



Time travellers

In current projects as far flung as Germany and Korea, Florian Beigel + Architecture Research Unit respond to traces of time in the landscape in developing an alternative to the usual masterplan

By Andrew Mead

Above: looking north across the Lichterfelde Süd site, with the Thermometer housing estate on the skyline. Below: view west from the ecological field at the centre of the site, with rubble hills made by the American army towards the southern boundary



It's a February morning at Lichterfelde Süd on the southern fringes of Berlin and commuters are still heading for the S-Bahn station. This is the end of the line; a terminus too for the city's bright yellow buses. Immediately to the north are the towers of a 1970s housing estate, the Thermometer Siedlung, while to the south, past a row of light-industrial plots (with timber yards and the like), is more than 100ha of grassland and birch woods; mostly behind fences bristling with barbed or razor wire.

The site, owned by German Railways, seems to be forgotten at present, but back in 1998 it was the subject of an international landscape and urban design competition, with a brief for 3,200 houses and apartments. This was won by Florian Beigel + Architecture Research Unit of the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University), with Daniel Libeskind coming second. It was the latest in a string of successes for Beigel + ARU, after first-prize schemes for post-industrial sites at Witznitz (1996) and Cosputen (1997), both south of Leipzig in the former East Germany.

What the three projects have in common is proposing an alternative to the usual masterplan. 'The idea of the urban masterplan is finished,' say Beigel and his ARU colleague Philip Christou. They talk instead about creating 'landscape infrastructures' as 'a

framework for diverse urban development to happen over time'. In the course of discussing the same scheme they may talk too of creating 'architectural infrastructures'. The relationship between architecture and landscape is that close for them.

In trying to turn these prize-winning projects into reality, Beigel + ARU have faced obstacles and frustration, but perhaps these travails have only validated their approach.



The concepts that inform their schemes are richly suggestive, as a closer look at the Berlin one will reveal.¹

Panoramic view

With its scheduled development stalled at present, primarily because of the downturn in the German economy, the Lichterfelde Süd site remains off-limits to the public, but it is a magnet nonetheless. Along its south-

ern perimeter, several gaps prised open in the fence have since been repaired, but one or two remain, so if you don't mind crawling, you can find a way in. On this particular February morning there was no sign of other trespassers, but patches of snow beyond the fence were imprinted with tracks – bird, animal and human.

It so happens that this unorthodox approach soon gives a comprehensive view of the site, but at first the topography is puzzling. Winding your way through the tall slender birches of the woods that form a triangle at the southern tip, you find in front of you a series of grassy mounds and gullies – disturbance that does not look natural. Nor is it. For much of this Lichterfelde Süd site was a US military base during the Cold War – hence all the barbed wire that still survives; and in this part, with rubble from Berlin bomb-sites, the army made an artificial landscape – rough terrain for use in training.

From the highest of these mounds comes a striking panorama. Looking north, beyond a broad road built across the site by the Americans, there is more evidence of military activity. On either side of a 4m-high embankment, stage-set replicas of bits of East and West Berlin were constructed, each with its typical street plan, one gridded, the other curving – now just concrete outlines blurred by grass.

Beyond them, at the centre of the site, is a large open area that ecologists value for its special grasses and other statutorily protected species. More birch woodland then extends eastwards and, past that, the ragged edge of light industrial plots beside Reamur Strasse, the Thermometer towers, and plumes of smoke from a power station in an inner suburb of Berlin.

Turning south, the boundary of the site is precisely where the Berlin Wall ran until it was demolished in 1989 – and then the prospect suddenly becomes immense. Completely flat, these were collective farmlands in the former German Democratic Republic, and they expand without interruption until a pale frieze of trees on the horizon.

It is astonishingly quiet – just birdsong if you are near the woods but hardly any other sound. No doubt the sense of trespassing and the residue of secrecy from the former military use are a factor, but there is a palpable atmosphere here, with the traces of past time, the unstructuredness, the neglect that lets nature thrive. There are signs of previous purpose and order to which the site is no longer subject; it has been left to its own devices. It seems vulnerable, too – you feel that no new order should be too insistent. There is something in all this that appeals to people and explains those patched-up holes in the fence and the tracks in the snow.

Sense of time

Beigel + ARU took the longest possible view in examining the evolution of the site, identifying five distinct landscapes: the geological, when this land was sediment under glaciers or the sea; the agricultural, particularly the field patterns of the 18th century; the industrial, when railway yards were built here in the 1930s; the military, with its disruptions and artifice; and



today's ecological diversity, the wildness that steadily predominates.

'These landscapes each have a powerful sense of time,' says Beigel, 'and it's this temporal dimension that is central to our project. Our concern is with the traces of history. We want to expose and develop them, intensify them, as it were. Our landscape infrastructures are generated from those traces.'

Here lies a difference between Beigel +

ARU's approach and the conventional masterplan. As Christou puts it: 'You find that masterplans often have a diagrammatic geometry – circles, squares and so forth. They introduce an abstract, idealised place rather than respond to the topography that is there. We take our cues from that topography. Our approach is closer to the way a farmer would appropriate the land. He can't grade the hills, he can't move mountains. But masterplanners *do* move mountains.'

Moreover, the masterplan – as Beigel and Christou see it – tends to be 'fixed and final'. What they want is something less prescriptive and definitive, a framework flexible enough to accommodate change. 'We need strategies that work with the dimension of time,' they say, 'strategies that are open to new conditions and unknown future needs.'

So what do 'landscape infrastructures' entail in the scheme for Lichterfelde Süd? The main concept is for a series of 'landscape fields', which subdivide a large proportion of the site and are eventually designated for housing of different types, pattern and density. Just how and when they are built on, depends on demand and the state of the economy. In all likelihood, the work will be undertaken at different times by different developers and different architects – it will be incremental – while the overall ratio of apartments to houses,



Looking east along the southern military road. At present the site is surrounded by high fences and barbed wire



Remains of the US army's training ground, in which typical street plans of East Berlin (left) and West Berlin (right) were replicated

already changed since the competition brief, will doubtless change again.

On first entering the site from the official gateway on the east, Beigel registered 'its east-west transparency', whereas views north and south were impeded by trees. Old railway tracks from the 1930s, discovered among the birches, proved to run east-west, while research into the 18th-century agricultural use revealed a system of roads aligned south-east to north-west – a pattern still visible in the neighbouring suburbs.

Reflecting these twin orientations, the proposed fields in Beigel + ARU's scheme flow east-west across the site, intercepted by roads at the same skew as the farming ones (now lost). Protecting the central 'ecological' area, the fields are occupied more densely both to the north, near the S-Bahn station and Thermometer estate (where new shops etc are envisaged), and to the south.

For the competition, Beigel + ARU came

Opposite page, top: the landscape of artificial hills at the south of the site. Opposite page, centre: in the heart of the ecological field, looking east towards Osdorfer Strasse. Above: a small hill of silver grass in the ecological field. Below: the railway tracks are from the 1930s, and their east-west orientation is reflected in the birch woods that have sprung up since then. Beigel + ARU propose to keep the remaining tracks, with the 'sense of time and enigma that they give to the place'



up with a 'menu' of housing fields, each with its particular building type: a field of patio houses, low-rise but high-density; a field of three-/four-storey villas with apartments; a field where one-/two-storey detached houses are scattered among birch trees; and various others. These fields have their own surface treatments (asphalt, gravel, lush or drier grass), which, together with the different grasses of areas left protected or awaiting construction and the stands of existing trees, would give the whole site a patchwork quality – 'quite like an agrarian landscape,' says Beigel.

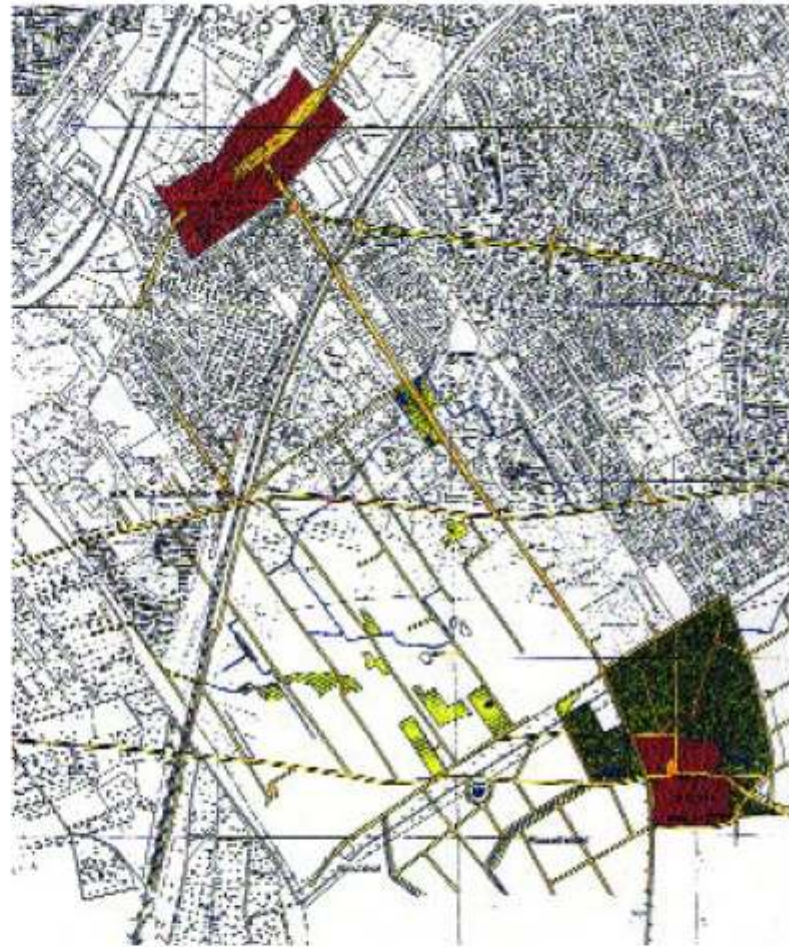
Treading gently
But while devising this 'menu' for the development of the site, Beigel + ARU were conscious of those qualities it has at present, which they did not want to lose. 'There is a certain enigma of place, a sense of mystery. It is fragile and threatened – a place where



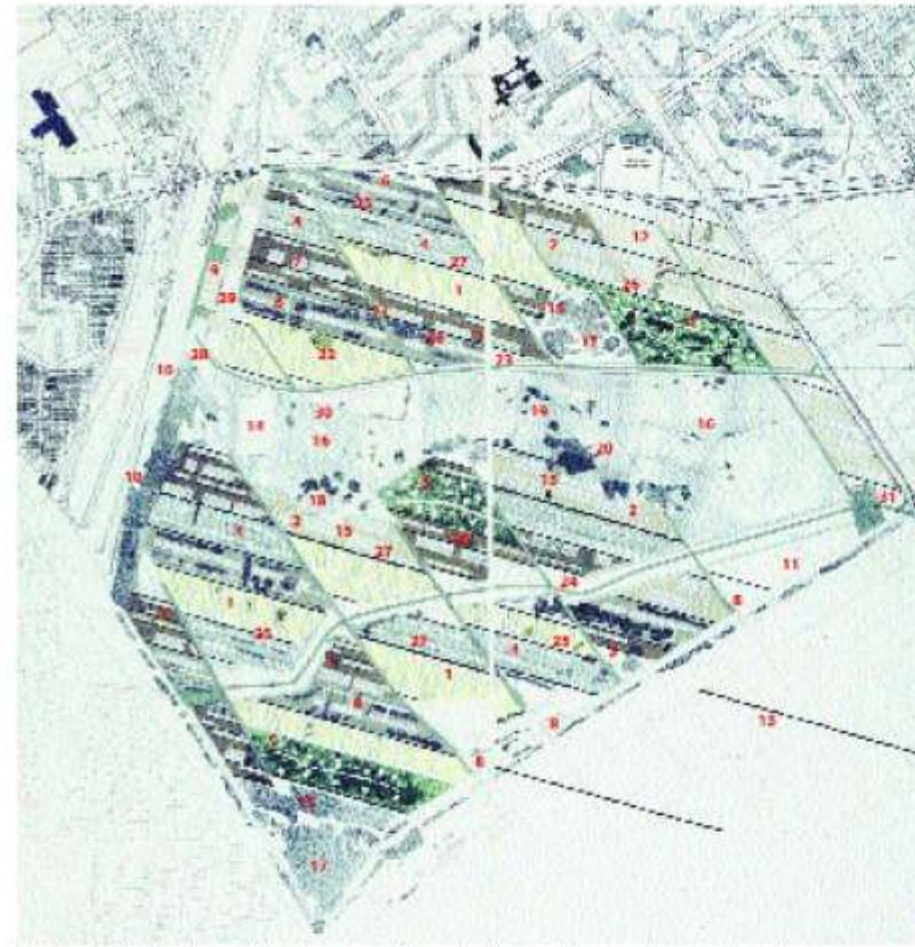
Looking south-east across the former military 'theatre', with its 'stage-set' recreations of East and West, from the railway embankment down its



Above: a 1995 aerial photograph of the site. At the centre is the US military 'theatre', and south of that are the artificial hills. Below: areas of particular ecological interest were identified in the competition brief, including trees (4, 10, 11), grasses (1, 8, 12) and dry ponds (5,7)



Above: 1906 map showing agricultural field roads and swales. Below: figure/ground plan of proposed building fields. Opposite page, top: Beigel + ARU's competition-winning plan. Opposite page, right: latest version (May 2002), prepared by Vivico with Peter Brinkert Architect



- | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| 1 urban 'stitch buildings' | 10 gabion noise protection wall | 18 protected grass species (Schalfröhricht) | 25 cycle path |
| 2 patio houses | 11 horse-riding field | 19 small hill with silver grass | 26 swale |
| 3 row houses | 12 relocated light industrial buildings | 20 pond | 27 gabion wall |
| 4 apartment villas (urban villas) | 13 poplar trees | 21 existing field trees | 28 poplar trees, walking path and cycle track |
| 5 one-family 'tree houses' (timber-framed, on stilts) | 14 sports field | 22 protected grass species (Schilfröhricht) | 29 youth club and primary school |
| 6 'hedge houses' | 15 picnic garden and play ground | 23 proposed valley road | 30 sports field |
| 7 mews houses | 16 wild high grass field | 24 former concrete military road with pavement and | 31 low jetty over ecological field, with small cafe |
| 8 'bridge buildings' | 17 existing birch forest | | |
| 9 regional centre with super market, school, library etc | | | |

one should tread gently,' they say. This is something more than dutiful respect for the ecological richness that has accrued. It acknowledges the complex atmosphere I indicated earlier.

In his essay 'Terrain Vague', Ignasi de Sola-Morales suggests why marginal sites such as Lichterfelde Süd can be so resonant, for, despite the factors that differentiate them (their specific histories and conditions), they frequently are. The French term is apter than its English approximates, says Sola-Morales, because *terrain* has a more urban connotation than the word 'land', while *vague* means 'empty' and 'indeterminate' but also 'available'.

'The relationship between the absence of use... and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to the evocative potential of the city's *terrains vagues*,' he writes. 'Void, absence, yet also promise – the space of the possible.'²

But when architects and urban designers arrive, there is usually a problem: 'They seem incapable of doing anything other than introducing violent transformations, changing estrangement into citizenship.' How, asks Sola-Morales, can architecture deal with the *terrain vague* more subtly, 'without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason?' Given his current housing plans, that is something John Prescott needs to know.

One way is to avoid the 'diagrammatic geometry' that Christou mentioned in his comment on masterplans, but another is to discount the idea of 'object' buildings. That certainly suits Beigel. 'There is an underlying feeling in my work of extreme suspicion towards objects,' he says – the result of belonging to 'a generation of post-war Germans very wary of architecture being used to present institutions'. One alternative is a situation 'where the object disappears to become a topography' (he cites Scharoun). Another is 'to make a void instead of an object.'³

The eloquent void recurs in Beigel + ARU's schemes. On the ARU website there is a section devoted to 'emptiness'. It states: 'Space is the essence of architecture, not object. You can also use the terms void or in-betweenness or openness. Thinking in these terms requires a freeing from object fixation.' At Lichterfelde this means that, even if the site is developed to the extent envisaged in the competition, there is no dominant object (or objects). While denser in some parts than others, what is built is always threaded among open space.

Sola-Morales remarks on the extent to which contemporary photographers (Thomas Struth and Olivio Barbieri, for example) have focused on *terrain vague* rather than monuments or cohesive urban fabric, as if they want to think of the city 'in primordial terms'. Their images may be dispassionate or at times disquieting, but they leave room for the viewer's imagination, and the places they depict seem full of possibilities. Not that these places are as static or



suspended in time as they appear; they are alive and continue to evolve.

Beigel + ARU seem especially open to such insights from outside their own profession in devising and presenting their schemes. Paul Klee, Giorgio Morandi and Carl Andre are among the artists they cite; with Morandi admired for making the space *between* his jugs and bottles so telling, and Klee's small engraving, *A Leaf from the Book of Cities*, seen as central to Lichterfelde Süd.

'It shows an evolving city typology,' says Beigel, 'with pictograms arranged in a series of horizontal lines. Basic patterns in the texture have a high degree of formal repetition. Some consist of a row of basic types with variations. It is possible to associate building typologies with the pictograms. It is a sophisticated and rich composition.' What Beigel finds here is 'a complex evenness and equality – a certain exchangeability'; in these respects, much like the scheme for Lichterfelde Süd.

Klee's broader appeal to Beigel + ARU is understandable, given his favourite compositional formula of subdividing the overall area into field-like rows of approximate squares or oblongs, some picked out in highly-pitched colour but not at the expense of structure. One might think, too, of the textiles that were made by Klee's colleagues at the Bauhaus – Anni Albers, Gunta Stözl, Ruth Consemüller – where local intensities provide moments of focus in a design, but the pattern and rhythm of the whole holds sway. Or, as the ARU website puts it: 'The landscape can be seen as a tapestry – at the



Morandi's *Still Life Drawn with Thick Lines*, 1931



Klee's *A Leaf from the Book of Cities*, 1928

small scale intimate, at the larger scale communicative.'

Water's edge

Though the Lichterfelde Süd scheme is stalled, it isn't dead, but it looks somewhat different now. The site is still owned by German Railways, whose management company Vivico is trying to interest developers. Since 1998 the German economy has foundered, Berlin's in particular, and the city's projected housing needs have been downsized. In addition, the land may be more contaminated than was thought at first. So while Beigel + ARU had originally hoped to build lightly on the mounded area to the south, retaining the evidence of military use and exploiting the slopes, there is pressure now to level that part of the site.

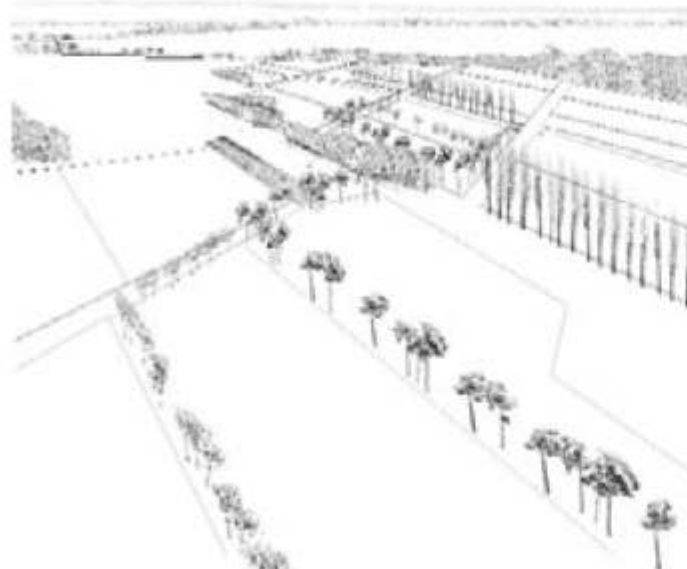
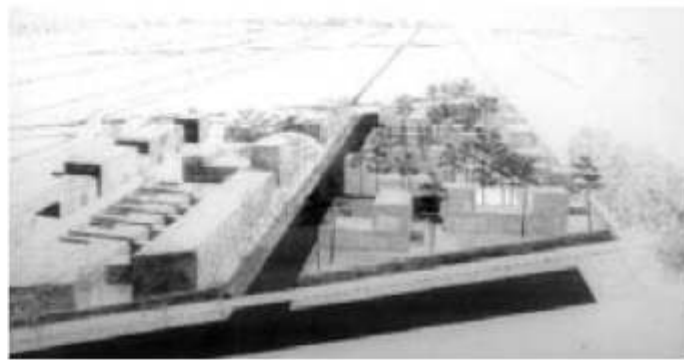
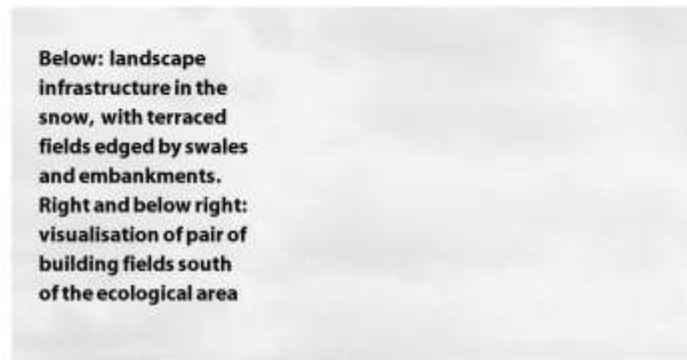
But their scheme has proved robust, and Vivico's latest version of it (May 2002) incorporates much of the original; the hierarchy of roads, for example, including the minor 'neighbourhood' ones in each housing field, which Beigel thinks are 'very important for social identity'. To accommodate the displaced earth from decontamination, these fields are now terraced, with distinct embanked edges. 'This articulates them more. I'm happy with it,' says Beigel. But though the density is no more than in his winning scheme, the open space at the centre has shrunk because Berlin's market economists believe buyers do not want to live in rows of more than four houses.

Vivico has asked Beigel + ARU for 'visualisations' to guide prospective developers,



Above: Park Chi Won's drawing of an exemplary field of 'stitch' houses. Below: section shows the terracing. Lewerentz's Malmö Eastern Cemetery (bottom right) is a source for this treatment. Bottom left: courtyard with brick houses that recall Mies' at Krefeld

Below: landscape infrastructure in the snow, with terraced fields edged by swales and embankments. Right and below right: visualisation of pair of building fields south of the ecological area



and their latest drawings show three different housing fields. In one, rather opulent brick houses not dissimilar from Mies' at Krefeld are clustered around courtyards ('For Mercedes-Benz drivers,' says Christou). A second has high-density, low-rise 'patio houses.' The third – preserving an important feature of the scheme – has 'stitch' buildings that run north-south rather than the prevalent east-west, reinforcing the connective idea of a tapestry, and seen as 'a solid block of building mass that is cut out into positive shapes for the voids.'

There have been compromises but, says Beigel, 'I'm not up on the barricades about this new plan.' At Cospuden, though, there has been more tangible progress with his and ARU's winning scheme. Indeed, enough has been achieved for it to be submitted by the Architecture Foundation for the prestigious biannual Mies van der Rohe Award (2003), whose selection committee has chosen to publish and exhibit it.

The site is profoundly post-industrial in character, in a region dominated by open-pit coal mining until German reunification in 1989, when its procedures were seen as hopelessly uneconomic. Excavation had taken place for 80 years or more, greatly changing the former flat, riverrine, agricultural landscape. The result, says Christou, 'is a powerful combination of natural and artificial land forms, on a scale reminiscent of glacial or volcanic action.'⁴

It is a place of giant holes in the ground, as Christou goes on to explain. 'Stopping the car and walking a few hundred metres, or simply walking to the edge of a small village, can be astonishing. Suddenly you find yourself on the edge of an enormous cliff, gazing into vast excavations.' Pits only 100m-deep may be several kilometres wide, providing a 50 million-year time trip through geological history in the layered earth they expose.

As earlier at Witznitz, Beigel + ARU made no pretence that the convulsions of mining had never occurred. Their schemes are not camouflage: the mix of the natural and artificial is embraced. In this Leipzig region, the old pits are being turned into lakes to make a recreational landscape. Architects in the competition were asked to submit ideas for the spatial relationship between a nearby village, Zöbiger, and the new lake that would flood the Cospuden mine.

'The basic form of a mining excavation is a long rectangle with a straight edge on one side, where the industrial dinosaur has cut into the land, and a soft wavy edge on the other, where material has been dumped. Our design strengthens this form,' says Beigel. So while the soft shore is designated as 'wilderness', Beigel + ARU have built a new straight embankment on the other side of the lake – an earth dam around 3m-high towards the water and 0.5m-high towards the village – which serves as a promenade, separated by a 50m-wide urban wetland from Zöbiger's

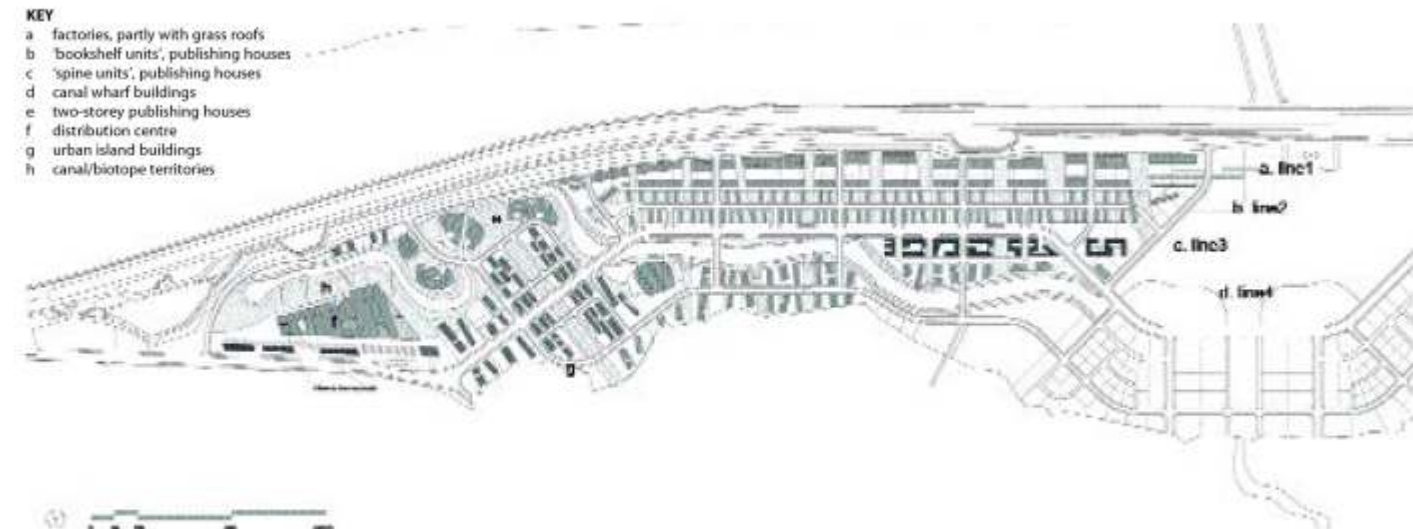
edge. This wetland keeps the lake free of dirty water from the village, and can be crossed by a timber jetty.

Generous nature

Not all the Cospuden scheme has been realised in the way that Beigel + ARU intended. They envisaged the housing at the edge of the wetland as a mixture of two-/ four-storey, detached 'lake villas' – each with its own shape, size and character, though with a family resemblance – and two-/ three-storey 'long houses' in a staggered layout, acting as 'urban stitches between the historic village and the lake shore territory'. Their designs were at the stage of working drawings when developer Hochtief withdrew, unable to resolve with the local authority the matter of insurance against possible subsidence on land affected by mining. Now, says Christou, 'some very traditional German-looking houses' have been built instead.

How much indifferent architecture can Beigel + ARU's 'open', 'flexible', 'non-prescriptive' schemes support before they are thoroughly compromised? They expect and welcome a certain 'diversity' as different developers and architects become involved, but when does diversity become a 'zoo'?

This is being tested at present in Korea, where Beigel + ARU have taken over the planning of the Paju Publishing Information Industrial Estate (Paju Book City). Inheriting the street system of the previous planner, and



Top: 'Paju Landscape Script'. Above left: view of site. Centre: collage shows 'bookshelf' building form. Right: construction of Beigel + ARU's building

again fostering an urban wetland, their 'Paju Landscape Script' – as they title their proposed layout and mixture of building types – once more recalls Klee's *A Leaf from the Book of Cities*. The Korean economy is buoyant and the estate is being built, including a publisher's office and studios by Beigel + ARU themselves, which is meant to be 'exemplary' – a pointer to the language of the whole. They wait to see how far that example is heeded.

Back in less buoyant Germany, it seems certain that the Lichterfelde Süd scheme will only be realised in fits and starts. Beigel + ARU were clear from the beginning that this might be the case, but does the lack of continuous momentum behind a development bring the risk of demoralisation? When something is only part-built, its future apparently uncertain, its associations can

quickly become negative, as residents get frustrated and no one wants to move there. Beigel hopes each field that is developed, each neighbourhood that is created, will be an entity and not seem incomplete. 'Make a field and you have a social unit, a spatial unit, and a landscape unit,' he says. The power of positive thinking, perhaps? But, while the openness and flexibility of their proposals are not without a downside, one can't but respond to the light touch, subtlety, cohesiveness, shrewd reading of landscape, and poetry they display. There is generosity, too, in the scope that their infrastructural approach leaves to others – developers, architects, occupants, who all contribute to something not final but evolving.

Or, as Florian Beigel puts it: 'You could

say we design the rug, not the picnic.'

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Above: mining excavation in Cospuden before flooding. Left: site plan shows lake shore delineated by a new stone-embanked promenade. The wetland is adjacent. Below: view to existing strip of forest on the horizon



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