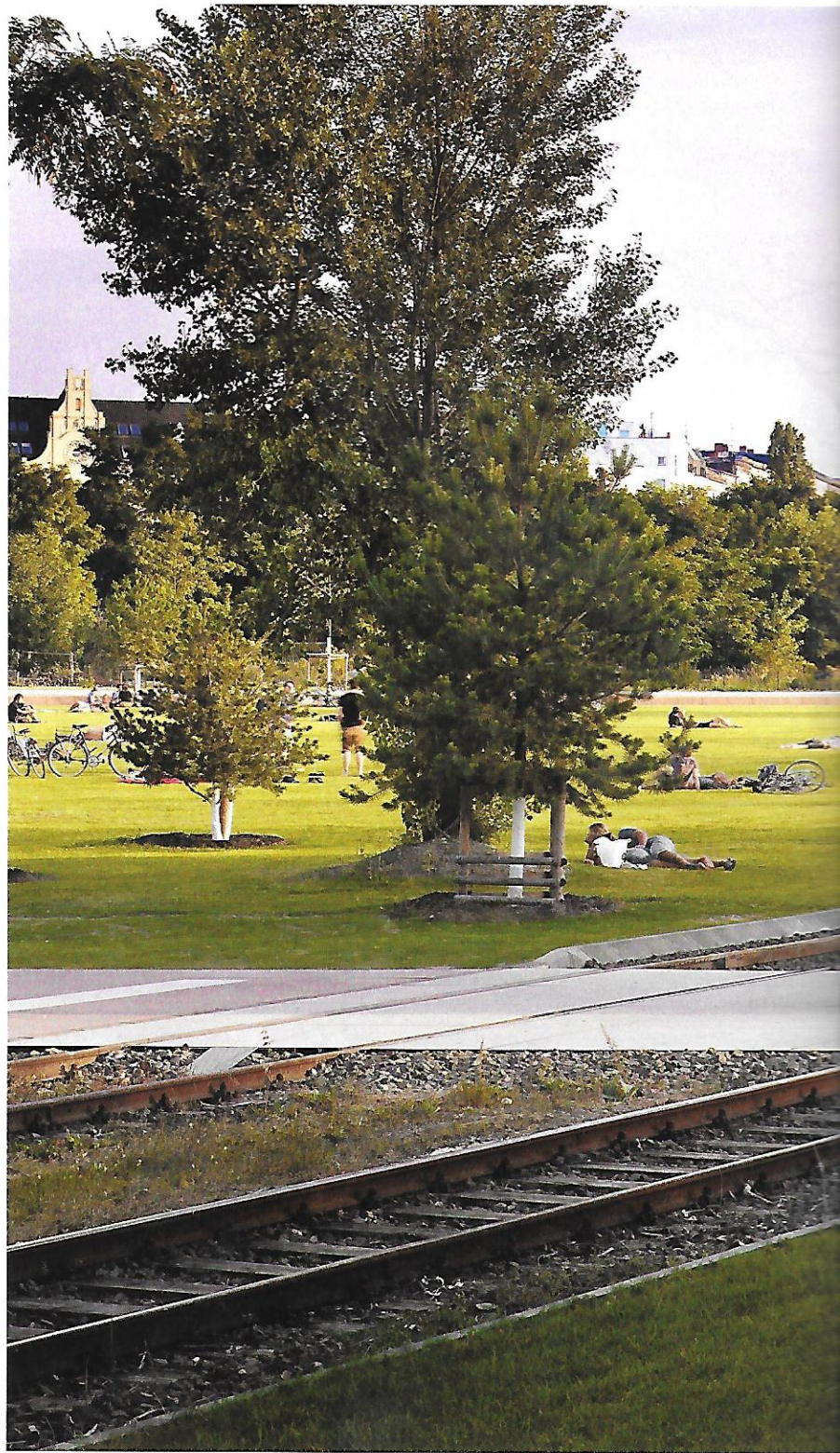


D

dozens of brightly clad children pour into Berlin's Park am Gleisdreieck for recess. The two primary sections of the park, Ostpark and Westpark, were completed in the summer of 2013, just in time for the new school year. Jacketed against the bite of autumn—this is Northern Europe, after all—the children quickly run to their favorite elements: trampolines set into a whimsical soft rubber hill and a watercourse made from wood and sand. The playgrounds at Park am Gleisdreieck are small masterpieces set in a frame of skillful design by Atelier Loidl, the hometown landscape architecture design team.

Yet the site was no tabula rasa: The context of Berlin's wartime history underlies the very conception of the park. The 26 hectares (about 64 acres) of Gleisdreieck, as the park is commonly known, constitute the final large urban open space to be reclaimed, designed, and constructed in Berlin's postwar, post-Wall period. Gleisdreieck is the layered meeting of many things in Berlin. The layers include the history of modern railroads, the ravages of war, the engagement of community, and, most of all, the power of design to define a place.

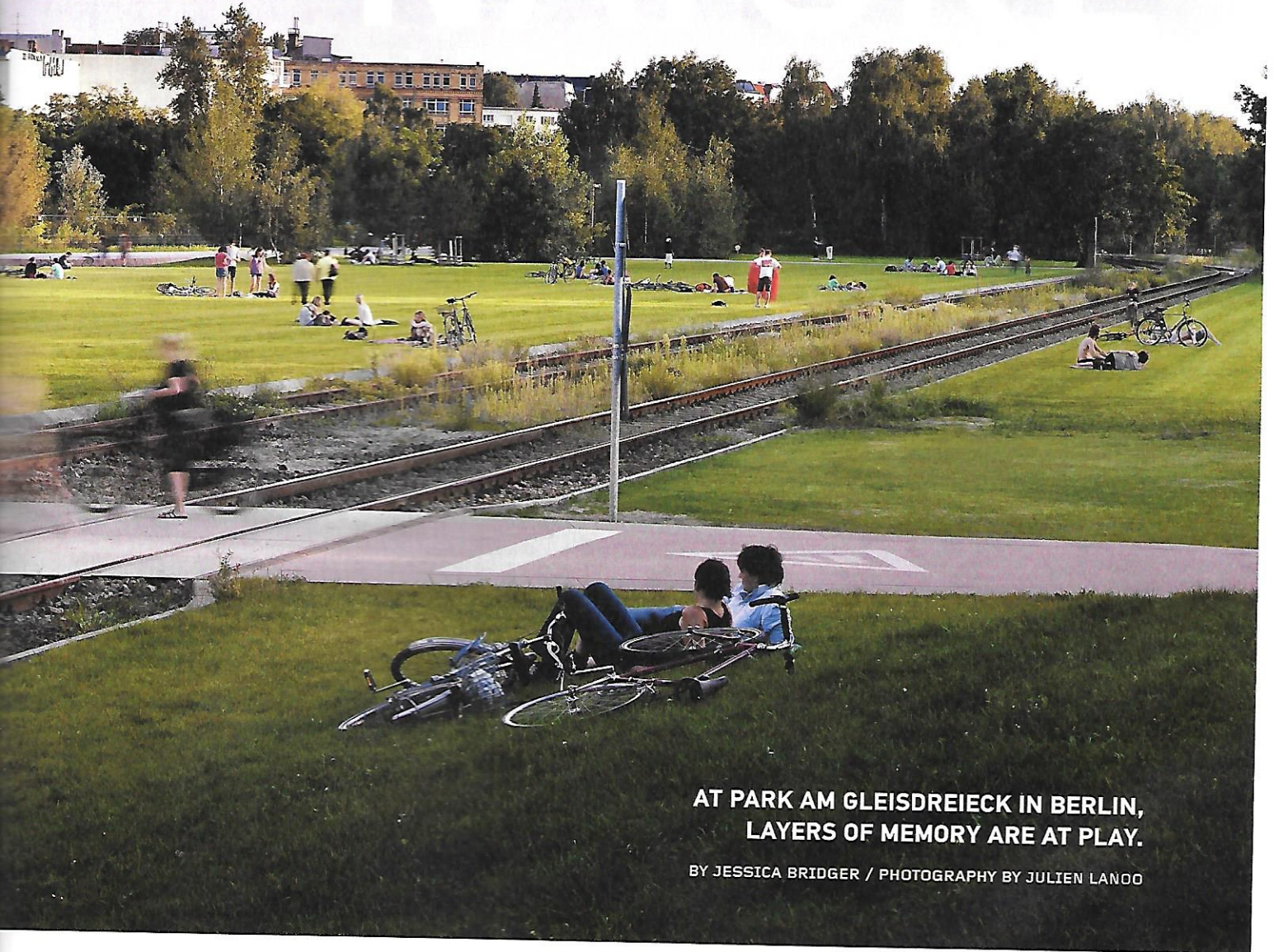
Gleisdreieck means "triangle of tracks," and it was just that for many years. The site lies between two important 20th-century rail terminuses in Berlin: the Anhalter and Potsdamer stations. Used as a rail yard, the site was severely damaged in World War II and then abandoned.



ABOVE

The design by the Berlin landscape architecture office Atelier Loidl acknowledges the site's rail-yard history.

NEUE NATURE



**AT PARK AM GLEISDREIECK IN BERLIN,
LAYERS OF MEMORY ARE AT PLAY.**

BY JESSICA BRIDGER / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIEN LANDO



TOP LEFT

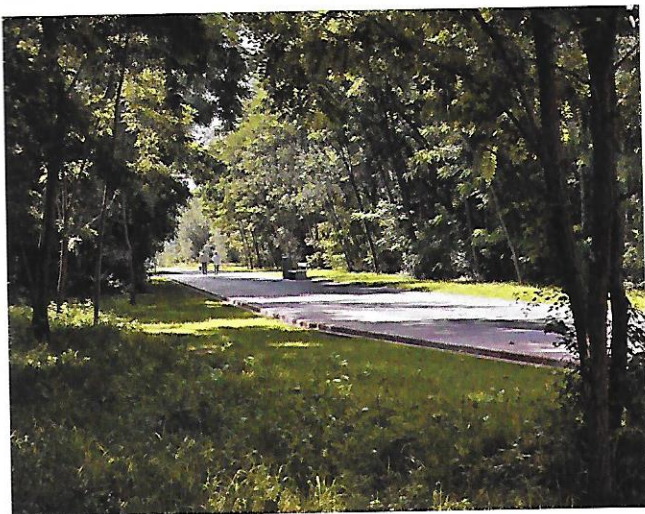
The park provides an expanse of open space in the city center.

CENTER

Riparian vegetation was preserved as found on the site.

BOTTOM

Entrances serve the diverse neighborhoods that border the park.



This cleared the way for desolation and decrepitude, but also the regeneration of urban ecological processes and, eventually, transformation. In the last stage, the site has had its redemption. Gleisdreieck's transformation is notable on many levels: The park links areas of Schöneberg, Kreuzberg, and Potsdamer Platz while retaining wide-open vistas in the heart of Berlin. It also takes advantage of the power of destruction to give cities an opportunity for progress, rethinking, and redesign. It isn't easy to rip up acres and acres of built space in a city: No normative modern civic process allows this kind of blank slate creation the way relentless bombing does.

All over Berlin, the wartime damage and the removal of rubble afterward led to large numbers of both large and small verdant vacant lots. The difficult postwar political and economic conditions preserved many of these open spaces through neglect. The site for Gleisdreieck was one of these places. Berlin was—and continues to be—an ideal place for volunteer, ruderal, and spontaneous growth in the spaces no one wants, at an unprecedented scale. These sites led, at least in part, to the development of urban ecology as a formidable branch of scientific observation and research in Berlin and beyond. The urban soils of Berlin were created by typical city processes as well as by more intense wartime disturbance—even the topography of Berlin was altered in the war, with hills of rubble added to the landscape and eventually covered in soil and vegetation. Ample room was therefore provided for nonnative species ↘





ABOVE
Gleisdreieck is a busy
urban park with places
for contemplation and
places for play.

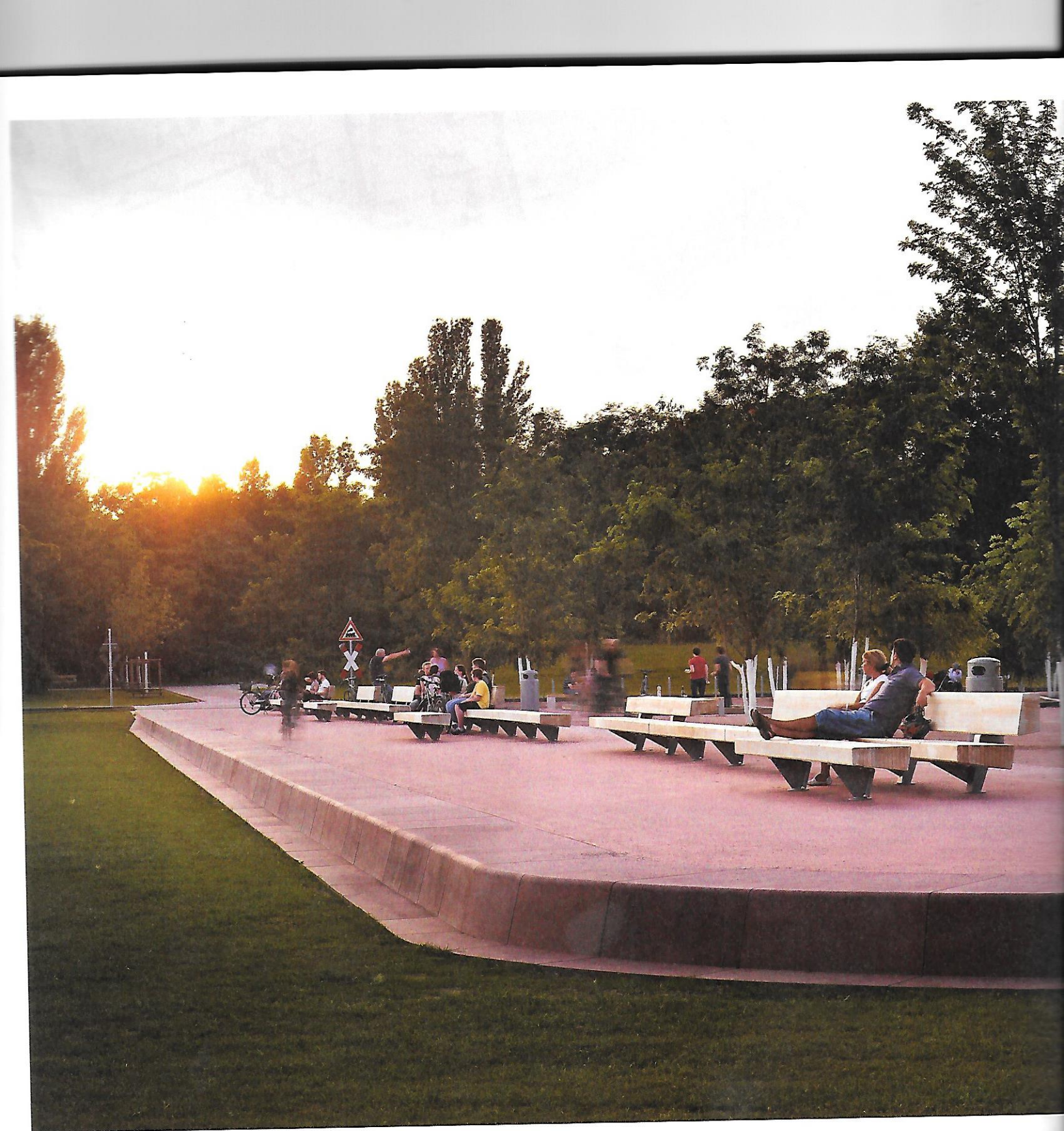


PLAN

- 1 PROTECTED VEGETATION AREA
- 2 ECOLOGICAL PROTECTION AREA
- 3 PLAY AREA
- 4 NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTION BETWEEN OSTEPARK AND WESTPARK
- 5 BEACH VOLLEYBALL AREA
- 6 RUDERAL VEGETATION
- 7 COMMUNITY GARDENS
- 8 LARGE WOODEN STAIR
- 9 U-BAHN PASS-OVER







ABOVE
Red concrete
pathways frame
the Westpark, with
custom solid wooden
benches providing
plenty of seating.



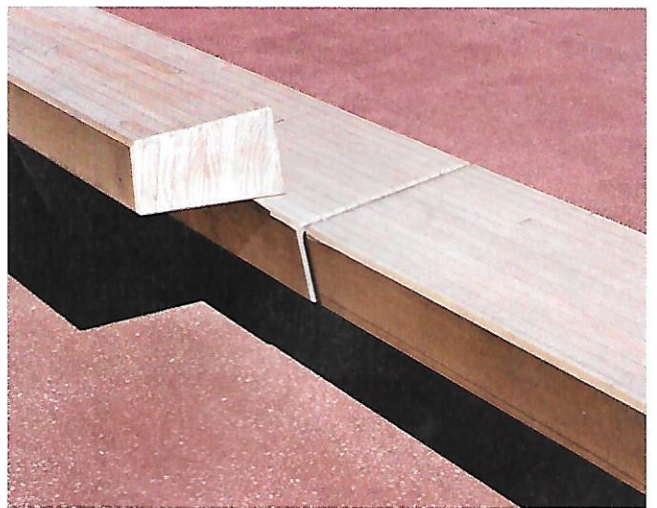
↳ to compete and thrive in these altered conditions, creating wholly new urban biotopes. The verdant spaces continue to be ripe for investigation but also for the enjoyment of city dwellers seeking a bit of “nature,” however constructed. Yet some codification and normalization of these spaces, especially the large central open areas, such as at Gleisdreieck, were necessary to stitch the city together. Retaining the ruins of the city was unbecoming to East Berlin and West Berlin, and even more problematic for post-reunification Germany: Berlin is the capital city of Europe’s largest economy and a seat of significant political power.

But Berlin’s paradise of urban wildness is shrinking. After reunification, many areas left vacant began to be filled in with development as the city was reassembled. Small sites, formerly filled with knotweed and other “urban achiever” flora and fauna, have now been filled with the usual bulky Germanic take on glass-and-steel condominiums. Enough are left that the city retains a scruffy urban green, and spaces like Natur-Park Schöneberger Südgelände, an 18-hectare (about 44.5 acres) former rail site in southern Berlin, ensure urban ecological continuity in spaces of considerable size. As a park in the center of a city rich in green but poor in formal parks, Gleisdreieck preserves swaths of this informal vegetation, carefully integrated into the otherwise formal gestures.

The balance between this urban wildness and sensible German design also informs the genesis of Gleisdreieck, mediating between its neighboring urban dwellers and the official park regenerators. The use of the Gleisdreieck site as a space for recreation was initially the result of a mid-1970s citizens’ movement. It was later formalized by the city in

TOP
Red concrete was custom mixed for the project.

BOTTOM
Atelier Loidl designed all of the site furniture at Gleisdreieck.



LEFT

The varied play spaces at Gleisdreieck include playgrounds for young children, a skatepark, and places for even adults to have a bit of fun.

1997 and finalized for use as a park with a competition, won by Atelier Loidl, in 2006. Throughout the process, a close relationship between the designer-based and community-based elements was part of a continuous negotiation in the park. This began in the first steps of the design phase with weekly meetings of neighboring residents. Elements of the site's informal recreational history were kept, most notably in the allotment gardens and a large sandy area with numerous volleyball courts, adding to the layered character of the larger site.

This recent history is folded into the historical uses of the site: Rail yard elements and tracks are carefully positioned in the park, rusting away like trophies from some forgotten victory. The brick supports of the overhead U-bahn trains carry cheerful yellow toylike subway cars, thundering above and across the park, and high-speed long-distance trains transit over and under it. Everything that has ever happened on the site seems to somehow still be present, but Gleisdreieck has an identity of its own.

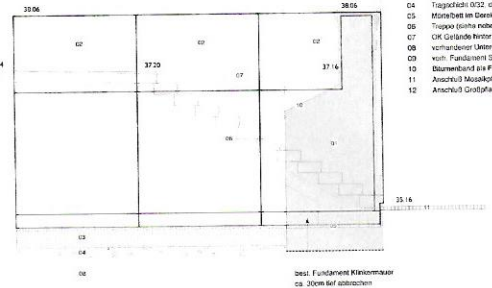
Projects like Gleisdreieck that manage to leverage the mixture of spontaneous and planned renewal along with history and contemporary use could potentially end up being compromised designs, rendered mediocre by a something-for-everyone approach. Fortunately, this is not the case, as the powerful design of Gleisdreieck was handled—and manipulated—with great competence and fluency by Atelier Loidl. Gleisdreieck is carefully detailed, and both sides of the space, divided by rail lines, reflect a distinct attitude about parks. There is a measure of control present throughout the park—you are never confused about what to do: where to walk, to play, or to contemplate ↘



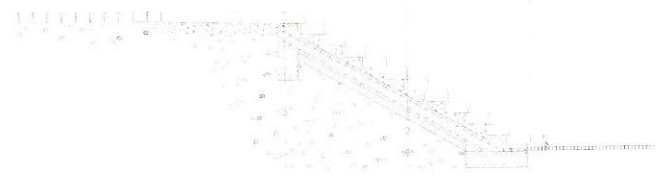


ABOVE
Sensible materials and a judicious treatment of the site result in singularly beautiful moments made from limited means.

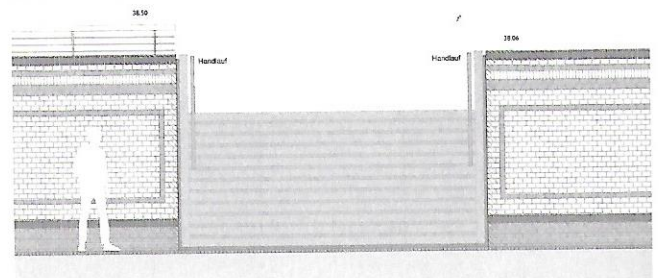
STAIR SECTIONS



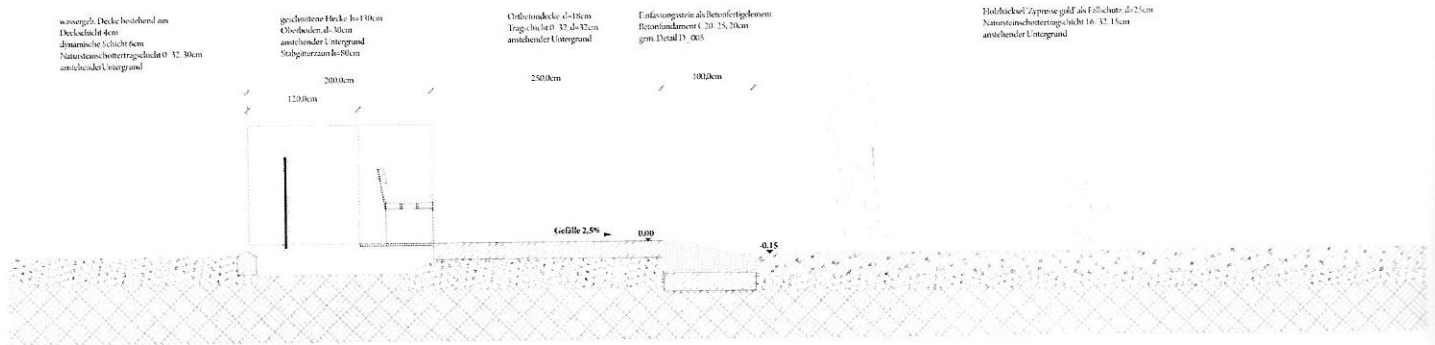
- C1 voll. Stützmauer
- C2 Winkelstützmauer
- C3 Betonfundament C 20/25 d=30cm
- C4 Tragschicht 0,22 m-Höhe, E12 z=800mm/2
- C5 Mauerwerk im Bereich voll. Fundament Stützmauer
- C6 Treppen (siehe nebenstehende Schnittzeichnung)
- C7 GK-Geländebeton-Wandstützen
- C8 vorhandener Untergrund, E12 z=450mm/2
- C9 voll. Fundament Stützmauer
- C10 Baumaterial aus Fundamentierung im existierenden Bereich
- C11 Anstrich Massivputzer Gateway Möckernstraße
- C12 Anstrich Großplaster im Restbereich



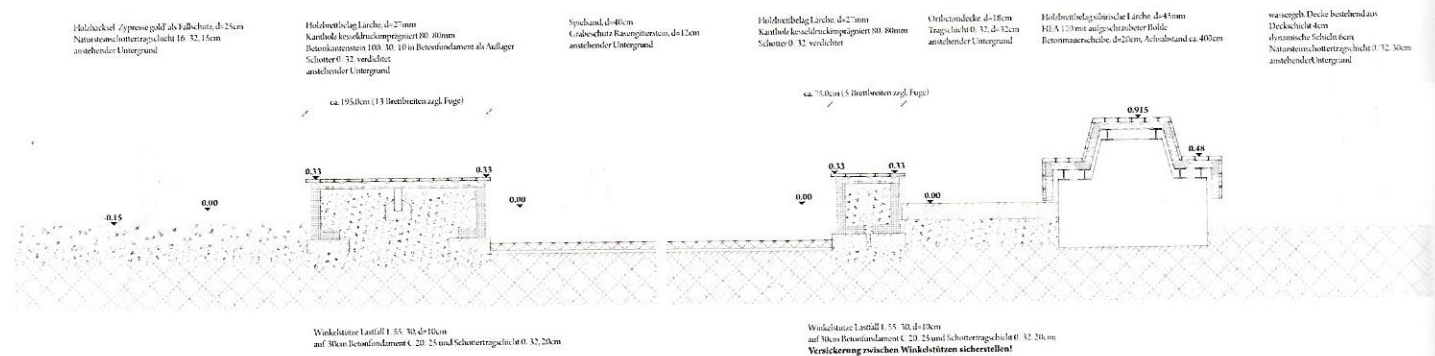
STAIR ELEVATION



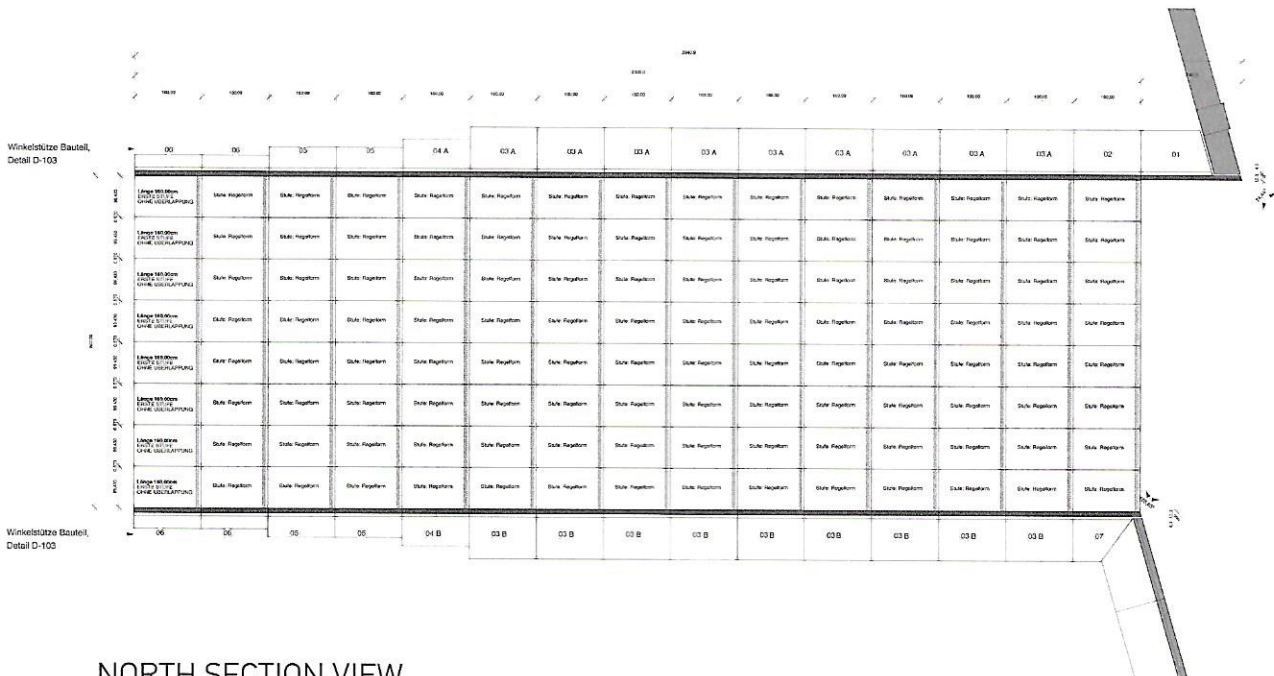
PRINCIPAL SECTION OF PLAYGROUND



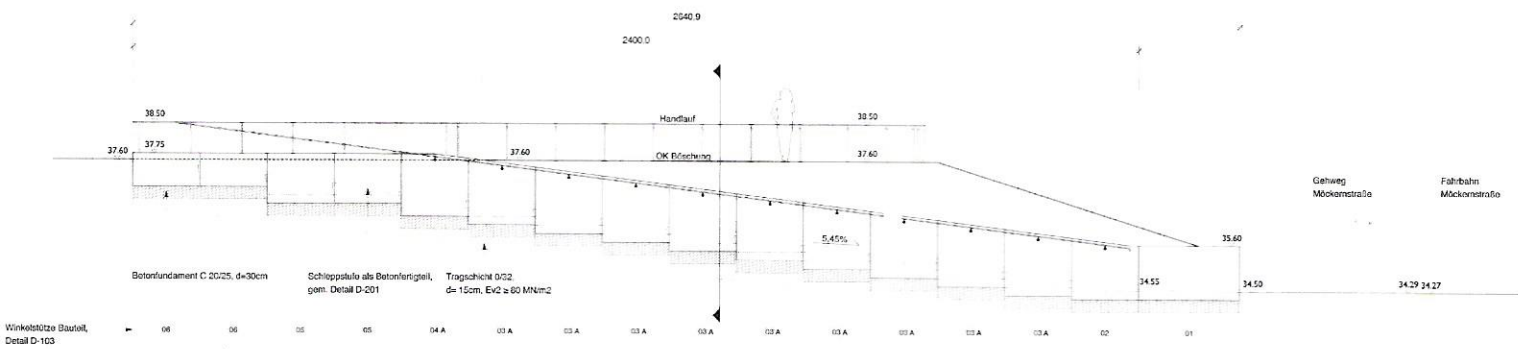
PRINCIPAL SECTION OF PLAYGROUND



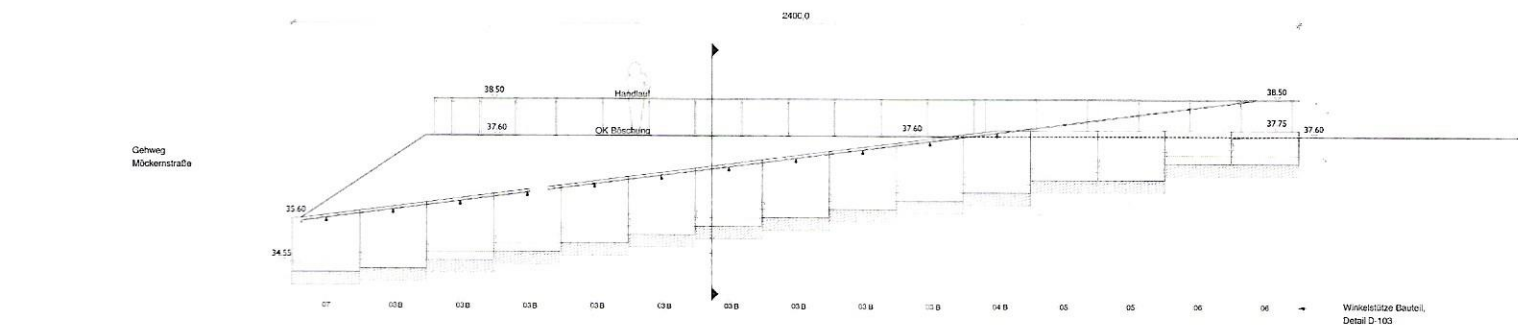
ENTRANCE STAIR PLAN



NORTH SECTION VIEW

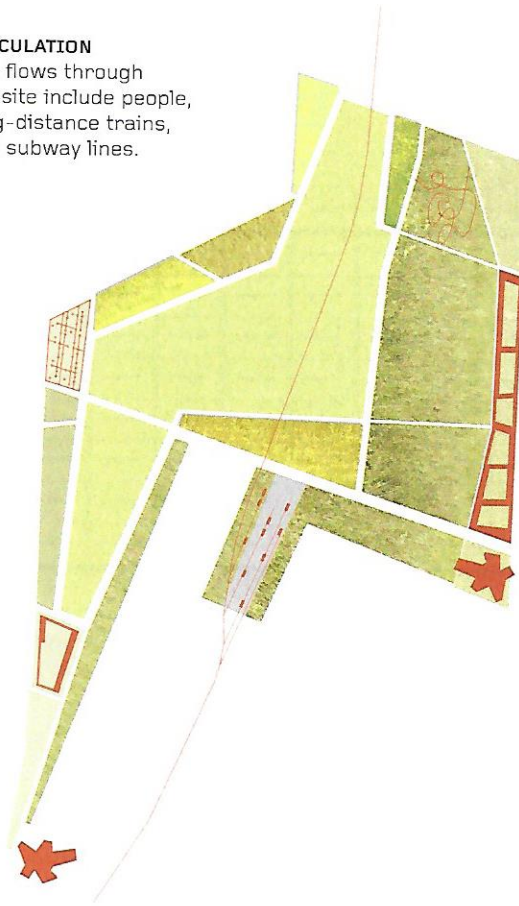


SOUTH SECTION VIEW



CIRCULATION

The flows through the site include people, long-distance trains, and subway lines.



↳ life. The stridency of function does allow the freedom for exploration but perhaps not for surprise. Gleisdreieck is meant to be discovered, and it rewards this discovery, but it is not a park of tricks and secrets, for better or for worse. Yet, it is very much a park of games.

Ostpark, first opened in 2011 and larger and more openly defined than Westpark, is structured with colored concrete and asphalt paths punctuated by playgrounds and play elements. It isn't simply that these spaces and features are good; they are truly great. What the park loses in surprise and from a peculiarly unrelenting flatness it gains in the wonder of play and experimentation. German playground design differs fundamentally from the American strain in that there is a greater tendency—and more room, legally—to create customized play areas and go far beyond mere catalog specifications. Some of the finest playground equipment today is manufactured in Germany, and at Gleisdreieck this equipment is combined with elements and materials to make play environments, not simply collections of play objects. While the equipment is ostensibly geared toward children, it is at a scale that also welcomes taller visitors, as the play of children is infectious and inspiring: The optimism and naive games of children seemingly remind us of our own simpler times. With forests of wooden poles, swings, and slides, the playgrounds in Ostpark are tiny universes of play, contained by wooden fences and edged with benches.

Westpark, opened in summer 2013, follows Ostpark's mix of defined program elements and structured circulation but adds more intensive elements to the smaller space. The idea of the





ABOVE

The large wooden stair at Westpark provides a platform for spectators and unique city views.



ABOVE
Minutes from
Potsdamer Platz,
meadows grow and
skateboards roll by.



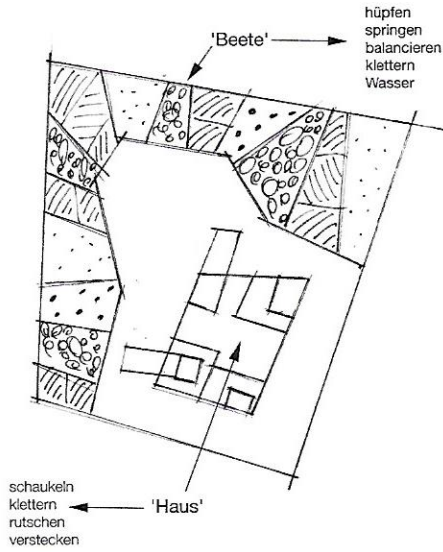
RIGHT
Gleisdreieck is frankly urban in places and retains a sense of wildness in others.

spectating-cum-recreating is present in the park: a tilted wooden stair along the central path, the rubber-surfaced whimsical terrain that scoops to an amphitheater, along with an observation point. The long-standing Western tradition of promenading, of public debate, and modern see-and-be-seen activity brings a bit of fun for adults into Gleisdreieck. And the playgrounds of Westpark are possibly even more impressively imagined than those of Ostpark, with water and sand tables, pumps, and other means of active play. There is ample space for all kinds of public gatherings and social events. There is also ice cream, available at a kiosk on a summer evening. Gleisdreieck is somehow a park for children more than any other group, and it neatly evades where the line between childhood and adulthood lies: On a recent site visit, a partner in an architecture firm and a critic of landscape architecture were seen bouncing on trampolines and eating popsicles in the cold, amid a sea of third graders.

Yet the story of Gleisdreieck is not complete without discussing its maintenance and, amid all this historical wash, its future. The issue of maintenance in public spaces is challenging in most cities, and Berlin is still an impoverished metropolis—the other side of its status as the capital of an economic powerhouse. Considering the tumult of the postwar period and reunification, this local economic struggle is often writ large—in garbage and brown grass, crumbling elements and graffiti. Intensity of use and the hierarchies of spaces play a role: The famed Tiergarten of central Berlin is relatively well maintained as the city's showpiece, but other parks do not receive much care. As a response to and in recognition of the twin challenges



IDEENSKIZZE SPIELPLATZ



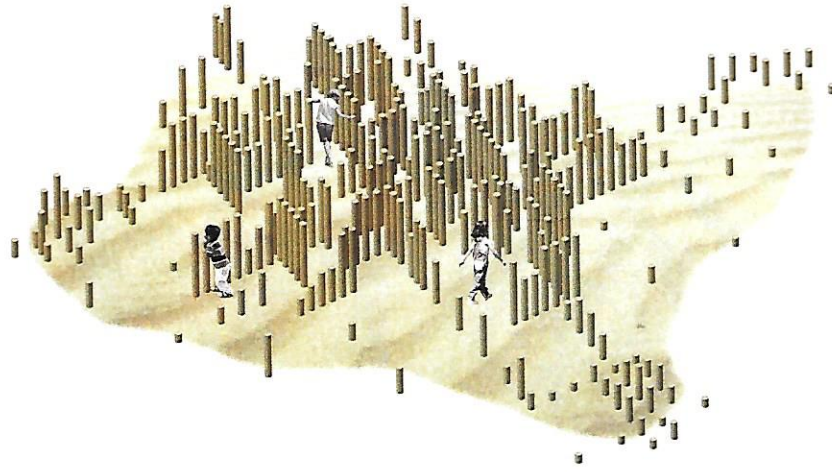
of Berlin's unique green character and limited finances, a nonprofit, Grün Berlin, was established in the 1980s. Beyond simply maintaining some of Berlin's existing parks and gardens, the organization develops new public spaces. Grün Berlin oversaw Gleisdreieck as an official city project from conception to competition and construction, and now the organization maintains the park. Leonard Grosch, a partner with Atelier Loidl, notes, "The districts adjacent had no plans to add staff to maintain Gleisdreieck on their own. They struggle to maintain what they have now—and Gleisdreieck would have added over 20 hectares to that!" Gleisdreieck is impeccably maintained by Grün Berlin, and it shows little obvious evidence of its riotous popularity, unlike many other parks in the city.

Grün Berlin is quite innovative, like the Bryant Park Conservancy, in its attention to branding, development opportunities, and partnerships—though unlike BPC, it is a public entity. Gleisdreieck benefits from this kind of progressive thinking immensely, and it has been, through no coincidence, a catalyst for formidable investment and development in the adjacent areas.



ABOVE
The masterful playgrounds at Gleisdreieck were all individually designed using a rigorous process of testing. The result is unique places full of the potential for discovery and imagination.

LEFT
Exciting in model, even better in person.

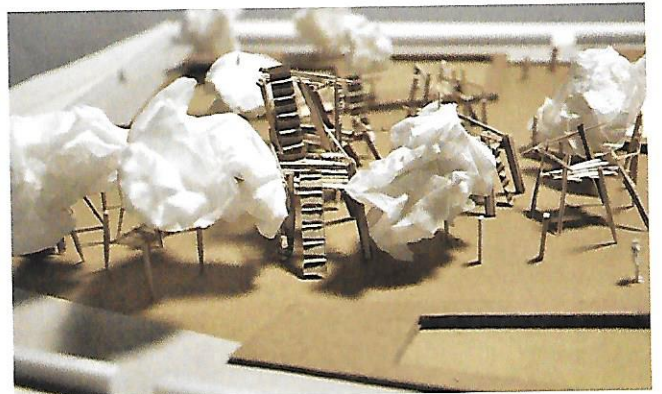
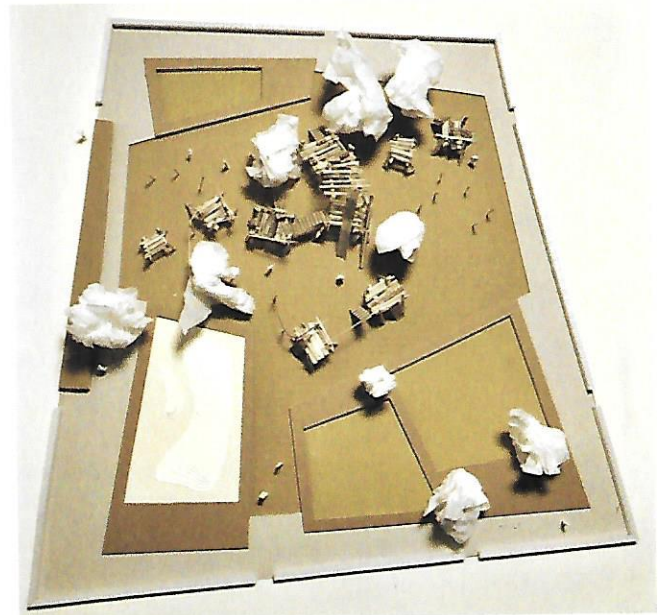


LEFT AND BELOW
Digital and analog
models were part
of the design process.

The edges of the park are peppered with cranes and construction, erecting new buildings and refurbishing the old. The park is marketed as a significant amenity—getting beyond typical passive assumptions of the positive qualities of parks to bring much-needed development to help stitch the city back together. Grün Berlin seems to attract and leverage financing well. This includes the financial functions of Gleisdreieck in a rather clever way.

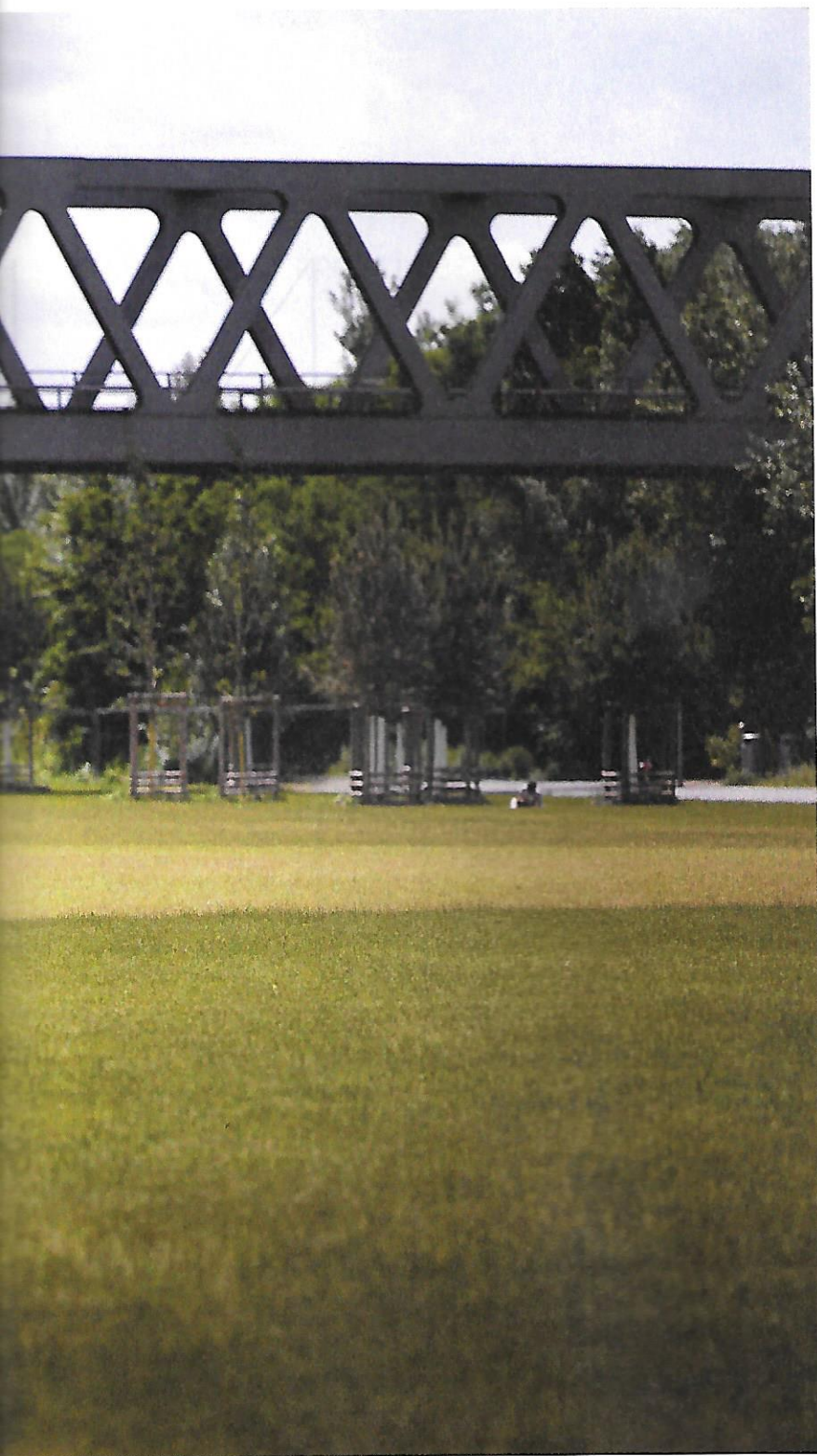
Landscape architecture is a constantly developing medium, dealing in temporality and change over time. Often, this does not jibe well with typical construction and maintenance time frames. Grün Berlin supplied funding to address this: 200,000 euros were set aside for postconstruction alterations. Atelier Loidl and Grün Berlin will use the funds in coalition to respond to changes in use, flaws in design, and the vagaries of landscape as a living element. In this way, the postconstruction funding allows a flexible approach and a more realistic timeline for the landscape architecture design services and construction—and the landscape as a medium.

Amid the layers of use and history, along with the openings that destruction can bring, Gleisdreieck has fast become a very successful urban park, in terms of numbers of visitors, adjacent urban improvement, and positive critical response. The complex history of the site, as much a product of the war as simple contemporary urban planning, and the citizens' initiative are legible on the site,





ABOVE
Wartime destruction left open space for the development of places like Gleisdreieck. Careful design and respect for the particulars of place have resulted in a truly excellent large urban park.



but none of it overbearingly present. The park became its own place, a whole from many parts. There is an overarching joy in the space, an experience of open vistas and play: places to let the imagination skip off into the distance, if only for 20 minutes.

Big parks must do a lot of work in a city, as they both unite and divide space. With the establishment of this new large space for recreation in the center of Berlin, the work of parks and the weight of the past at Gleisdreieck have been brought to an elegant and light conclusion, one with the ending “to be continued.” ●

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Project Credits

ARCHITECT ATELIER LOIDL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, BERLIN (LEONARD GROSCH, BERND JOOSTEN, AND LORENZ KEHL, PARTNERS; FELIX SCHWARZ AND ANDREAS LIPP, STAFF). **CLIENT** LAND BERLIN/STATE OF BERLIN, REPRESENTED BY GRÜN BERLIN, BERLIN (CHRISTOPH SCHMIDT, MANAGING DIRECTOR). **CONSTRUCTION SITE MANAGEMENT** BREIMANN BRUUN SIMONS LANDSCAPE ENGINEERING GMBH, BERLIN. **WATER MANAGEMENT ON SITE** MÜLLER KALCHREUTH, PLANUNGSGESSELLSCHAFT FÜR WASSERWIRTSCHAFT MBH, BERLIN. **STRUCTURAL ENGINEER** IFB FROHLOFF STAFFA KÜHL ECKER, BERLIN. **ENERGY AND LIGHTING DESIGN** INGENIEURBÜRO I. ACKER, BERLIN. **CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES** OTTO KITTEL GMBH & CO. LANDSCHAFTSBAU; ECKHARD GARBE GMBH, GARTEN-, LANDSCHAFTS- UND SPORTPLATZBAU; SCHUBERT ZÄUNE; MODELBAU STEIN GMBH; KELLNER STECKFIGUREN; TRP BAU GMBH; FHS HOLZTECHNIK FREIZEIT-, HOLZ- UND SPIELGERÄTE GMBH; AND H. LORBERG BAUMSCHULERZEUGNISSE GMBH & CO. KG.