of the Green Party in Germany and designed its central symbol, the sunflower.



Figure 1 The first tree and the last tree, twenty-five years after the end of the 7000 Eichen campaign



Figure 2 Beuys



Figure 3 Joseph Beuys swimming across a moor, 1971.



Figure 4 Sweeping out the Grafenberger Forest in Düsseldorf, 1971

For Beuys, planting trees was a simple but radical way of comprehensively regenerating society in an increasingly technological world, a world of nuclear armament and environmental destruction, that is, of giving a more natural shape to the city and stimulating social and political processes that would lead to a creative shift in consciousness and a change in the everyday realities. This was part of his work on the *Sozialer Körper* (social body), as he called it: "Working with trees is a new step. It is not a truly new dimension in the whole concept of a metamorphosis, especially on this earth and of the metamorphosis of the understanding of art. It is a metamorphosis of the social body in itself, to bring it to a new social order for the future compared with the existing private capitalist and state capitalist Communist system. This has a lot to do with the new understanding of man himself. A sensible practical anthropology should be worked out. This will enable it to reach the heart of the existing systems, especially the heart of business life, because the extended understanding of art is connected with each person's creativity" (Beuys 1982, cited in Groener and Kandler 1987: 18 f.).

The 7000 Eichen was an exemplary work of 'social sculpture' (on Beuys's concept of social sculpture, see Stachelhaus 1989; Harlan, Rappmann and Schata 1976; 1984). With this work Beuys was engaging initially not only in temporary actions but also on a permanent basis in the everyday life of a city and in the design of its open spaces.

He spoke about the 7000 Eichen for the documenta 7 mostly in interviews. As he died before completion of the work, he was unable to say whether it had developed as he had thought. The last tree was planted by his son Wenzel next to the first one in front of the Fridericianum Museum (Fig. 1). It is therefore important to understand what his intentions were

and how the work of art developed on the basis of those intentions. He wanted, literally, to go outside with this work and with his *Stadtverwaltung* (afforestation of the city) to come into more intense contact with people and thus bring them into contact with nature. He had already attracted attention with his open-air campaigns such as *Aktion im Moor* in 1971 and the sweeping of the Grafenberger Forest in 1971 (Figs. 3&4).

"I want to go outside more and more to be at the interface between the questions of nature and the questions of people at their workplaces. It will be a self-renewing activity; it will be a healing process for all the questions that confront us [...]. That is my main aim" (Beuys 1982 cited in Groener and Kandler 1987: 15 f.).

Above all the aspect of time was important; the tree was an element of regeneration for Beuys, one that unfolds in the course of time. In particular, the oak as a slow-growing tree, in his opinion, clarifies the effects of time and has also been a cultic tree since the druids used it to mark holy places (16). What Beuys did not mention was that the oak also played a substantial role in German nationalism as a 'German tree', for instance as the Bismarck oak or in war memorials. For this reason even Germans are sometimes misled by the title of the work. Nevertheless, the oak was reinterpreted by Beuys.

Another way of clarifying time was the use of basalt stele. Beuys's aim was that the trees last for about three hundred years. Each tree was accompanied by a stele (Beuys called them "stumbling blocks"). These were stored on a pile in the Friedrichsplatz from the beginning of the campaign (Fig. 5). The combination of trees and basalt stele was a visual manifestation of time (Figs. 6 & 7). While the stone represents antiquity as well as

# What roles for ruins? Meaning and narrative of industrial ruins in contemporary parks

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with the notion that parks containing industrial ruins possess an emotional attraction that can depoliticize historical narratives. How can we design parks containing industrial ruins that reveal the multiplicities of history? In order to pursue this question, the article examines the literature to outline the relationships between the historical meanings of traditional ruins in landscape design and the contemporary emotional appeal of industrial ruins. The article also examines the relationship between cultural perceptions of industry, its ruins, and parks containing industrial ruins. The findings show that each of these three conditions (industry, industrial ruin, and park containing industrial ruins) are perceived differently, but all share the roles of icons, emotional objects, settings, workplaces, environmental agents and characters in cultural life. The article concludes with a guide for designers to assist in the creation of more complex narratives than are found in the contemporary genre of parks containing industrial ruins.

*Industrial ruins / technological sublime / park design  
historical interpretation / landscape perception / ruins / myth of landscape*

## Ozymandias

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,  
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mock'd them, and the heart that fed,  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818

Figure 1 Landschaftspark Duisburg-North, Germany. The ruins of Thyssen Steelworks are a setting for recreation. The structures' new uses are not necessarily linked with the site's history.



## Introduction

### Purpose

Motivated by the cultural implications of the genre of parks containing industrial ruins, the purpose of this article is twofold: to examine the factors that lead to the apolitical nature of how industrial ruins are perceived, and to examine the attraction of industrial ruins with the aim of developing an operational framework to guide the design of parks within these charismatic sites. By 'apolitical', I mean that industrial ruins in parks provide a neutral history. Parks containing industrial ruins are aesthetically attractive and nostalgic. The draw is less about who worked in the industry, what was manufactured, mined or transported on that site, and more about the emotional response to the ruins. The ruins are not typically used in ways that project the environmental consequences, production practices, economics, or legacies of the industry. Instead, it is my view that parks containing industrial ruins are designed and built because people enjoy ruins, especially in parks. Industrial ruins in parks are enjoyed for particular and complex cultural reasons. By unpacking the sublime qualities of industrial ruins – those qualities linked to the scale, material, function, and power of industry – we can better understand their fundamental attraction. Understanding the attraction of ruins can help to support the development of a new framework for designs that can better capture the competing narratives of industrial landscapes. Finding ways to make cultural landscapes from post-industrial sites is a complex challenge, and the challenge of their meaning has been the subject of many recent papers (Langhorst 2004, Edensor 2005, Armstrong 2006, Huyssen 2006, Loures et al. 2006). Background, knowledge and viewpoints that frame visitors' readings of parks containing industrial ruins are out of beyond designers' control, but the design of this type of park can be guided toward more nuanced and politically engaged portrayals of history.

Many designed landscapes rely on myths and imagination to create meaning. Culture and memory are also brought to bear on a park visitor's phenomenological experience. It is this author's assertion that the myth-making power of both ruins and industry has a significant impact on the meaning and narrative of industrial ruins in parks. Without question, the set of relationships between myth, meaning and narratives of industrial ruins in contemporary parks is complex and variable. However, an open discussion of the problems of these parks, as well as the differences and relationships between industry, industrial ruins and parks containing industrial ruins, has the potential to inform future designs of parks built among industrial ruins.

There are three primary problems of contemporary industrial ruin parks. Each of these problems is linked with the passive pleasure-seeking role of park visitors (a phenomenon over which designers have little control, but with which they must be familiar).

1. Ruins of industry and manufacturing work almost like follies in these parks, much as ruins functioned in traditional eighteenth-century English gardens. Structures left behind on post-industrial sites tend to be grand and impressive, but usually ambiguous in their purpose. In parks, both in Europe and the USA, industrial ruins typically act as an attraction and backdrop to recreational activity. This is a problem because it oversimplifies the complex history of such places. The best-known example of a contemporary industrial ruin park is Landscape Park Duisburg-North in Germany. The structures of the former Thyssen Steelworks serve as climbing walls and swim tanks for scuba practice (Fig. 1). What the edifices' functions were in the past is veiled by their contemporary use or state. This is a problem in most contemporary industrial ruin parks.

# Living with the dead

Andy Clayden, Jenny Hockey, Trish Green, Mark Powell

## THINKING EYE

The images presented in this article are of a woodland burial ground in the North of England. On this site, the family and friends of the deceased are not permitted to erect a permanent headstone but may instead mark the location of the grave with a tree. Since the burial ground opened in the mid-1990s there have been over three hundred burials, and the former potato field is gradually changing into an area of woodland pasture.

The photographic record from which these images have been taken began in December 2007 and has continued through regular fortnightly visits through to the present. This visual document is just one element of an ongoing three-year research project to explore the cultural, social and emotional implications of natural burial. The photographic record was included in the research design to capture the various ways in which bereaved people marked and tended their grave and also to reveal how the burial ground changes with the seasons. Six graves and two views were identified at the beginning of the study; the graves were chosen because they represented different periods of bereavement and alternative ways of memorializing the dead. Although the burial ground owners do not encourage the placing of objects that do not decompose naturally, it has become a feature of some graves.

The visual survey has provided a valuable insight for the research team into the many different ways in which bereaved people interact with graves. In a burial context intended to promote nature and the creation of a collective memorial landscape into which the identity of the individual is ultimately subsumed, we have observed many different strategies that try to preserve the location of the grave and identity of the deceased. These include mowing the grave space, marking its boundary with small stones or temporarily with cut hay gathered on site. The regular photographic diary made it possible to trace these stories as they were played out over time.

The photographs have also provided a valuable shared resource that has stimulated discussion within a cross-disciplinary research team including a landscape architect, a sociologist and anthropologists. The images have also been used as discussion material when interviewing bereaved participants about the changing visual and spatial character of the burial ground. The commitment to regular site visits and time spent in the burial ground has also provided other benefits to the research that were not anticipated at the outset. In following the same route through the burial ground each fortnight and lingering in the landscape, the researcher became more aware of the small changes and patterns of visiting that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. For example, temporary tracks left in the late autumn frost or summer dew reveal grave visiting, even though no flowers or more permanent memorials have been left.



Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 clockwise

Grave plots are laid out on a tight grid. Bereaved people choose the grave location, the tree species, and orientation of burial, and can add ground flora if they wish. The grassland management is adapted to provide a fluid path giving access. In the absence of any coordinated design beyond the grid, evidence of the passing seasons, the varying forms of tree canopy and ground plants and the shifting location of paths produce an unpredictable aesthetic, manifest in the photographs taken in spring, summer, autumn and winter (clockwise from top left). The choice of tree and when it flowers and fruits may encode a personal epitaph that is not legible to the casual observer.