

# FOUNDATIONS *for* REVIEW

THE GARDEN FESTIVAL IN URBAN PLANNING *and* DESIGN

ANDREW C. THEOKAS



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# **GROUNDS FOR REVIEW**

To my mother and father

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## PREFACE

Garden festivals uniquely precipitate and mark urban change with a celebratory, transformative and memorable event. Originating with the 1951 Hanover *Bundesgartenschau*, they have been identified with major reclamation projects, novel planning stratagems, major expositions of horticulture and public art, and the creation of new urban parks. Their influence on the urban scene, while not dominant, is sustained. Since Hanover there have been over fifty garden festivals, with seven more scheduled up to 2013. Despite occasional Asian and North American festivals they remain primarily a European phenomenon, with most having occurred in Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain. This study focuses on festivals in these three countries, which display similarities due to their more common occurrence.

The term 'garden festival' may be somewhat misleading to those who are not familiar with these projects. It is likely to conjure an image of a modest, small-scale event limited to domestic floriculture and with a short-term impact on urban life. Garden festivals are, as will be shown, almost the exact opposite in every respect. They offer a unique concordance of garden and urban culture and have a demonstrated potential to substantially improve the public realm so vital to the quality of our civic life.

This project began while I was a graduate student at the School of Design at Harvard University. A small travel grant presented the opportunity to visit an ongoing British garden festival and to visit the sites of its predecessor festivals. This initial study focused on British events, but it soon became clear that these were influenced by the rich tradition of German garden shows. The study then widened to include the German events, the Dutch Floriades, other legacy sites in France, Austria and Switzerland and more recent Asian and North American events. Several more exploratory trips followed and in the end over 15 sites were visited and revisited. What follows then has been garnered from numerous reports, published papers, articles, promotional literature and interview transcriptions as well as a compilation of selected photographs, masterplans and other graphic representations of festival landscapes. Additionally, several festival sites were visited and

explored twice – during the key exhibition stage and the following post-festival development phase. A reasonable account of any one festival project could itself fill a volume, so how to properly review the entire ‘festival movement’, if indeed such a thing exists? In the end I decided that, as disparate as these events may appear to be, they essentially operate on the basis of the same model. Therefore, considerable effort is expended in the first chapter to explain the components of this model and influences upon it in order to provide a contextual framework for later discussion.

What is the basic organizational strategy of a garden festival? How are they sanctioned? What distinguishes them from the more widely known ‘world’s fairs’? Is there such a thing as ‘festival park design’? Do festivals correlate with existing planning strategies or ordinances? Does it matter? Do they adapt to emergent trends in urban open space planning or do they consistently follow traditional approaches? These and similar questions are explored in what follows. In order to answer them I have attempted to move from the particular to the general. Several individual events are discussed in some detail but with an eye to their universal properties. One question, often asked but difficult to answer, is whether garden festivals are in fact *necessary*. Could the often heralded legacy sites of these festivals have been achieved through some alternative, less costly, less complex approach? Festival organizers will not admit their endeavours to be redundant to the process of urban change, and I agree. It is likely that in most cases a similar result would eventually have come about, but without the celebratory nature of a festival, not in the same time-frame and not with the same quality of site after-use.

This work, while primarily a retrospective analysis, also attempts to identify ways in which future events have the potential to improve the quality of the urban experience. The festival process has not been without its critics but, as will be seen, these projects are not easily evaluated. This is largely due to their complex, phased nature. They have the unique property, in principle, of developing two design schemes simultaneously for the same site. First comes the exhibition phase, requiring an infrastructure and masterplan peculiar to its own needs and circumstances. Subsequent to exhibition closure the site becomes a permanent open space, with use requirements substantially changed from those of the more differentiated exhibition environment. Ideally, the masterplan for the ultimate site condition is considered first, with the design of the exhibition subordinate to this. When this occurs, a festival will move from the exhibit to the after-use phase in a seamless and committed manner. But there are other important properties to

consider, such as economic benefits, visual impact, reclamation and environmental gains, and exhibition quality. In short, there can be no single definition of the 'successful' festival and no attempt is made to provide one here.

Through reviews of selected projects, I set out the challenges typical to the festival process. As will be seen, these are not consistently met. One festival will prove a success as a reclamation project, but will founder in post-festival follow-through. Another will have an 'overly commercial' exhibition phase, but will leave behind a new park of estimable quality. Perhaps the most important of these challenges, however, is the need to capitalize on the morphological, cultural and historical characteristics that make the site identifiable within the context of the city, thereby promoting the identity of a particular urban place. Whether this is achieved depends on the character and form of the post-festival site, and the coherence contributed to an open space system.

Following the introduction to the concepts and contexts of the festival process there are extensive reviews of the German, Dutch and British approaches. As noted above, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain have staged the majority of festivals and provide ample material for analysis. The British festivals have been discontinued, but are no less worthy of scrutiny for all that, if only to better understand the pitfalls on the path to successful post-festival development. Following reviews of selected events in these three countries, others in France, Switzerland, Austria, Japan, China, Canada and the US are also discussed. What these events have most in common is that they were all *horticultural* exhibitions, with each one demonstrating how indigenous culture is made manifest in the festival experience.

The final chapter identifies common themes, universal concepts and traditions as well as emergent trends. The focus of this comparative analysis is the open space production of these events. A key question is how and to what extent planning correlates with the ultimate quality of the final site condition, given that garden festivals are essentially self-contained processes that do not always reflect, or follow, local planning policies. In addition, I seek to cull from selected projects innovative or validating aesthetics of the spatial aspects of the urban experience. There can be considerable debate over just what qualifies as 'aesthetic'. Here we require that the urban landscape be understandable at a human scale and that it may be apprehended in terms of visual, as well as functional, patterns. The significant role of public art in these events is also primarily explored in the final chapter, although mentioned in earlier chapters.

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# INTRODUCTION

## What are Garden Festivals?

A garden festival may be thought of, roughly, as a world's fair but with a strong horticultural theme and presence. A large tract of derelict, abandoned or otherwise under-utilized urban land is acquired and made suitable for development. The site is 'trapped' for the duration of an exposition, typically five to six months. At the end of this period festival exhibits are dismantled and the site moves to a pre-determined final stage of development, usually, but not always, a new urban park.<sup>1</sup>

This book explores the role of the garden festival in modern urban planning and design. Originating in post-war Europe, they remain primarily a European phenomenon, but with their longevity and recent exports to Asia, Australia and North America the question arises of whether there exists a 'garden festival movement'. Wilson, in his account of the City Beautiful Movement, describes the particular incidents or features of a movement as 'incremental gain[s] for a broadly conceived vision'.<sup>2</sup> This 'vision', within the context of urban design and planning, ought to be identifiable through its ideology, mode of operation, and design elements. An application of these criteria demonstrates, however, that festivals are not consistent across cultures. German festivals, for example, may share an ideology based on 'nature in the city', but this was not an ideology voiced by their British counterparts, whose schemes focused more on employment and economic concerns. Further, while garden festivals seek to transform despoiled or under-utilized urban land, they diverge in the quality, purpose and style of the post-festival condition. Garden festivals, then, are highly complex episodes of markedly phased urban development and to group them all as a 'movement' is somewhat problematic – especially now that the British festivals have been discontinued. Nonetheless, differences in festival outcomes must not be exaggerated, since similarities of approach precipitating urban change outweigh dissimilarities in after-use design, and it is possible to speak of garden festivals as employing a common methodology and organizational structure, if not ideology or aesthetic.

Garden festivals focus awareness of urban land issues and design in several ways. First, as large-scale reclamation or development projects with similar aims and methodology, yet varying outcomes, they offer the opportunity for evaluative comparisons of administering planning policies. Second, they are illustrative of a constellation of attitudes towards the public realm. They are instances of social, cultural and political agendas that demonstrate how 'civic place making cannot occur successfully without a propitious conjunction of local opportunity community wherewithal and design capability'.<sup>3</sup> Third, urban land is not some 'neutral container' of activity: its ownership confers significant political and economic power that will be either concealed or revealed through its development. Urban property owners generally consist of corporate and commercial interests, public agencies and private homeowners. While ownership of festival land has been transmitted to all three categories, public land has been the largest beneficiary of the festival process. Finally, since their legacy landscapes are significant additions to the inventory of urban 'green space', garden festivals are barometers in the current atmosphere of muddled uncertainty over the appropriate role of urban space and of nature in the city. If garden festivals are endorsed as a means of urban change and renewal then it is important to analyse them as products of contemporary culture and assess their potential to improve the quality of the public realm.

The garden festival project brings the urban environment sharply into focus as an issue of political importance. It links and illuminates government policy, both central and local, with the creation of new, large-scale landscapes. Festivals closely follow an intrinsic or self-contained planning process but the extent to which they also carry forward or reflect established or existing planning policies is highly variable. In some instances the festival project may be directed entirely by the local planning authority, as was the case of the 1992 Zoetermeer Floriade.<sup>4</sup> In other cases there is informal coordination between festival organizers and existing policies, as with the 2001 Potsdam Garden Show. Whatever the source of festivals' land-use plans, their primary goal is always to maximize the quality of an end-use condition brought about 'on the back of' a garden festival. Festivals have been described as 'catalysts' and 'midwives'. They are intended to both stimulate development and steer design on a site that would otherwise remain derelict for an unacceptable period. The commercial or theme-park nature of the exposition phase has often been criticized, but such criticism in general misses the point of the festival as only one step in a broad process. The festival is temporary. It is the form and land-use pattern of the post-festival condition that is of long-term significance.

Festivals can be distinguished from other methods of urban intervention through three basic characteristics. First, they associate reclamation costs with the creation of a commercial event, the festival. Precedents exist in the form of world's fairs, but festivals are proponents of floriculture and regional character rather than of science and technology, as non-site-specific world's fairs have tended to be. The second distinguishing property is their sheer size: they are enormous in scale, dwarfing the usual piecemeal developments that dot the urban scene. The Munich festival of 1983 developed approximately 72 hectares in the creation of Westpark and the site for the 2003 Rostock International Garden Show occupied over 100 hectares. Finally, garden festivals are important in that they are predicated not on the need for development as such but on the need for *open space development*. While festival objectives have included accelerated reclamation, improvement of property values and economic regeneration, their focus on effective open space design is pivotal to their significance as a planning methodology. The strategic use of open space in planning to stimulate retail development and capital investment is not a new idea, nor one unique to garden festivals, but open space development for its own sake, rather than as a means to some commercial end, is less frequent and on the scale of the garden festival rarer still.

Typically exceeding 50 hectares, these projects are major planning initiatives that go well beyond the boundaries and concerns implied by the term 'garden festival'. As Adrian Poller, the Project Director of Garden Festival Wales, asserted, 'what has become apparent...is that whatever people's conceptions of a garden festival are, there are very few who have any idea of the scale and complexity of the design and construction process that has to be gone through before the gates are opened'.<sup>5</sup> Key festival objectives include environmental, aesthetic and economic benefits from post-festival site development in addition to any reclamation gain. Planning takes several years and a temporary company is usually created to administer financing, construction and marketing. The festival, spanning three seasons from April to October, includes structures for leisure and recreation generally adequate to accommodate upwards of ten million visitors overall. The host city profits not only through commercial aspects, but also through permanent community amenities, usually in terms of improved peripheral transport infrastructure and new or renovated pedestrian precincts. Garden festivals are especially associated with the development of urban parks at a scale rarely achieved through traditional processes, which are limited by financial and political constraints.

The legacy spaces of festivals, as will be shown, not only include new



urban parks but, more recently, other traditional open space elements, thereby giving these events a new relevance. This is due in part to a pervasive discontent with the roles of plazas, squares and boulevards as their functions are supplanted by and internalized into the shopping mall, once a suburban artefact but now increasingly inserted into the urban fabric. While there is currently no one theory that holds sway over urban open space initiatives, there is a renewed awareness of urban aesthetic potential with 'open space' now an ascendant element of urban design whose design and placement has a renewed significance.<sup>6</sup> Although there exists disagreement over what might constitute a 'successful' urban space, this may not be as detrimental as the lack of the creative, synergistic thinking necessary to reconstruct the failed urban, suburban, and ex-urban landscapes that spite decades of intellectual effort and enormous expenditure. Garden festivals bring political, economic, aesthetic and social concerns to the common focus of urban open space design; they are unique opportunities to explore what can happen when such synergistic thinking actually takes place.

### **Structure and Standards**

There are essentially four stages in the festival process. First, there is site acquisition and reclamation, including infrastructure development and the establishment of landscape design and site masterplan. A wholly owned subsidiary festival company is established to administer day-to-day operations up to the closing of the exhibition. The extent of its influence beyond this largely turns on whether the closed festival site is turned over to a private development company. The second stage centres on scheduling, marketing, publicity and promotion. This critical stage determines the types of sponsorship, which in turn will impinge on the design quality of the festival, on the festival experience and on the quality of the post-festival condition. The third stage is the festival period itself, obviously important for a number of considerations, not the least of which is the revenue from admission charges included in the budgeting of running costs. This stage implements the pricing policy and unveils the site layout and design programme chosen to maximize festival attendance. The final stage involves festival closure and the dismantling of the site, the dissolution of the festival company and the sale of targeted assets. A well-planned festival will, at this stage, require a minimal amount of site alteration and 'down time' to realize a pre-determined end-use condition. The 1993 Stuttgart International Garden Show was exceedingly successful at this stage: removal of the perimeter fencing and dismantling of the monorail and

international exhibits was essentially all that was required to arrive at the end-use state.

The Department of the Environment set three goals for British garden festivals.<sup>7</sup> In addition to 'enhancing the image of run-down industrial areas' and 'stimulat[ing] good examples of landscape design', the initial goal was to 'accelerate the reclamation of derelict or unused land'. Britain's garden festivals and the early post-war German garden shows primarily addressed derelict urban landscapes. Germany has seen a gradual shift from the reclamation of bomb-damaged sites to restoration or conversion of under-utilized open space such as the former sites of Munich's Westpark and the Soviet military base in Potsdam. The recent history of garden festivals demonstrates, however, that the British festivals were inaugurated primarily to transform derelict inner-city properties into developable land to accommodate new businesses and jobs.

Manufacturing industry, which had transformed British cities in the nineteenth century, began a slow decline in Britain after the Second World War – a decline that had become precipitous by the 1970s. In the two decades from 1960 to 1980 the number of manufacturing jobs located throughout Britain's six major urban centres declined by nearly half.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the creation of a national grid distributing North Sea gas brought about the closure of Britain's local gasworks (at Gateshead, for example, the former gasworks became the site of the 1990 garden festival). By the 1980s much of Britain's urban landscape was blighted by the detritus of former industrial sites. Influenced by the successes of the German federal garden shows or *Bundesgartenschauen*, the British Conservative Party adopted the garden festival process in 1982 to address the problem of derelict urban land. While the quality and pace of post-festival development has been regarded as the least successful phase of the British adaptation, it is generally considered that the first or reclamation stage has been the most successful. With the possible exception of the first festival at Liverpool in 1984, all of the subsequent British festivals demonstrated the successful implementation of a coordinated programme of reclamation. In general, festival companies demonstrated an ability to develop and implement a large-scale programme of a highly technical and complex nature, to work to tight schedules, and to operate in close partnership with private sector consultants and contractors. Reclamation for the 1990 Gateshead event involved four separate polluted sites including abandoned coke, gas and tar works, and at Stoke-on-Trent 'the festival meant a much faster reclamation of a much larger site compared with existing proposals which consisted of a piece-