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### *Title*

Whose park is it?

Transferring political design approaches from Emscher to Reconquista

### *Format:*

Research

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The politics of (park) design

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## **Extended abstract**

### *Introduction*

Motivated by a transdisciplinary cooperation between the landscape department of SLU university (Malmö, Sweden) and the urbanism department of UBA university (Buenos Aires, Argentina), started in 2015 and aiming at developing knowledge on the upgrading of post-industrial urban water landscapes, this research involves a team of teachers and master students in the elaboration of strategies and experimental design approaches for the upgrading of the Reconquista river basin area, suffering from heavy environmental pollution and social marginalisation. The research project aims to transfer knowledge retrieved from a case study of the Emscher river basin area that managed to instate a comprehensive environmental, spatial and social upgrading programme since the 1980s as a politically motivated experiment based on an extended park concept, conceived and partly carried out during the period of the IBA Emscher Park 1989-1999, and ongoing since. The success factors include fostering the integration of large-scale planning and small-scale interventions, of environmental engineering and cultural programming, of social and spatial instruments – a transdisciplinary approach aiming at economic restructuring while embracing landscape narratives, such as the ‘Emscher Landschaftspark’.

### *Research question*

This research asks how strategic transdisciplinary knowledge (understood as political) and narratives (involving landscape terminology such as the ‘park’) can be forged and transferred from the Emscher to the Reconquista project in view of upgrading its marginalised post-industrial urban water landscape, and in view of extracting generalisable methods.

### *State of the art*

Numerous publications in the field of regional planning and urbanism have accompanied the Emscher transformation since the IBA Emscher Park start in the late 1980s, first of all in the region, throughout

Germany and in the German speaking countries, later also internationally. In the past decade the culture and leisure landmarks of the transformed region, like Zeche Zollverein and Gasometer Oberhausen, have attracted broader audiences and opened new economic sources, supporting structural change in the region. However, the Emscher transformation project has not yet been studied from designerly vantage points, based on a political interpretation of this transdisciplinary project combining large-scale hydraulic engineering with small-scale community projects while understanding public space design as socio-spatial interventions – lessons that are fruitful to shape the starting upgrading projects in the Reconquista river basin.

#### *Method/ sources*

In the theoretical outset of our research, we draw on the definition of the European Landscape Convention of 2000: ‘Landscape’ means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors. ‘Park design’ is then subject to both natural processes (water regimes) and human practices (urbanisation and water engineering), shaping complex cultural interrelationships which can be investigated through a method mix focussing on qualitative methods stemming from landscape architecture and urban design.

Through literature study, interviews with main authorities and actors, repeated fieldwork, and long-term observation of the ongoing transformation the Emscher case has delivered empirical material, methodological clues and research networks for the transfer project. The authors’ previous research into site-specific design and best practice translations (Diedrich 2013, Diedrich and Lindholm and Kahn 2015), action research (Janich 2011, 2009) and education-based research by design projects (Diedrich and Janich 2016) provides the theoretical and methodological framework for this research project. The present research serves as a kick-start for a longer term Reconquista upgrading project, in need of larger actor networks aiming at disclosing international funding.

#### *Findings*

The political wish to place the ‘park’ in the centre of this urban transformation of the Emscher river basin was expressed through the name the regional government gave to the initiative: IBA Emscher Park. Intentionally established as a public development company outside of the public administration, its aim was to involve a multitude of public and private bodies as initial sponsors, in view of creating a sound economic base and a true enrooting in society on the long term. Managerial and entrepreneurial development strategies were complemented by a clear orientation on spatial design interventions. To date the supra-municipal association of Regionalverband Ruhrgebiet, municipalities, regional authorities, and the public water company Emschergenossenschaft, further develop the so-called Emscher Landscape Park, based again on an extended concept of the ‘park’, which this research interprets as a political construct involving many actors of society, business, and government in the construing and constructing of an urban water landscape.

The Reconquista river basin in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region features agricultural expanses upstream, an accumulation of industry, waste dumps and service facilities midstream, gated communities downstream, and ever growing informal settlements along the flood-prone areas mid- and downstream. This urban water landscape features catastrophic environmental conditions, calling for heavy water infrastructure improvement, but they have also been subject to innovative urban change-making processes that have emerged during the past decade under the auspices of the public authorities in cooperation with the local communities and designers focused on public space.

However, there are numerous knowledge gaps related to the interaction between large-scale water infrastructure planning and small-scale socio-spatial interventions in the urban communities. This is why this research develops a politically oriented strategy taking over ideas from the park concept shaped in the Emscher upgrading project.

#### *Conclusions*

Park politics, enacted in the design of public spaces, can be seen as a powerful tool for the transformation of post-industrial urban water landscapes and to improve the level of socio-territorial integration in marginalised environments while tackling environmental problems, as needed in the Reconquista river basin. Through transfer operations from a ‘political park’ project in the Emscher river basin, this research provides guidelines for a social and spatial urban upgrading. It does so through the recognition of the collective and inclusive capital inherent in public space, and of the

agency of design to generate powerful narratives and concrete experiments. On this basis the research highlights the potential of landscape architecture and urban design to forward a more political understanding of urban landscapes.

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### Images

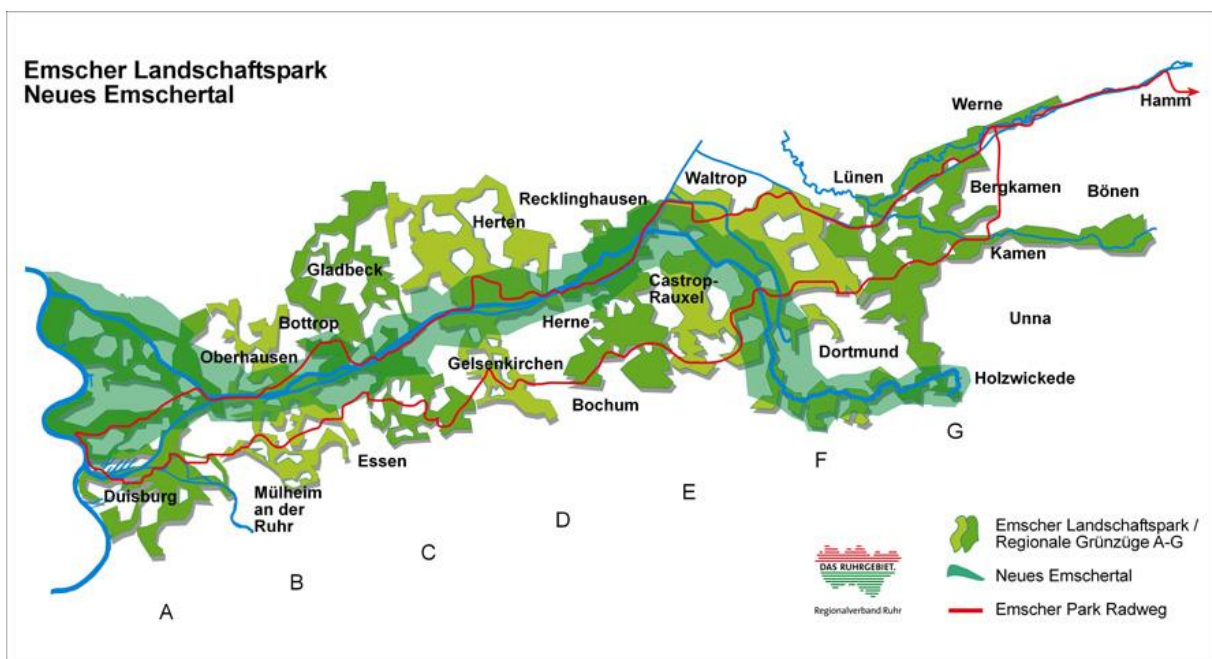


Fig 1. Plan of Emscher Landschaftspark (source: Regionalverband Ruhrgebiet)



Fig 2. River banks in an informal settlement of the Reconquista urban landscape (photographer: Flavio Janches)



Fig 3. Design proposal for a 'park strip' in San Fernando, downstream Reconquista (designer: BJC architects)

## CVs

Lisa Diedrich studied architecture and urbanism in Paris, Marseille and Stuttgart, and landscape architecture at the University of Copenhagen, where she received her doctoral degree. She currently works as a professor of landscape architecture at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) in Alnarp/ Malmö and runs the research platform SLU Urban Futures. From her Berlin based office she also works as a critic and consultant for international clients in practice and academia, inter alia as the editor-in-chief of the book series *Landscape Architecture Europe* and as co-editor-in-chief of *'scape the international magazine for landscape architecture and urbanism*.

Flavio Janches studied architecture at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, holds a postgraduate degree in urban design from the same institution, and received his doctoral degree in urbanism from Delft University of Technology. He currently works as a professor of architecture and urban design at the University of Buenos Aires where he also directs the Postgraduate Program in Strategies and Design for Cities and Territories. In parallel he collaborates with TU Delft as a Guest Researcher at the Chair of Spatial Planning and Strategies. Janches also works as a practicing architect and urban designer, being a partner in the office BJC architects in Buenos Aires.