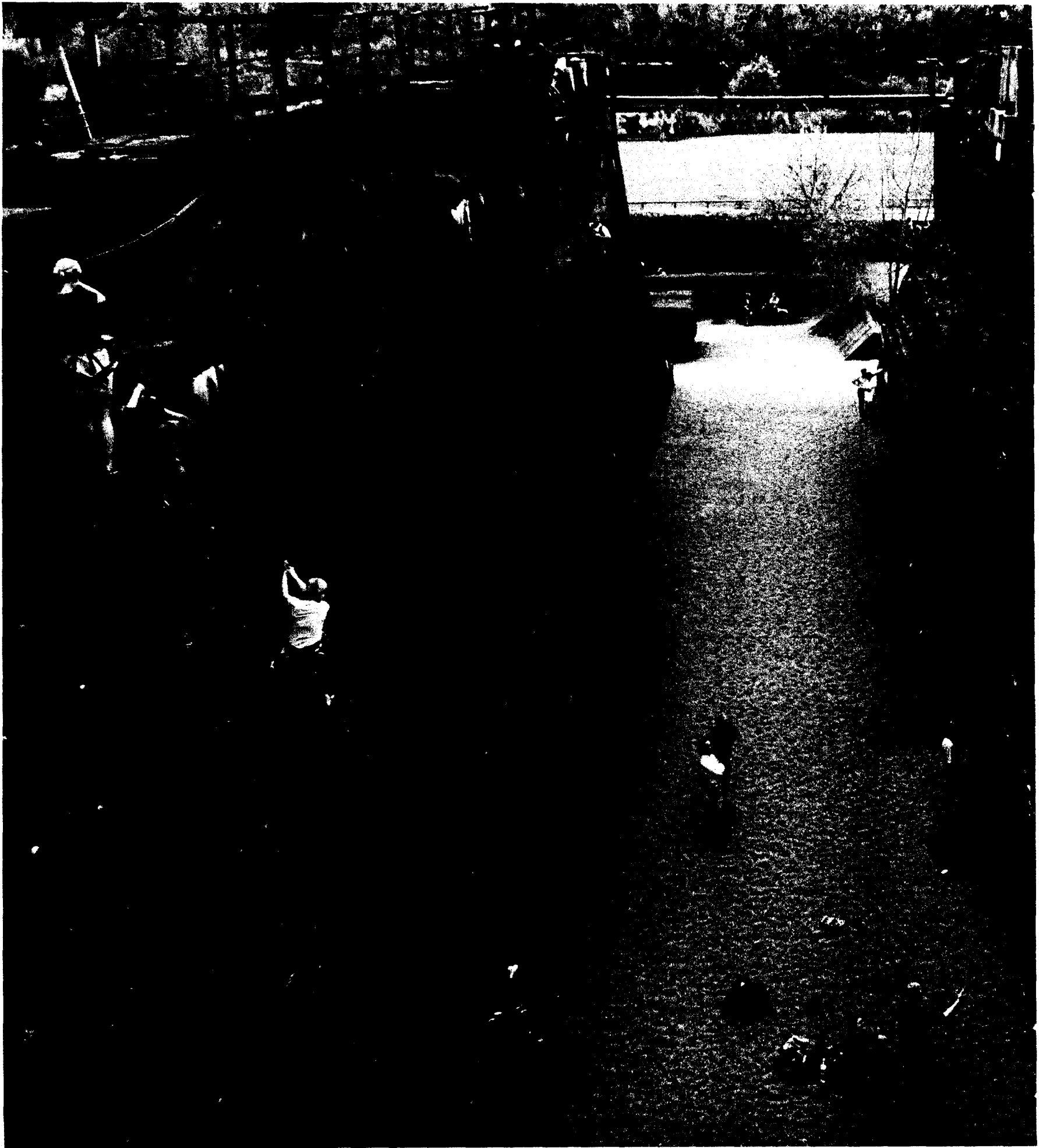


The Anti-Olmsted

Arthur Lubow

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Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord
DUISBURG, GERMANY



The
**ANTI-
OLMSTED**

SWIMMING IN THE GAS TANK.
GARDENING IN THE ORE BUNKER.
IN DUISBURG, GERMANY,
PETER LATZ HAS TURNED BLIGHTED
FACTORY RUINS INTO A GREAT
URBAN PARK BY LEAVING THE BLIGHT
AND RUINS INTACT.

By Arthur Lubow

Photographs by Harf Zimmermann

Three blast furnaces loom over Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord like rusting dragons, their flaming mouths silenced, their brown scaly skin slowly flaking away. The pipes that once water-cooled the pig-iron mills and siphoned off gases still snake and coil, but they are drained and lifeless. In 1985, as part of a wave of industrial shutdowns that changed the character of the Ruhr Valley, the Thyssen plant in Duisburg closed. The nightmarish hulks that remained — almost mythic in their lurid grandeur — stood stranded, presumed doomed. The notion that they would come back to life in the quintessential park of the early 21st century seemed about as probable as sighting a pterosaur in flight overhead.

They don't make parks the way they used to;

indeed, someone raised on Frederick Law Olmsted may have trouble seeing how Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord lives up to its German name as "a landscape park." When Olmsted designed Central Park with Calvert Vaux in the mid-19th century, he intended "the spaciousness and tranquillity of a charming bit of rural landscape" to afford "the most agreeable contrast to the confinement, bustle and monotonous street-division of the city." Refreshment is still what a park promises, but the contrast no longer lies between greenery and cement. Unlike Olmsted, who used his acreage as a buffer against the commotion of urban existence, Peter Latz, the designer of Duisburg-Nord, has created a large-

'LANDSCAPE IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF THE TOWN,' LATZ SAYS. 'LANDSCAPE IS CULTURE.'

scale recreation zone (570 acres, or two-thirds the size of Central Park) that is unmistakably man-made and that extends into the gritty neighboring communities. By leaving blast furnaces, gas tanks and storage bunkers intact, he implicitly debunks the fantasy of taking refuge in pristine nature. "Landscape is not the opposite of the town," says Latz, a short, trim man of 65 with wavy hair and a graying beard. "Landscape is culture."

People easily forget that even a park like Central Park is totally artificial. They are meant to forget. Olmsted's team imported tons of topsoil, moved boulders, drained swamps, excavated lakes and planted thousands of trees, all to achieve a landscape that appears natural. Most of the competing proposals for Duisburg-Nord would have erased the industrial structures. "Peter Latz may have been the only one to keep everything," says James Corner, a founder of the New York-based Field Operations, which is planning a park for another blighted site, the 2,200-acre Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. "Strategically, it was very savvy." Because the scheme didn't call for an instant makeover, the park could be developed with incremental infusions of cash. Beyond its fiscal practicality, Latz's plan for Duisburg-Nord offered the attraction of honesty. It deferred to the history of a densely populated and deeply scarred terrain, where virgin verdure seems as remote as Eden.

The typical site for a large urban park today is a mothballed industrial plant, a polluted brown-

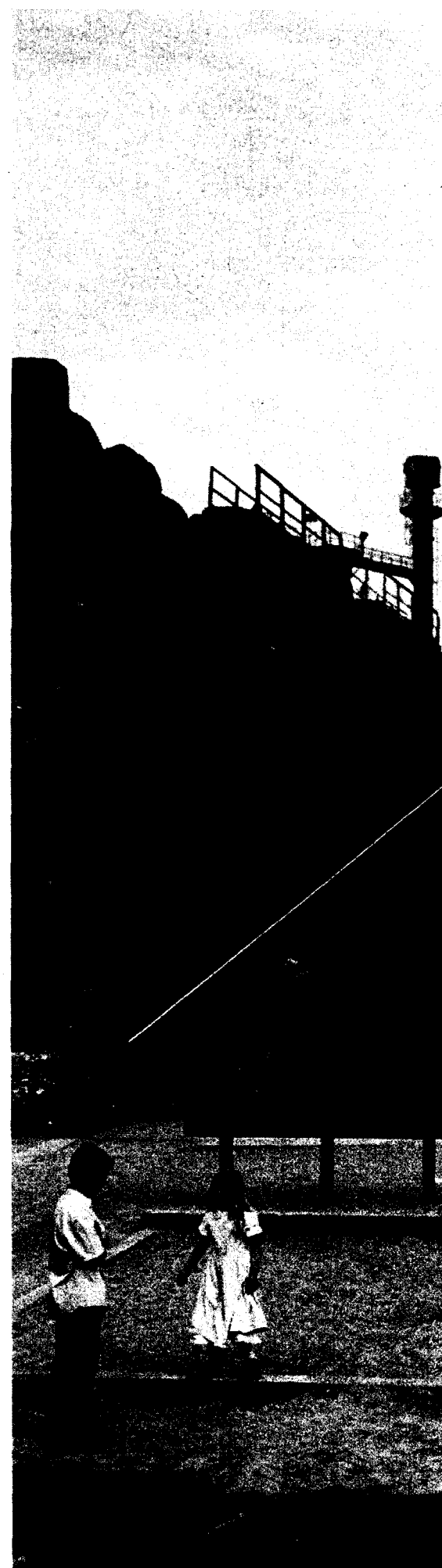
field or a decommissioned military base. In metropolitan centers, no other large tracts of land are available. "Everywhere I go, I see similar kinds of problems," said Niall Kirkwood, chairman of the landscape architecture department at the Harvard Design School. Kirkwood, who specializes in brownfield reclamation, had just returned from Seoul when I spoke with him in March. "Over a four-year period," he told me, "they turned their landfill into a brand-new park, bigger than Fresh Kills. In Belfast, they're starting to look at brownfields in shipbuilding areas. Large pieces of land all over the world are waiting to be reborn."

The most prominent predecessor of Duisburg-Nord is Gas Works Park in Seattle, constructed in the 1970's by the landscape architect Richard Haag on the grounds of an abandoned coal-and-oil-processing plant. Haag appreciated the aesthetic merits of buildings that most observers dismissed as useless fossils. Situated on the edge of Lake Union near the heart of the city, the chimneys and compressors of the old plant now mirror the Seattle skyline like ruins of a previous civilization.

Latz's Duisburg-Nord — major work on which was completed in 1999 — carries on this tradition. Latz recognized that the *genius loci* of a postindustrial park can reside in blast furnaces and drainage ditches, just as for an 18th-century English garden it was found in wooded groves and cascading streams. Duisburg-Nord, however, takes things even further than Gas Works Park. At Duisburg-Nord, the ruins can be enjoyed actively. Mountaineers practice rappelling on container walls. Scuba divers descend into the old gasometer. Gardens flourish within the confines of ore bunkers. Revelers come on weekend nights for a light show. The park is a descendant of the *Volkespark*, the innovative German model developed in the early 20th century to provide urban residents with playing fields and other opportunities for energetic recreation, not quiet contemplation. The magic of Duisburg-Nord is that the old industrial structures on the site are left virtually unchanged in form, and the architect never prescribed a specific program for how they should be reused. "My design is normally quite neutral," Latz says. "It gives people the opportunity to interpret the land in their own way."

The scuba diver began after Latz engaged a professional diver to explore which underground tunnels could be used to channel rainwater. Local enthusiasts then volunteered to help clean the tunnels out. Once the task was accomplished, the amateur divers cast their eyes on the 50-foot-deep gasometer tank. They drained it, placed a motorboat wreck that they salvaged from the Rhine on the bottom, refilled the tank with clean water and established it as the center of a dive club. "Now it is part of normal life, and nobody remembers how it started," Latz says.

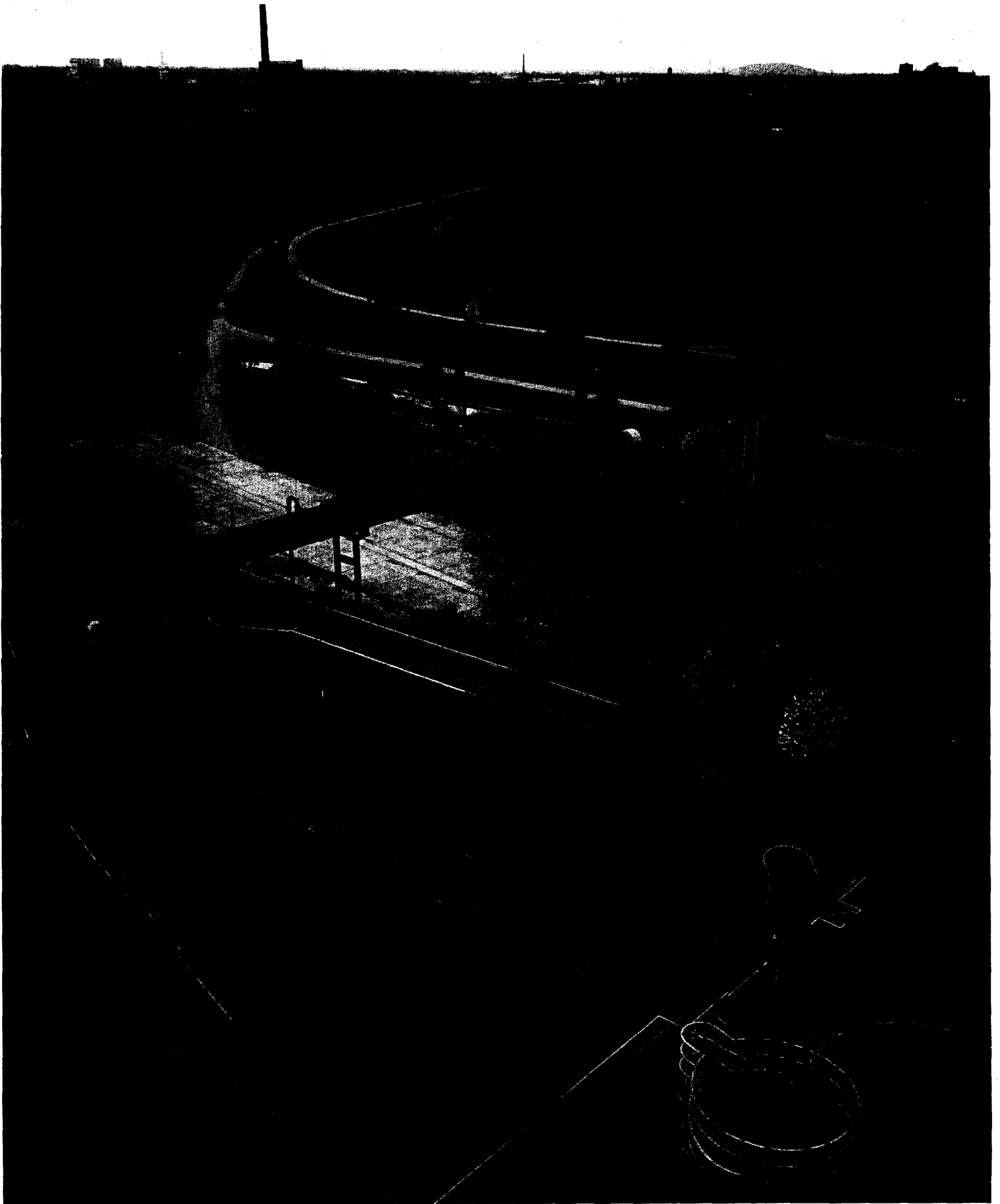
Arthur Lubow is a contributing writer for the magazine.





Play Among the Ruins

WHERE MILLIONS OF TONS OF PIG IRON WERE PRODUCED FROM 1891 TO 1985, A PLAYGROUND.



Just last fall, an elevated railroad track was converted into a promenade, which provided an unanticipated opportunity for young Muslim women who live in an adjacent Turkish immigrant community. "Before, it was not permitted for the girls to go out on their own," Latz says. However, approximately a quarter-mile of the new walkway is visible from the upper stories of the houses at the edge of the park. "It is always possible to see the promenade," he says, "and for that reason, the girls can use it." A railway built in the early 20th century to transport coal and iron ore now enables young women to escape from their homes for an afternoon stroll.

The German-born Latz says that when he designed his first postindustrial park, in Saarbrücken, a city in what was then West Germany, he had never heard of Gas Works Park in Seattle. What he had in mind were Renaissance gardens, even if he was working not with the cypress trees and marble slabs of Italy but the industrial rubble of the bombed-out Saarland. Having grown up there during World War II and its aftermath, he knew the materials well. In 1979, when he and his partners designed a proposal to remake the derelict river port in Saarbrücken, they began with conventional solutions. "We made plans for an English garden and for a formal garden," says Latz, who, in partnership with his wife, Anne-liese, and their son, now has a landscape-architecture firm located near Munich. "We worked through all the clichés and then put them in the trash." The remnants of the Saarbrücken coal dock lay buried under piles of debris. Pulling the old stones out of garbage heaps, Latz constructed walls and pavings for a 22-acre multilevel park that used many of the old foundations and recalled both the port's former function and its wartime destruction.

Still, the postindustrial Harbor Island park in Saarbrücken won't evoke a Renaissance garden unless you understand that what Latz admires in those 16th-century gardens is their multiplicity of meanings. "In a Renaissance garden, you can see in half an hour three or four different information layers," he says. "You have a wonderful garden and blossoms, and you have a sculpture. Why do you have a sculpture? It is not the duke and his wife, it is a hero of Roman or Greek times. Then you have different styles of columns. Then the references to the theater and to literary texts." Filled with allusions and subtleties, the cultivated Renaissance garden required a high level of cultivation in the visitor. Yet, without comprehending any of the references, the contemporary tourist at the Villa d'Este or the Villa Lante may still appreciate the beauty of the place.

Latz wanted Duisburg-Nord to contain multiple references that visitors might or might not pick up on. "Everyone who uses the park has a different park," he says. "Someone is coming to

study old blast furnaces, and someone is coming to plant a small garden. Totally different." Latz's notion of landscape architecture has a strong theoretical component. "Landscapes as real objects don't exist," he says. "We select some information from the surroundings and make an idea in our head. Each person has another method to combine the information. There are different information layers, and you may understand only one or two, but somebody else may understand 50."

This airy speculation has real-world consequences. In a garden like the Villa Orsini at Bomarzo north of Rome, the Renaissance vis-

course of the last century, rail tracks had been laid successively for the mining companies, private railroads and the state, with each new self-contained rail system being constructed on its own level. Latz saw that once the tracks were pulled up, these three rail routes could be retained as bicycle and pedestrian paths, providing circulation arteries for the new park. It was a penny-pinching approach that appealed to IBA. It also suited Latz's philosophy. "It is the lowest level of what you can do in a park," he says. "That was our idea, to make a landscape with the same feeling, and to avoid a high investment on small spaces." The cost so far has been about \$24 million to ren-

A POSTINDUSTRIAL PARK'S SPIRIT RESIDES IN BLAST FURNACES AND DRAINAGE DITCHES. JUST AS FOR AN 18TH-CENTURY GARDEN IT WAS FOUND IN WOODED GROVES AND CASCADING STREAMS.

itor followed a specified path in which a narrative, typically expounded in stone inscriptions, unfolded. Less obviously, in the later English landscape-garden tradition to which Central Park belongs, the visitor was brought to different prospects from which a designed vista could be enjoyed. At Duisburg-Nord, Latz did not define preferred vantage points. "I think that that is the most important success of this park, to see things from everywhere," he says.

Duisburg-Nord Landschaftspark is part of a 45-mile-long string of parks that, under the collective name of Emscher Landscape Park, was created in the last decade of the 20th century. The name itself was a kind of provocation, because the Emscher River throughout the century had been a stinking waste-water ditch, sluicing away the effluvia of industrial mills and mining communities. Now that those mills were closing, a partnership of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, municipal governments and private companies in 1991 staged a competition — overseen by a commission, the Internationale Bauausstellung, or IBA — for the redevelopment of these sites. Duisburg-Nord was the first major project. "Peter Latz won this competition because he had a very clean drawing of the harp of the iron tracks of the trains," says Michael Schwarze-Rodrian, a civil engineer who is developing a master plan for Emscher Landscape Park. "He said, 'Let's work with the objects and put green in between.'" Over the

ovate the buildings and another \$24 million on the grounds. By keeping the three levels of sinuous paths, Latz also achieved his desired renunciation: abdicating the power of the landscape architect to dictate vista points. From high and low, in any sequence, the entire park is on view.

Wondering what Latz himself saw, I toured the park with him for two days in late March. From my point of view, the timing was bad because the weather was unseasonably cold. For Latz, the moment was unfortunate because the daffodils were in bloom. Some years ago, without consulting him, the municipal authorities planted thousands of daffodils on the slag heaps that constitute a major topographical feature of Duisburg-Nord. Latz has nothing against bulbs: he himself included drifts of 22,000 blue and white scilla in the park. But to his eyes, the colors of the scilla coordinate attractively with the browns, yellows, reds and oranges of the ore-stained concrete and rusting iron. The daffodils make him shake his head ruefully. "There are all these trees in blossom," he says. "I have all these beautiful little blue blossoms. But these unnatural yellow daffodils — I couldn't believe it."

Coming from Latz, it was a funny comment, because in his lexicon "unnatural" is usually a quality to be defended, not derided. The major conflicts that arose in planning the park pitted him against those who wanted to restore what they called a natural order. The notion is ludicrous to him. "This situation is highly artificial," he says. "Everyone knows that the cherry trees are not woods, not natural. This place has nothing to do with untouched nature." His most dif-

ficult challenge was cleaning up the Emscher. Once a meandering river, it had been converted early in the last century into a drainage ditch. With great difficulty, Latz channeled the dirty water into underground tunnels and then filled the canal with collected rainwater. The ditch runs for two miles, with the widest part — a little over a third of a mile — following the strict orthogonal path laid out by civil engineers. Nature-conservation advocates wanted the Emscher to meander once again, as it had before man interfered. But there was a problem. “No one can find a natural river here,” Latz says. As they came to understand the process, the conservationists were persuaded to desist and allow the Emscher to remain unabashedly artificial. “If you have to carve the meander with a digger, even the nature-conservation people don’t want it,” Schwarze-Rodrian, the planner, says. In the summer, sunbathers now bask on rectangular docks that have been erected alongside the straight-edged canal.

There was a similar debate over the exotic plants that had colonized this man-made landscape. Parts of the park are tinted a “poison yellow” in February, Latz says, and a brownish-red in autumn by mosses that are native to Norway and Sweden. Clumps of South African yellow

pussey willows had been planted. Less obviously, on the border of one of the bicycle paths, the old hawthorn hedges, which would soon be white with flowers, had grown up on their own — “naturally,” one might say — because they seemed to be resistant to the herbicides that were used for decades to suppress weeds along the railroad tracks. To see Latz’s subtlest intervention, you must climb 200 feet to the viewing platform that was opened atop one of the blast furnaces. From that vantage point, you can see three levels of former railroad tracks and concentric rings of sloping earth. Before Latz had them cleared, these contours were obscured by birch trees and blackberry vines. He calls it a form of “land art” that he has not constructed, just exposed. But it is plausible that Michael Heizer or Walter De Maria, and not anonymous miners and construction crews, might have created this configuration of furrowed earth.

The land-art movement that emerged in the United States in the late 60’s has had a big impact on contemporary landscape architecture. The work of Robert Smithson (best known for “Spiral Jetty,” an earthwork that most of the time is submerged in the Great Salt Lake of Utah) is particularly influential. “Smithson was the one who worked with geological processes,

that shielded the wall-mounted wires: the only conduit tubing available to the restaurant’s designer was rustproof. Latz himself had better luck a hundred yards away when he built the Piazza Metallica, a plaza that is surrounded by giant industrial structures in the same way that a Renaissance piazza is ringed by palazzos. To pave his postindustrial piazza, Latz was able to transport 49 massive iron plates that had lined the bottom of a foundry pit on the property. Eroded by the molten metal poured over them and continuing to corrode over time, the floor grid squares of the Piazza Metallica exude a malignant beauty that is very much in the spirit of the place.

Once the infrastructure of Duisburg-Nord was largely completed in 1999, the authorities governing Emscher Landscape Park directed scarce funds to other projects. As a result, Duisburg-Nord is an outline that is waiting to be colored in. Latz harbors ambitious schemes for the mineral-stained concrete bunkers that once held ore and coke. He had chevron-topped doorways cut through the thick walls, so the bunkers now resemble the garden rooms that, in a traditional park, are bounded by hedges of yew or hornbeam. (Typically, Latz had the cut-out concrete pieces bound with cables and left the bundles in or near each enclosure; seen from above, they are both illustrative and beautiful.) In one of these bunkers, a grass rectangle is framed with gravel and culminates in a small, formal copse of beeches. Another has espaliered trees on one side and climbing vines on two other sides. In a third, boxwood is planted in a succession of rippling waves. In most, however, birches and buddleias sprout. Latz would like to leave some of these untouched and wild, but others he would transform substantially. “The idea was to cover these walls with climbing plants, and then to have other plants, especially plants of other times, like the ones the coal comes from — ferns, something like this,” he says. “Not little ferns, but very big ones. And you would have different climates — one misty, one normal, one dry. And then you would have the experience — if you have these walls, you can do this — of special acoustics and special smells. The original proposal was to make special gardens in all parts of the park.”

At one time, he wanted to convert some of the larger bunkers into an art gallery, but that project proved unrealistically expensive. He says he still hopes, however, to install art projects that would demonstrate his belief that parks revolve around culture, not nature. “These walls make a special sound,” he says. “One artist had the idea for a music roof. People can come in and the music follows the visitor as he moves through.” Another

ANY CHANGES THAT OBSCURED DUISBURG-NORD’S GRITTY HISTORY LATZ FOUND REPUGNANT A MORAL AND AESTHETIC VIOLATION.


flowers appear in autumn. Both the mosses and the yellow flowers probably first arrived in Duisburg as stowaways on shipments of iron ore. (Although local mines supplied coal to the blast furnaces, iron had to be imported.) Surveying the park, ecologists found some 200 plants that are not native to northern Germany. Conservationists favored extirpating these exotics, while Latz wanted to educate the gardeners in how to care for the plants, some of which are rare. After a while, the back-and-forth took on a discomfiting resemblance to the controversy over German immigration policy: What is truly native, and how far back do you go? Once again, Latz prevailed. The plants stayed.

Walking through the park with Latz, I could feel a melting away in my mind of the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial. It was apparent that the hills rising above the flat terrain were not volcanic deposits or sedimentary upthrusts: they were heaps of slag, the highly alkaline residue of the iron-making process, on which wild buddleias sprouted and

crystallization processes, growth processes and also entropy,” James Corner says. “He didn’t only think of processes as producing something but also as decaying and becoming something else. That’s a very significant insight.”

Landscape architects have always been aware that their creations unfold over time. “You set a process in train where you alter things to a certain point and let natural processes proceed but keep an eye on them,” says Alan Tate, head of the landscape-architecture department at the University of Manitoba who is the author of “Great City Parks.” “When you look at something like Central Park, it’s become an icon, ageless and timeless — Prospect Park also. But they’re just as much places with process and change going on as Fresh Kills or Duisburg-Nord.”

The difference is that a park like Duisburg-Nord displays its temporality as proudly as its artificiality. Latz likes visible decay. When we ate dinner in a restaurant that has been inserted into the renovated power transformer station, he pointed regretfully to a shiny zinc-coated tubing



Industry Transformed Into Art

"THIS PLACE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH UNTOUCHED NATURE."

bunker would be converted into what sounded to me like a Chuck Close garden room. The walls would be drilled with holes, big and small, that would be filled with black color, like the pixels that make up half-tone illustrations in a newspaper. The pattern would be apparent only from a distance. "Nobody can read it as a whole," Latz says. "Everybody has to make an intervention for his own story. It's typical for landscape. Landscape is readable, but normally not as a whole."

The catwalks and metal bridges that Latz has inserted on different levels of the park are painted blue, to signal their accessibility. Everything else he has left its original color. His intrusions in the park have been remarkably delicate, taking care with each alteration to leave visible what was there before. "These landscapes are palimpsests," Alan Tate says. "No matter how little we intervene, we're putting another layer on top of what was there previously." The concept of the architectural palimpsest has been explored, starting in the 1980's, by Peter Eisenman, who rigorously sought to bring to the surface the erased history of a site (most notably at the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts in Columbus, Ohio). At Duisburg-Nord, Latz inherited a site whose past was still apparent. Any changes that obscured that history he found repugnant — an aesthetic and moral violation.

Fifteen years ago, when Latz had just finished Harbor Island in Saarbrücken and was about to begin working on Duisburg-Nord, many observers, much to his dismay, associated his work with other new parks in Barcelona and Paris that

were reclaiming industrial sites. One of the most conspicuous projects was Parc André-Citroën in Paris, on 35 acres that once held an automobile factory. "I was just the opposite," Latz says. "For me, it was important to have history and to have the park. The typical situation, as at Citroën, was to avoid remembering the history. There is nothing, only the name, that is Parc Citroën. That was the idea, to avoid the industrial memory, and to give this area to the middle class. There are expensive, upper-middle-class houses by the park now." Around Duisburg-Nord, the revitalization of the former blast furnaces into a park has sparked a renaissance in the dilapidated bordering communities; however, the newly renovated houses are still small, multi-unit dwellings. These neighborhoods remain working class and lower middle class. Latz devoted much attention to puncturing the walls of the old factory and to creating plazas and promenades on the boundaries to welcome the residents of these communities into the park. "It was very important to us always to spread the fingers as far as possible," he says. "I think some people just use these areas and never go into the big park." In the mornings, they exercise their dogs, and in the evenings, they stroll.

The big park itself retains some of its brooding menace. "This was a forbidden city, with a wall around it," Schwarze-Rodrian says. "Only the steelworkers went in — not the families, not the children." A toxic afterglow lingers, both in the imagination and in reality. Some parts of the park are still too poisoned to use. The deadliest chemicals — including 500 tons of arsenic mud

— were dug up, enclosed in boxes and buried deep in an old mine. Other less dangerous areas have been fenced off and capped with clean material. Over time, the heat of the sun will dissipate the polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons that are the carcinogenic residue of the industrial processes. Latz has contoured these toxic mounds to be wedge-shaped and obviously artificial to remind people to keep their hands off. "It is necessary to remember that it is not nature here," he says. "It is not possible to dig down and take the material out. And you cannot plant trees that put their roots down, because then maybe you have the poison going into the leaves."

The European attitude toward brownfields is more relaxed than in the United States, where environmental agencies strictly control public access. In Gas Works Park in Seattle, for example, coal tar rising to the surface has led to portions of the park being closed off. "Our regulations put the Gas Works Park in the same category as a residential development," says the park's architect, Richard Haag, "which would mean that people are living there and children are playing there every day. It should be regulated as a commercial site." In Germany too, many are leery of brownfield parks. "People can be a little hysterical," Latz remarks. "I say to mothers: 'What are you doing with your children when you drive them to kindergarten and you have to fill the gas tank? Do you take them home first and then go to the gas station?' They say, 'Hey, that's not a problem.' I say, 'Exactly.'"

Even if these fears are dispelled through rational argument, the atmosphere of Duisburg-Nord will continue to be a little sinister. And so it should be. The Renaissance garden to which Duisburg-Nord is best compared is Bomarzo, where the Duke of Orsini in the mid-16th century converted a steep, unpromising slope into a woodland garden. The terrain was dotted with enormous boulders and rocky outcrops, which the duke's landscape architect carved into large figures, many of them ominous. In its original form, the garden must have been truly frightening, as a visitor suddenly came upon a forbidding figure that until the last moment had been masked by the trees. Today the landscape is more manicured, so that only on a misty winter day is some of the old effect achieved. I asked Latz if his park ever rose to such a level of romantic gloom. "Yesterday evening, there were some hours it was like a dragon with the mists," he said. "In wintertime especially, by 5 o'clock it is dark, and it is typically misty and it is very impressive." The Renaissance nostalgia for Pegasus, Neptune and Cerberus has been succeeded by our own selection of mythological monsters: the behemoths of heavy machinery. They loom over Duisburg-Nord, awe-inspiring but silent, and a bit forlorn. 🐉