

# Herbert Dreiseitl: About park therapy

He has received a number of prestigious international awards for his work. His innovative projects are being implemented all over the world. Herbert Dreiseitl is a landscape architect, sculptor, artist and urban planner. In an interview that he exclusively provided to our magazine, he reveals his professional beginnings and mentions important topics that are currently more than current.

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**At the outset, please allow me one obligatory question. Why did you become a landscape architect? What was the main impulse for which you chose this profession?**

At first I dealt with art. I was interested in connecting art and people and their need for mutual interaction. I tried to help young people in particular, I dealt with drugs and I worked with art and various forms of exercise using water elements, with experiments to help overcome fear and build young people's confidence in their ability and self-confidence for the outside world. I have found that an open and well-designed outdoor space is extremely important for the self-confidence of these people and their trust in the surroundings and in the neighborhood community. Because the real connection of people, the real living room of society, is not inside, but outside, in the public sphere. Everything that people learn about humanity, about how to be a real person, they learn outside, where they have contact with other, sometimes completely foreign people.

me. So over time, I discovered that as an artist I had to work with such an open outdoor space, and eventually I discovered that there was a profession called garden or landscape architecture.

But when I look at my position today, I feel that I work outside this profession. I deal with garden architecture, parks, but still art, social sciences and especially urban planning, I work across many fields. I think that sometimes garden and landscape architecture in its classic form is too narrowly defined. Today, at a time of climate crisis and threats to nature, we need to expand and embrace our visions and ideas more broadly. We need to rediscover landscape architecture and take it with a more modern holistic approach.

**There are many problems in an urban environment, but you have chosen water. Does it have any emotional basis, for example in your memories of water from childhood? Why this element?**

I have a deep relationship with water. My childhood was tied to water, I was raised by a small stream flowing through our village, in German we call Bach, and I played a lot with water. I was enchanted by drops of water in the rain, circles on the surface, I played in pools, I rode them by bike, I connected water reservoirs with streams. My parents took me to places where I could indulge in a passion for water. I played by the mountain streams and did various experiments, I let snails or ants float on small sticks over the hand-built lakes, like a passenger on a boat, and I was extremely fascinated.

When I think about my memories of water, I perceived it as something magical, extremely sensitive and unpredictable. You can swim in the water, but it can also be very dangerous. It symbolizes life and movement, but it can also bring death in its ongoing process of transformation.

We cannot perceive water only from a physical point of view. When we look at the history and different religions, water has always mediated change, connecting individuals with the great world and the spiritual environment. Even a large part of the human body is made up of water. It serves as a transition between the external and internal environment, where it stabilizes our temperature, brings minerals and nutrients for growth and energy, to enable metabolism and much more. Playing with water connects us with everything. This somehow instinctively fascinated me as a child, and later I was lucky to meet interesting people who connected science with philosophy, such as Theodor Schwenk, John





▲ Prof. Herbert Dreiseitl at the international conference Urbanscapes in Ostrava in 2019, organized by the Czech Association of Landscape Architects and the Society for Garden and Landscape Creation

Wilkes or Professor Muller of the Max Planck Institute in Germany and others. They all opened my eyes, inspired me a lot, and then I started to devote myself to water on a scientific, artistic and business level.

**In your lecture at the conference in Ostrava, you mentioned that children in big cities lose contact with nature. The only places where they come into contact with nature are parks. How do you perceive this detachment of man from nature? Is the importance of the landscape architect shifting to the role of a mediator of natural laws and manifestations?**

Our modern society has come to the conclusion that most children live mostly inside. The outdoor area only passes to the car, bus, subway, and then they are inside again. In modern cities, and cities in America or Asia are extreme in this respect, children may not be able to get out for a whole week, they only occur in buildings, schools and air-conditioned vehicles. And I see more and more that such a separation from nature causes people all sorts of problems. Children who grow up in this way are very afraid of nature. They are afraid of a bird, a bee, they are afraid of small caterpillars or even a butterfly. They are afraid to take a frog in their hand, to touch the clay. I call it biophobia and I think it's a real psycho-

logical problem. Therefore, children in cities must learn the basic relationship to the environment, to nature. We must observe the beauty of nature on every piece of green space that is available. We can perceive living nature through the colors of days and seasons, and it is wonderful to see their transformation. And in addition to the visual effect, you need to be aware of other features, such as how trees cool the streets on hot summer days. When one is inside the building, everything is monotonous and repetitive, everything looks the same regardless of the season. Therefore, I strongly recommend everyone to go out! Everyone should be within easy reach of a park or garden, within a three to five minute walk. A public park is a therapy for humans. Many studies on this topic show that people who are more connected to nature suffer less from depression or burnout. They also have better social ties and are physically and mentally healthier. I am convinced that the existence of public greenery has a practical benefit for society. Here, people learn real democratic behavior, and thus are able to consider and prioritize natural values in their personal and political decisions. For example, children playing on playgrounds meet other children from different social or even ethnic groups and find that they have a common interest - playing outside! By sharing one space



**Herbert Dreiseitl**

An internationally recognized expert who has won a number of prestigious awards for his work. In 1980, he founded the company Atelier Dreiseitl (now Ramboll Studio Dreiseitl), where he has long worked on projects for habitable and climate-resistant cities, inspired by a deep understanding of water. He is also currently a visiting professor at Singapore National University with a focus on teaching and research. He is a member of the graduate program at Harvard University and a member of the Center for Residential Cities in Singapore. His iconic works today include Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, McLaren Technology Center in London, SolarCity in Linz, Tanner Springs Park in Portland and many more.

they realize that it is better to respect each other. This acceptance of diversity does not occur within the family. This happens on the streets, outdoor playgrounds, parks and gardens.

**The problem of many Czech cities is the detachment of the river from their structure. Flood protection is often preferred over habitability, which often leads to complete inaccessibility of the river. What do you think are the main tools for overcoming the fear of water?**

This is a very important question. Fear of water is deeply rooted in many people. On the other hand, when we look back, all the prosperity of big cities, such as Prague, is related to water, to the presence of a river. The river is transport, but also energy that can be captured. That is why all big cities are located in specific places - by rivers or lakes or on the seashore. The problem is that we later started to reduce rivers, straightened them and took away the space they needed to breathe. And when water can't breathe, it explodes, resulting in uncontrollable flooding and destruction. Today we have to learn that we can work with rivers differently, that water can be retained using various technologies, polders and the like. Cities need to be better integrated into river systems and floodplains through new resilient technologies, using bioengineering and the like. I think that

The metal approach is much better than building large walls separating the city from the river, because the beauty of the river forms the identity of the city. For example, Vltava and Smetana's beautiful composition - this is your identity that society is proud of. I think it is important to fight for our reconnection with such basic things as water, the river. And it can take place on both a small and a large scale. Water management can be more water-friendly and can allow people to regain some confidence in water. Especially in times of climate change, we must learn to work or cooperate with water and build safe, resilient and environmentally friendly water infrastructure. This is far from just a dream, but a proven reality in many places.

**Can you name the most common water management problems in major European cities? Can any identical characters be traced?**

I would like to add a few words to water in relation to the surrounding space in smaller cities. In the Czech Republic you have beautiful small and medium-sized towns. They are located in valleys or just by rivers, sometimes even at the confluences of two or three rivers. And I see tremendous potential here to better adapt these cities to water to make them more beautiful and attractive to live. Greenery and water are a great challenge for garden and landscape architects and consultants. I would like to work here myself now. Both my parents were born in Bruntál, I was in this town on our

## TOPIC: CITIES IN DRY TIME

visiting and talking to the mayor. We hope to agree on a city remediation project that could serve as a prototype for an attractive city and modern development that will keep young people in the city or even attract new families, as well as a model for water management according to current needs.

But back to your question, to the big cities. Many cities are no longer afraid of water and are beginning to develop proactive planning tools for water management and interconnection. I will give examples and start with Nordic cities such as Oslo or Copenhagen. In both cities, I worked on several projects where the primary goal was to slow down rainwater runoff, prevent flooding, and further improve the environment and increase biodiversity. These are the biggest challenges we have in cities. We have covered too much soil with concrete or asphalt, and now it is necessary to change this and incorporate more water-friendly measures and technologies into the urban space - seepage belts, retention tanks, ponds and the like. The second thing we can do is purify the water - we can integrate smaller purification units into the urban space, using the sedimentation and cleaning capabilities of some habitats to ensure better water and air quality and to reduce temperature fluctuations. We saw many great examples where greenery can act as a filter at a conference in Ostrava (Urbanscapes 2019). All major cities - Hamburg, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stuttgart, Munich, Vienna - are moving in this direction. And of course outside Europe, New York with its BIG U (flood protection project) and filtration system, Chicago is part of the Green Roof Program. Also cities in Asia, China and last but not least in Singapore, where they watch the ABC Waters Program (Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Program). Cities around the world are coming up with a strategic plan for how to work proactively with water, both at the city-wide level and at the level of individual city districts, streets and lands. Because it is necessary to work with both river water and rainwater and to retain, filter, soak into the soil or let the water evaporate not only in parks, but also in residential areas and on the streets. Water management needs to be decentralized and left to operate on the principle of a large number of different measures, such as a network. I think that this approach is important not only because of the presence of water as such, but also because of the microclimate in the city. Water and the greenery associated with it have been proven to clean and cool the air, and these interconnected relationships then make cities habitable and more resilient to climatic fluctuations, as a network. I think that this approach is important not only because of the presence of water as such, but also because of the microclimate in the city. Water and the greenery associated with it have been proven to clean and cool the air, and these interconnected relationships then make cities habitable and more resilient to climatic fluctuations.

**In Singapore, you are working on a large-scale project with global implications. You are trying to capture a large part of the rainwater, you are striving for greater independence**

**on water sources from abroad (in this case Malaysia). What are its results so far and what should the final water management system look like?**

Singapore is a very special project, but its focus is also relevant to many other places. Many large cities around the world draw water from their surrounding landscape, sometimes from a great distance. They can be lakes, rivers or boreholes. In short, we bring water from somewhere to our cities, use it, pollute it and release the dirty water back into rivers and the environment. In this way, it is still happening in many parts of the world. Singapore is an island and, with more than five million inhabitants, is dependent on every drop of water. Until 2000, all rainwater was collected in monsoon canals and quickly discharged into the sea. By the way, in most cities, all rainwater flows into the sewers, where it is mixed with wastewater. During heavy rains, the sewerage system is not enough to absorb the rush of rainwater and the polluted mixed water flows directly into streams and rivers. With the growing demand for water, not only for drinking water for households, but also for industry and agriculture, the old systems have had to be transformed, and I am very pleased to be able to take part in this transition. With the help of ABC (Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Program) guidelines, we now try to process, maintain and preserve as much rainwater in the city as possible. 17 tanks have already been built. The Singapore government is therefore trying to contain and purify and reuse all the water that comes into the city. I think this is a necessary path for many cities in the future. Cities are currently too dependent on local water, taking large amounts of water from the landscape for their own use and leaving drought. I think that in the future we will have to recycle much more water and use different quality water for different purposes. We're going to have to catch water, store and reuse. Even in the Czech Republic, cities could go in this direction. Smart cities investing in water work will always be at an advantage. In Europe, this area is being addressed by Vienna, and we are currently planning similar projects in Budapest. Singapore certainly has an edge in the development of technologies and measures, and I am very proud to be a visiting professor of landscaping and water management as a city administration consultant. It is not only the development of new technologies, but also the integration into the urban space and the urban landscape that makes blue-green infrastructure projects successful. Finally, it is also about public involvement. Cities cannot be changed without people, and this is a very interesting challenge, especially for our profession. ■ In Europe, this area is being addressed by Vienna, and we are currently planning similar projects in Budapest. Singapore certainly has an edge in the development of technologies and measures, and I am very proud to be a visiting professor of landscaping and water management as a city administration consultant. It is not only the development of new technologies, but also the integration into the urban space and the urban landscape that makes blue-green infrastructure projects successful. Finally, it is also about public involvement. Cities cannot be changed without people, and this is a very interesting challenge, especially for our profession. ■ In Europe, this area is being addressed by Vienna, and we are currently planning similar projects in Budapest. Singapore certainly has an edge in the development of technology and measures, and I am very proud to be a visiting professor of landscaping and water management as a city administration consultant. It is not only the development of new technologies, but also the integration into the urban space and the urban landscape that makes blue-green infrastructure projects successful. Finally, it is also about public involvement. Cities cannot be changed without people, and this is a very interesting challenge, especially for our profession. ■ as a visiting professor of landscaping and water management I can act as a consultant for the city administration. It is not only the development of new technologies, but also the integration into the urban space and the urban landscape that makes blue-green infrastructure projects successful. Finally, it is also about public involvement. Cities cannot be changed without people, and this is a very interesting challenge, especially for our profession. ■ as a visiting professor of landscaping and water management I can act as a consultant for the city administration. It is not only the development of new technologies, but also the integration into the urban space and the urban landscape that makes blue-green infrastructure projects successful.