

topotek 1  
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# behind the mirror

THOMAS SCHREGENBERGER

## behind the mirror

THOMAS SCHREGENBERGER



Riva del Canale / Waterfront at Maselake, Berlin

IT WAS “CONVERTIBLE CITY”, the German contribution to the Venice Biennale’s Architecture Exhibition of 2006, that brought us together. Topotek 1 presented the *Playbox*, the playground in Niebuhrstrasse, in the Berlin district of Charlottenburg, while I had submitted an essay on the *as found* principle in architecture. It was easy for us to find the same wavelength, as we were both convinced that we had something to tell each other and that Topotek 1’s works were related to the *as found* principle.

What then is the *as found* principle? *As found* is an attitude, a manner of perception, a working approach in architecture and art. *As found* means dealing with the here and now, with what is real and ordinary, evident and tangible and not with things such as elevated visions and unreachable ideals. *As found* means examining what exists, recognizing its essence and exploring its potential. "*As found*", the architects Alison and Peter Smithson said, "*is a perceptive recognition of the actuality around (...), a new seeing of the ordinary, an openness to how prosaic "things" could re-energise our inventive activity*". *As found* is anti-utopian: it is concrete, plain and direct.

The *as found* principle sprang up in London in the 1950s, when the formality of the Establishment seemed likely to stiffen into total rigidity. A new generation of theatre people, literary men, filmmakers, architects and artists began to challenge this formality, creating irreverent literature, rebellious theatre, brutalist architecture, an independent cinema, Pop-Art, and also a new kind of music.

Topotek 1's works are provocative, and this is their first similarity with the English movement of the Fifties and Sixties. On top of that, Topotek 1's interest in pre-existing reality is parallel to the *as found* approach: they also build on actuality.

This is convincingly illustrated by the new sports-ground in the Berlin district of Spandau, at the end of Maselake Canal. Located between an industrial area and a residential quarter, this precisely reflects the direct, plain, raw character of the location. A large lawn with flat grass steps leading to the water becomes the new end of the Maselake Canal. It constitutes the focus of the project and provides the starting-point for a walkway running along the bank of the canal. To the north,

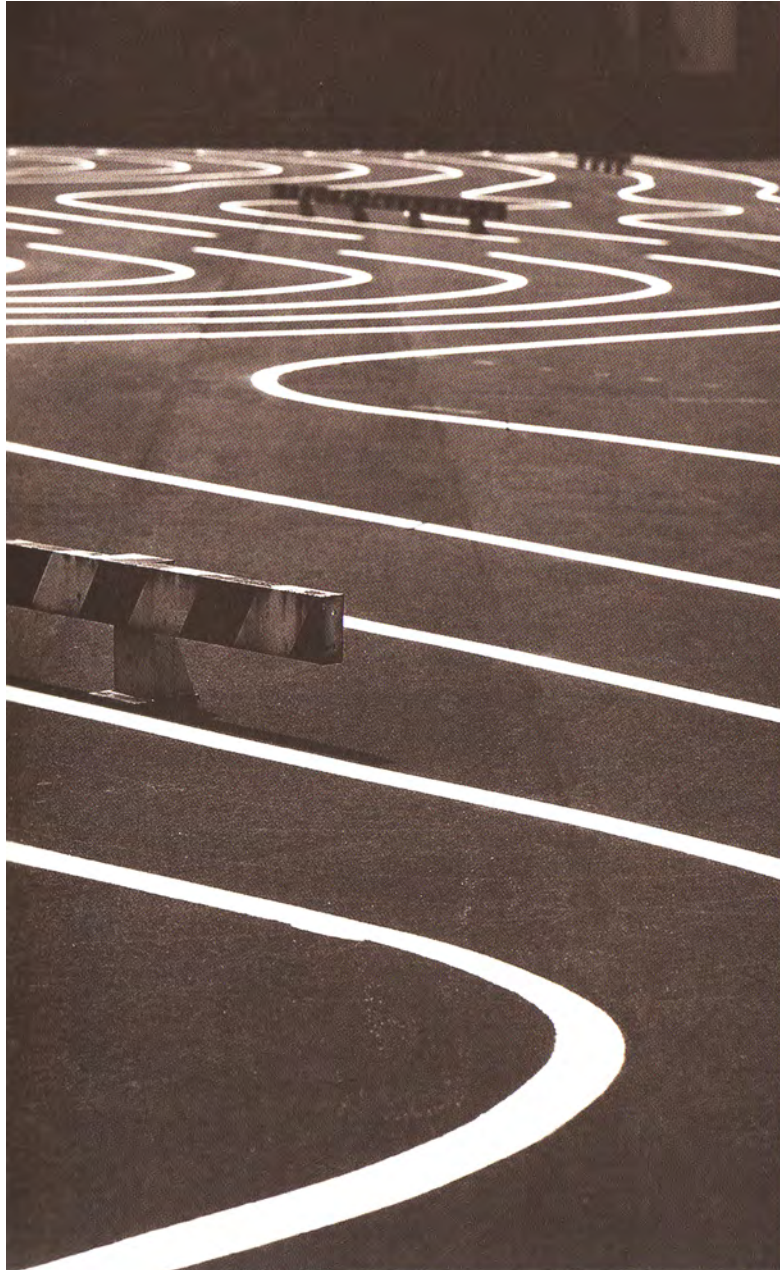


two large asphalt foundation plates left over from demolitions provide space for recreation. The lawn, the walkway and the playing fields, three very different elements, have been faithfully developed out of the existing situation. The lawn adopts the geometry of the end of the canal and, through its grass steps, creates a new, clearly defined relationship with the water. The lawn's integrated slipway makes the canal available for sports such as canoeing and ice-skating. A willow-tree emphasizes the proximity of the water. Unlike the lawn, which feels almost residential, the walkway along the canal retains



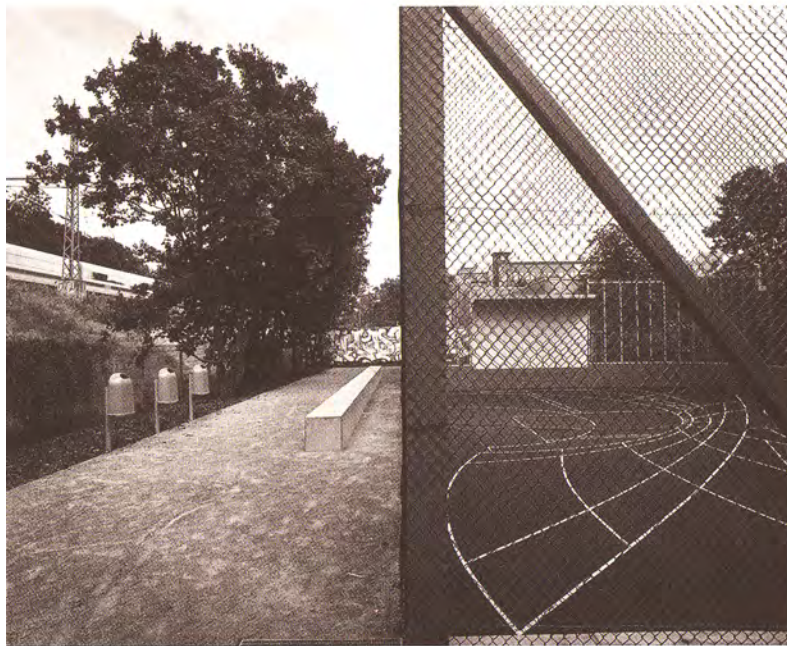
Parco Sportivo / Sportspark at Maselake, Berlin

some of its industrial character. A piling separates it from the water and a wire-mesh fencing from the adjacent factories, so that it retains the simplicity and the severity of the surrounding environment. The apparently spontaneous vegetation of the shore and the raw asphalt of the three-metre wide walkway emphasize this atmosphere. The playing fields to the north of





the canal, consisting of two old foundation plates, seem like archaeological remains of the industrial past. Moulded grass slopes bring out the topography of this part of the park. They are gentle green depressions, which suggest peace and relaxation, while the playing fields are converted into theatrical stages. The yellow lines painted on their asphalt call for movement and speed. The undulating markings remind us of athletics tracks gone mad, but also of the trails left by skaters. Black and yellow railings encourage performance, and simultaneously recall the



Parco Giochi / Playground Niebuhrstrasse, Berlin

factory courtyards and the loading areas. Two lost-looking basketball baskets are surrounded by markings devoid of any rules or regulations.

Although the simplicity and directness of these alterations as well as the use of plain materials evoke the brutalism of the Sixties, their origin is to be found in the previous set-up of the site. The aim is to discover, to see differently and to build on reality. Or, as Alison and Peter Smithson have once put it, “*as found*’ where the art is in the picking up, turning over and putting-with...”. Moreover, one has to look behind the mirror of reality, and this sense of “behind the mirror” can be found in every project of Topotek 1. For instance, it is very evident in the lines painted on the asphalt platforms. These recall the markings of roads and sports grounds, that is, the rules of games and even playing in the street. But at the same time their distorted shapes stimulate other associations, such as with movement and speed, while they hint at the realms of comics and cyberspace, the virtual world of heroes and contemporary myths.

The original design of the asphalt grounds takes us back to an earlier project of Topotek 1: the *Playbox*, the playground in Niebuhrstrasse. While in Spandau the design made use of the almost unlimited spatial possibilities and the very large surfaces led to this kind of signage, in Berlin-Charlottenburg it was defined by the limitations on space. In short, the site was too small to cater for conventional sports, and accordingly it was also too small for regular markings of sports fields. Topotek 1 transformed this alleged limitation of the site into its point of strength. Their solution has gained some fame: the playground is criss-crossed by dynamic, overlapping, condensed and twisted lines, accentuated with numbers and letterings. This





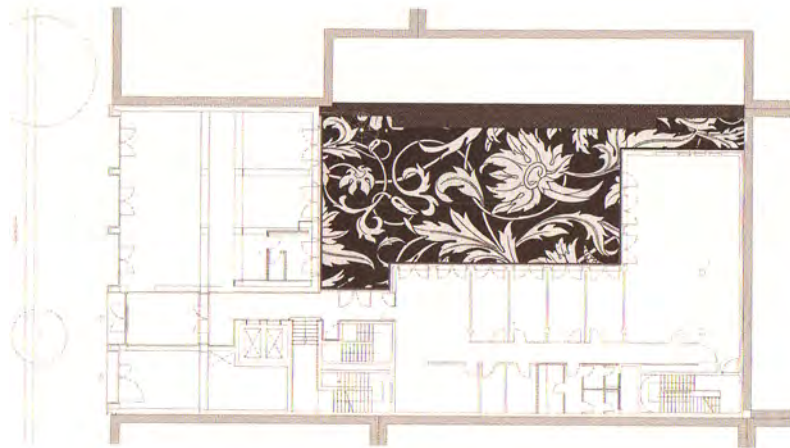
unconventional set-up forces the players to create their own rules, discussing the basis of the game again and again. The principle of compaction is evident in more than the design of the play surface. The Playbox itself is a concentrate. Sunk one metre and a half below ground level and surrounded by a bank-like coloured wall and tall wire-mesh fencings, the new sports facility resembles a box rather than a conventional playground. A rebound wall for ball games, made of prefabricated elements of curved concrete, forms the limits of the playground, even vertically, while a five-metre high fencing, made of two layers of wire-mesh and featuring a vibrant moiré-effect adds to the sense of compressed energy in the Playbox. The ramp leading to the sunken playing field is directly connected with the surrounding roads. Therefore, in spite of its character as a distinct closed object, the highly popular Playbox is not only a representation of street culture, but literally a part of it.

A completely different kind of street culture is found in the surroundings of the office building of Federal Health Associations in the KPM quarter in Berlin. Topotek 1's project is remarkable even for the language they use to describe it. They speak of a *"carpet of granite, a bouquet of black pine trees, brass object (fountain), a wooden chaise longue"*, in short, of a *"coherent family of furniture"*. They refer to the design of the Herbert-Lewin-Square as an *"open-air foyer"* with the *"atmosphere of a quiet room: a representative entrance with the features of a private sitting-room"*.

Is this meant as a provocation? No, it reflects another reality, an interpretation, a portrait of the situation found.

Together with the Royal Porcelain Factory (KPM), the offices of the Federal Health Associations represent the





Cortile / Courtyard Unter den Linden, Berlin

urban centre of the Spreestadt Charlottenburg, an area near Spree River, which is being converted from an industrial zone into an urban mixed area in accordance with the plans of the architects Ortner and Ortner. New office buildings, with their severe and distinguished character and their veneer of dark polished stone, characterize the new Herbert-Lewin-Square. Topotek 1's furniture is precisely arranged on the granite paving of the square. Its geometry corresponds to the front building and its main entrance. This affinity involves the materials and surface qualities as well. A polished brass object rises from the ground like an idol. The water-film running over its golden surface keeps the observer at a distance and simultaneously invites physical contact. The wooden sofa, a bench made of finely-assembled oak boards with brass arm-rests, seems at first glance to be an object of desire rather than piece of furniture to

sit on, and yet it invites the onlooker to do just that. The general setting is magnificent, composed of yellow, beige and brown shades, fitted with brass ashtrays and large pots with cervine pear-trees. In this perfect and harmonious world, the Herbert-Lewin-Square seems almost air-conditioned.

While the atmosphere of Herbert-Lewin-Square appears subdued, refined and sophisticated, the setting of the inner courtyard of the Bayer Pensionskasse, on Unter den Linden Boulevard, is full of emotions, intense, almost extravagant and loud. The dimensions, the form and the colour of the decoration of the courtyard evoke the Pop-Art of the Sixties and Seventies as well as the debate on beauty of that time. Reyner Banham, art historian and outstanding ideologist of the London “Independent Group”, questioned the traditional concept of beauty by St. Thomas Aquinas: “*beauty is what pleases the eye*”, replacing it with the phrase: “*beauty is what arouses emotions*”.

What is it then, that arouses emotions in the design of this courtyard? Basically it is just a common asphalt court of about 250 square metres. But it has been coated with a floral ornament of synthetic resin which Topotek 1 has compared to the Baroque *parterre de broderie*. An important aspect of the project is the colour of the coating, which is taken from the adjacent building: the black-blue colour from the polished stone façade, the yellow from the brass frames of the windows. But the most exciting thing is the dimension, the sheer size of the floral drawing, the exuberance, the explicit delight in excess, in the pure lavishness of form and colour. On closer scrutiny, what calls the visitor’s attention is the power of the floral ornamentation to conjure up worlds of images: not only of the Versailles gardens, or traditional Gobelin or brocade fabrics,

but also imagery featuring the employees' ties and the carpets of their offices. The courtyard design is clearly visible from the upper floors as well. From up there, the yellow flowers reflected in the façade merge with the brass pattern of the window frames in such a way that the creepers seem to be infinite and three-dimensional. In the courtyard itself the design resembles a rolled-out carpet and converts this space into an interior, providing the pleasant intimacy of a furnished room.



Cortile / Courtyard Unter den Linden, Berlin



Topotek 1's skilful and flexible approach to the "language" of artistic creation recalls a linguistic phenomenon called "parlando". This term is derived from musicology and means the imitation of ordinary speech by musical instruments. In contemporary linguistics, this concept describes a peculiar phenomenon related to text messaging, e-mails, and web chats. Characterized, among other things, by the influence of spoken language on writing, "parlando" consists of combinations of words or parts of words, coming from all kinds of idioms and languages: it even explodes the sentences into fragments of words. Punctuation becomes a sign, and signs combine with words to become phrases. In "parlando", the correct use of language is not important: what is important is the exactness and the expressive strength of the message itself. It asks for immediacy, the creative interpretation of feeling, for what is hidden "behind the mirror" of reality - and for authenticity. A brilliant example of such a collage is the setting that Topotek 1 gave to Wolfburg Castle Park. On the occasion of the State Garden Show in 2004, the historic Wolfburg Castle Park was redesigned and adapted in observance of the historic monuments laws. It was opened to the outside and three new circle gardens were added: the *sculpture garden*, the *rose garden* and the *forest garden*. Placed in the park as precious ornaments, they are a modern interpretation of the *folies*, typical of landscape gardens of the 18th and 19th centuries. The gardens are clad with reflecting stainless steel, thus duplicating the park and the landscape.

Located between the Aller River and the castle, the *sculpture garden* is a completely enclosed space. Peeping through round openings in the wall, the visitor suddenly finds himself in a different and exotic world. The inner wall, polished like a mirror,



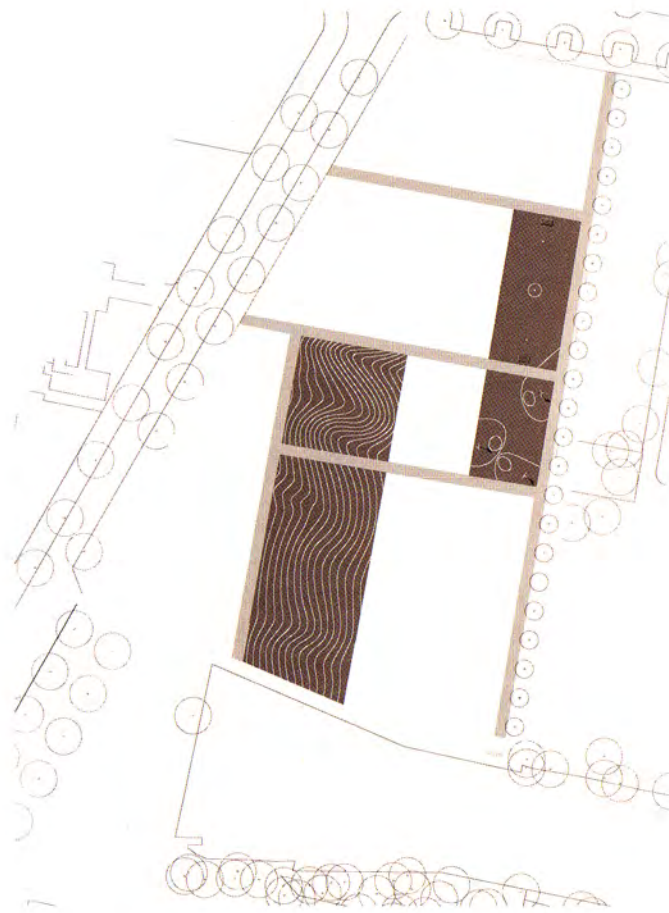
infinitely multiplies an unusual desert landscape, enriched by wonderful cactuses.

The proud and exhibitionistic *rose garden* is the direct opposite of the *sculpture garden*. Formed like a brooch, it presides over the park, formed like a rose and itself representing a rose. Protruding like wedges from the ground, the roses are arranged like petals, making the roses seem even more desirable. Their shimmering reflections in the polished steel, reminiscent of loves and jealousies, take us into another world.

The third circle garden, the *forest garden* or *shadow garden*, seems somehow archaic. It sits just above the wetlands in a pre-existing clearing of the landscape park. Curved mirrors and walls built of brush-wood promise a magic initiation into the secrets of the wood. As in a saline, water flows over the walls of the brush-wood. This is the shadow-world of ferns, mosses, and mushrooms.

Topotek 1's interventions in Wolfburg Castle Park are small but significant. The circular gardens create worlds that, in combination with the historic site, excite the imagination. They extend the park itself: from a place of history it becomes also a place of dreams. The fences of the horse meadows along the Aller river are another example of this. Their pink colour transforms the white horses grazing there into fairy-tale creatures and childish fantasies.

Topotek 1's projects are varied: but whether simple or sophisticated, quick and dynamic, extroverted or dreamy, they always reflect reality, including the reality lying "beyond the mirror".



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