

## WHEN CHANGE EMERGES — THE OLYMPIC PARK OF 1972 IN MUNICH

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### ABSTRACT.

Wellbeing and sustainability are integral concepts of the Olympic Park in Munich, Germany built for the 1972 Summer Olympics. The Olympic Park follows a very distinct concept of wellbeing: it fosters a sensation of individual autonomy, a freedom to choose and a sense of participation that can be experienced in the park's architecture, landscape design, visual communication and urban layout alike. This avant-garde concept full of bold idealism was never planned to last just the few weeks during the summer. To ensure the continuation of the park's unique character after the Games, long-term use was addressed in the 1967 competition of concept for the area and its facilities. A second long-term perspective was taken on for the urban development, both in the park's vicinity and the entire city when massively investing in the city's public transportation system.

Over the past fifty years, the 1972 provisions for the Olympic Park have proven to be resilient. The Olympic Park represents the emergence of the concept of sustainability, years before the term was coined and before it became a societal program. Being an artistic synthesis of various disciplines, which follow the ideas of wellbeing and sustainability in their own way, the Olympic Park exhibits an important moment of societal change. As such, it could contribute to the current debate about values for the planning of tomorrow.

### 1. THE SITE

Wellbeing and sustainability are integral concepts of the Olympic Park in Munich, Germany, built for the 1972 Summer Olympics. Both concepts were — although in not quite these terms — intentional for the design of the Olympic Park. Even though these concepts have been part of the global debate for long they became highly topical with the events surrounding Covid-19. Considering their relevance for today, their implementation in the park deserves a closer look.

The Olympic Park is located on the extensive plain of

'Oberwiesenfeld' in the north-west of Munich. The area with an extension of approximately 2.5km (north-south) times 1.5km (west-east) had been a military drill ground since the late 18th century and accommodated Munich's first airport from 1929 onwards. After Munich's extensive destruction in World War II, the area was used for the city's clearance debris. When Munich was chosen as the venue for the XX Olympic Games, an architectural competition was held for the overall artistic concept and design of the Olympic sports facilities in 1967, which was won by the office of Behnisch & Partner. The ensemble of the Olympic Park completed by 1972 falls into



Fig. 1. Behnisch & Partner, Olympic Park, Munich, Germany, 1967–72, architectural landscape of the core zone. © City of Munich, Michael Nagy, 2012.

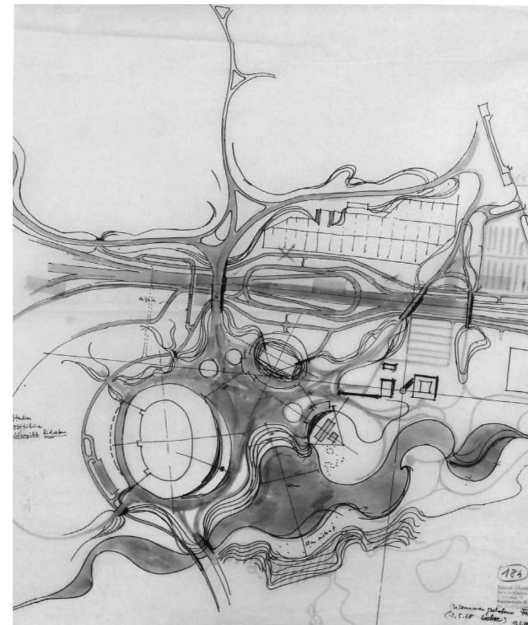


Fig. 2. Behnisch & Partner, design sketch for the core zone of the Olympic Parc. © Behnisch & Partner, Karl-Heinz Weber, 1968.

two areas that are sharply separated from each other by the east-west running highway of the 'Mittlerer Ring'. In the south, the main sports facilities such as the stadium, sports hall and indoor swimming pool, the secondary sports facilities and the buildings erected before 1967 such as the television tower and the ice-skating arena form the core of the complex (Fig. 1). To the north are the former Olympic Village and what is now the university sports centre. In 1998, the Olympic Park has been listed as a monument.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. THE MANY FACETS OF WELLBEING

While it seems obvious that parks, especially sport parks, promote human health and wellbeing in general, the Olympic Park in Munich follows a very distinct concept to enhance subjective wellbeing: it fosters a sensation of individual autonomy, a freedom to choose and a sense of participation that can be experienced in the park's architecture, landscape design, visual communication and urban layout alike.

The consistency of this experience has been the result of

a quite literal implementation of the central theme for the 1972 Olympic Games. To clearly distance themselves from the 1936 Berlin Games in Nazi Germany the Olympics in Munich were planned as a venue for a democratic and pluralistic society with short distances between all points of interest and amidst lush greenery aiming for an atmosphere of "openness, transparency and straightforwardness."<sup>2</sup> The individual disciplines, architecture, landscape design, visual communication and urban layout, have each addressed this request with their own approaches, of which some are presented in the following.

#### 2.1. Aiming for the Small Scale

The main sports facilities of the southern part with their indeed large volumes are not realized as single buildings but are embedded in an architectural landscape which is then carefully connected to the northern part (Fig. 2). In order to integrate the buildings into the landscape in such a way that they almost disappear into it, Behnisch & Partner has developed an overarching design approach that is based



Fig. 3. Günther Grzimek, landscape design for the individual. © City of Munich, Wiepke van Aaken, 2020.

on the artificial landscape of the renatured debris mountain, the 'Olympiabergr'. The mountain's shape is the model for the entire area. It is continued to the north with lower heights and in varying shapes. On its northern slope, the Nymphenburg-Biedersteiner canal is dammed up into a lake with a winding shoreline. Beyond the lake the large sports venues lean against another hill. The stadium, sports hall and swimming pool are linked by a connecting tentlike roof. Its shape is a reminiscent of the form of the landscape.

## 2.2. Connecting Indoors and Outdoors

The primary as well as the secondary sports facilities of the core area show an extensive use of light materials such as glass facades for the sports hall, swimming pool and the warm-up hall and the translucent covering of the iconic tentlike structure. This lightweight construction with the design by Frei Otto and static calculations by Fritz Leonhardt and Wolfhard Andrä radically minimizes the use of materials — at least for its parts above the ground. The tensile structure holding acrylic panels and being suspended from pylons creates the impression of a just temporary construction, although it was realized with considerable constructional effort. The "roof without shade" shields all three sports facilities in regular curves, creates a gate situation between the southern and the northern part of the Olympic Park and another gate between the sports hall and swimming pool. In addition, with paving materials that extend from the outdoors to the indoors this architecture without

conventional but blurring boundaries evokes the sensation of being under the sky, having visual control of what's going on in the nearer and farther surroundings.

## 2.3. Stimulating Individual Use

The claim to create social spaces with more autonomy for the individual is inherent in the park's architecture. For the landscape design, this claim was explicitly expressed by its designer Günther Grzimek, which he later summarized as a call "to take possession of the lawn".<sup>3</sup> Thus, user guidance is kept minimal and communicated by the horticultural design. Certain species of plants are designated to specific areas:<sup>4</sup> the 'Olympiabergr' is studded with mountain pines, the paths are marked by linden trees which are organized on an orthogonal grid, white willows grow along the watercourses and the sickle-shaped parking area is assigned to Norway maple trees. Functions of the park are not pre-terminated. Instead, the design of the landscape has a stimulative nature and invites users to all sorts of individual activities without being too specific: in the entire park, quiet areas of retreat and open spaces are provided, but playgrounds were not planned. The individual use of the green areas, including the development of new trails, is welcomed (Fig. 3). The 'Olympiabergr' and its neighbouring elevations are crossed by winding, narrow paths which allow visual connections to all directions and on all heights. In the rather flat, northern part of the Olympic Park paths are elevated on embankments. The landscape is no longer a hierarchical-

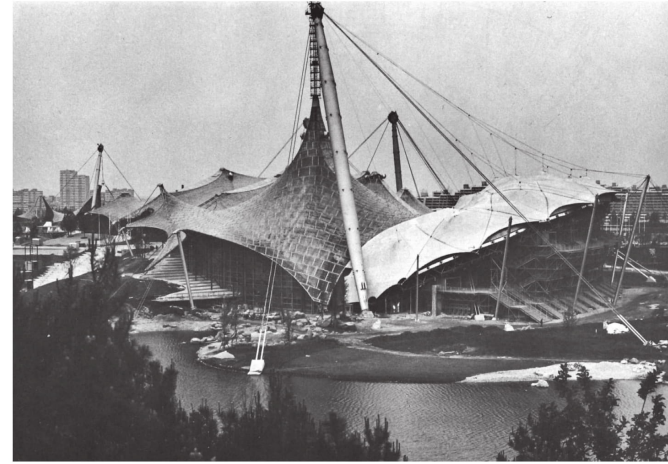


Fig. 4. Behnisch & Partner, Olympic swimming pool with adjacent temporary tribune. © Behnisch & Partner, Christian Kandzia, 1972.

ly structured composition, but rather based on the conditions of the location, oriented towards the individual needs of a pluralistic society in the second half of the 20th century.

## 2.4. Being Inclusive

The consistent visual communication by lettering, signposts, logos and pictograms serves for a good orientation of users throughout the park. It is based on a coded palette of six highly saturated chromatic colours<sup>5</sup> and is applied also on building components. Guidance in the Olympic Village is complemented by a system of elevated coloured tubings by Hans Hollein. Sports pictograms by Otl Aicher together with Gerhard Joksch show figures which express the character of the respective sport through the dynamics of a typical movement. Service pictograms by Otl Aicher together with Alfred Kern, Rolf Müller and Elena Winschermann serve to visually communicate facilities, services and processes. The visual design and orientation system create an aesthetic climate that underlines the cheerful, carefree character of the summer games. It is a universal visual language that later became an international standard and the "Esperanto of globalization".<sup>6</sup>

## 2.5. Reaching into the Urban

The park appears to be a continuation and accentuation of the city, but also extends as green corridors into the city,<sup>7</sup> despite the park's bordering large traffic arteries. Urban connections have been created between the 17th century

Nymphenburg palace and the English Garden via the Nymphenburg-Biedersteiner canal from the east to the west and between the city centre in the south and the lakes in the north. Finally, the park visually incorporates the surroundings, opens to them through open and flat edges and stretches into its adjoining areas, especially in the south and southwest. The park is thus the extension of the human scale into the park's vicinity. Unlike the typical urban planning concepts of the "structured and sprawling city" and "urbanity through density", the Olympic Park shows an independent concept of urban space. With its reconciliation of city and landscape it stands for a paradigm shift.

## 3. LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

While a sensation of individual autonomy, a freedom to choose and a sense of participation in the park was the main goal for the 1972 Olympic Games, it was never planned to last just for the few weeks during summer. The requirements of the competition provided for a long-term continuation of the park's character.

### 3.1. Making Prerequisites

The call for bids for the competition of ideas did not stress the importance of the park's long-term use, or even tried a theoretical approach to this, but listed in great detail requirements for the Olympic Games subsequent use in its programme.<sup>8</sup> Some tribunes (Fig. 4) and most restaurants



were planned to be just temporary. The request for ten bowling allies and provisions for public and club swimming illustrates that long-term functions were aligned with the growing interest of citizens for recreation and amateur sports. Turning the Olympic Village into a residential area should ease Munich's housing shortage. The approach for long-term use was supported by the designers. Grzimek emphasized: "It is not only important to set the scene for the XX Olympic Games. It is the post-Olympic use which is decisive for the planning concept."<sup>9</sup> After the Games the Olympic men's village was sold as condominiums, the low-rise buildings in the women's village were converted into 1,800 apartments for students, the press city to the west of the Olympic Parc turned into 1,100 apartments, and the television and radio centre got used as the central university sports facility of the Technical University of Munich. In 1970, even before the Games, the Olympiapark München GmbH (OMG) was established as a 100% owned subsidiary by the City of Munich to manage the facilities of the Olympic park's core zone and to develop their future use for concerts, congresses, sports events and alike.<sup>10</sup> Later Olympic cities such as Montreal in 1976, Athens in 2004 or Beijing in 2008 were hardly able to reuse their prestigious buildings and sports venues in a meaningful way.

### 3.2. Delivering Infrastructure

The 'Oberwiesenfeld' is located a few kilometres from the city centre, but there was only rudimentary access to the area before 1972. For the Summer Games, short-term solutions to this constraint would probably have been easy to implement. But this was never the intention. Instead, the city of Munich massively invested in public transportation not only for this specific area but for the entire city, in times when car-friendly towns were still the standard. Before the decision to host the Games in Munich, plans existed to establish a local transportation system with S-Bahn and U-Bahn for the city<sup>11</sup> but these should have been implemented in stages and with a much longer horizon. The city now accelerated their realisation and decided in addition less than two months after the award of the Olympic Games, to build a proper underground line, the 'Olympialinie'. The construction of this line, that should become the feeder line to the Olympic Park, was given priority.<sup>12</sup> A four-track suburban railway station and a generous bus station should provide further access to the Olympic Park. The Games were not just an engine for the public transportation system, the construction of the ring roads for individual transport, the 'Altstadtring' and 'Mittlerer Ring', had also been accelerated. For the 1964 Games in Tokyo, 95% of the costs were used exclusively for urban infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> In Munich, this approach was continued, and the Olympic Games were used for far-reaching urban redevelopment measures. Instead of the motto "Munich for the Olympics", the political decision-makers did go for the strategy "Olympics for Munich".<sup>14</sup> The Games turned into a fast-forward modernisation pro-

cess of the city which had again a great impact on the (self) perception of Germany.

Long-term planning can doubtlessly never foresee the future in its entirety. However, the provisions of 1972 for the Olympic Park have proven to be resilient over the past 50 years. Intergenerational planning, more precisely "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"<sup>15</sup> was first described as the concept of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987. The Olympic Park represents the emergence of this concept, years before the term was even coined and before it became a societal program.

## 4. CONCEPTS REVISITED

The Olympic Park was the most important construction project in the Federal Republic of Germany around 1970. It enjoys international recognition as it anticipates global socio-political changes. Jürgen Joedicke said in 1968 "what we are supposed to build in Munich is increasingly turning out to be an utopia that has nothing to do with reality, but rather represents a state of the possible and the desirable."<sup>16</sup>

Today, the concepts of wellbeing and sustainability have become a societal matter of course, but are currently challenged to be taken to the next level. Just like in 1972, the population of Munich sees another significant demographic growth. The needs for more housing and working places in the area adjacent to the Olympic Park question the existing height of eaves and thus the strong ties between the park and its surroundings. The growing want for recreation, especially in times of the pandemic, pushes in turn the Olympic Park on the edge of attrition. The current developments are a call to reconnect to the outstanding concept of the Olympic Park in order to respond to the needs of the next generations.

Being an artistic synthesis of various disciplines, which follow the ideas of wellbeing and sustainability in their own way, the Olympic Park exhibits an important moment of societal change. As such, it could contribute to the current debate about values for the planning of tomorrow.

## NOTES

- 1 For mapping and description see BayernAtlas, accessed on March 11, 2021, [https://geoportal.bayern.de/bayernatlas/?zoom=9&lang=de&topic=ba&bgLayer=luftbild\\_labels&E=689829.92&N=5339090.42&layers=6f5a389c4ef34b5a9916475f05c3962b.044eccef4b23478c8f12e2182559d036.d0e7d4ea62d8446a035a099654330bedc.9d0e3859bee574440094391ba19b45fbb8&layers\\_opacity=0.55,0.85,0.8,0.45&catalogNodes=130](https://geoportal.bayern.de/bayernatlas/?zoom=9&lang=de&topic=ba&bgLayer=luftbild_labels&E=689829.92&N=5339090.42&layers=6f5a389c4ef34b5a9916475f05c3962b.044eccef4b23478c8f12e2182559d036.d0e7d4ea62d8446a035a099654330bedc.9d0e3859bee574440094391ba19b45fbb8&layers_opacity=0.55,0.85,0.8,0.45&catalogNodes=130).
- 2 Günter Behnisch, Fritz Auer, Winfried Büxel, Erhard Tränker, Karl-Heinz Weber, & Jürgen Joedicke, "Entwurf, Koordination aller Einzelleistungen, künstlerische Oberleitung", Stuttgart-Vaihingen, *Architekturwettbewerbe*, 1969, IV/1-31, 4.
- 3 Title of an exhibition for the insurance Bayerische Rückversicherung in 1983. The exhibition presented seven assumptions that have been reprinted in: Günther Grzimek & Rainer Stephan, "Sieben Thesen", Stefanie Hennecke, Regine Keller, & Juliane Schneegans (eds.), *Demokratisches Grün Olympiapark München*, Munich, jovis, 2013, 166/157.
- 4 A comprehensive analysis is provided by Katrin Schulze, *Olympiapark München Parkpflegewerk*, unpublished paper, Munich/Berlin, 2012.

- 5 For details see City of Munich Department for Urban Design (ed.), *Olympiapark München Gestaltungshandbuch 2012*, Munich, 2015, 43-75.
- 6 Sebastian Heilig, "der Sportlerstrich von München", *Spiegel Online*, 2008, accessed on March 19, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/piktogramm-a-946708.html>.
- 7 See the sketches in Behnisch, Auer, Büxel, Tränker, Weber, & Joedicke, "Entwurf, Koordination aller Einzelleistungen, künstlerische Oberleitung", IV/6-11.
- 8 "Aufgabe, Programm des Wettbewerbs", *Architekturwettbewerbe*, 1969, II/4-12.
- 9 Günther Grzimek, "Bau der Landschaft", *Architekturwettbewerbe*, 1970, 36.
- 10 The comparison of the report after 25 years of activity with the report after 47 years demonstrates how activities of the OMG have been continuously expanded. Berichte aus der Schriftenreihe Münchner Statistik der Jahre ab 1948-1999, "25 Jahre Olympiapark", accessed on March 19, 2021, <https://www.muenchen.de/rathaus/Stadtfos/Statistik/Historisches/Bildung-Kultur-und-Freizeit.html> and Archiv der Jahresberichte, "Geschäftsbericht 2019", accessed on March 19, 2021, <https://www.olympiapark.de/de/der-olympiapark/olympiapark-muenchen-gmbh/geschaeftsbericht/>.
- 11 For an overview on urban development measures see Robert Geipi, Ilse Helbrecht, & Jürgen Pohl, "Die Münchner Olympischen Spiele von 1972 als Instrument der Stadtentwicklungspolitik", Hartmut Häussermann & Walter Siebel (eds.), *Festwalisierung der Stadtpolitik. Stadtentwicklung durch große Projekte*, Opladen, 1993, 278-304, 285.
- 12 For description and appreciation see Wiepke van Aaken, Burkhard Körner, "München im Aufbruch. Die Olympia-U-Bahn-Linie", Ralf Liptau, Verena Pfeiffer-Kloss, & Frank Schmitz (eds.), *Underground Architecture Revisited*, Deutscher Architektur Verlag, Berlin, 2020, 124-31.
- 13 Sandra Zenk, "Städtebauliche Perspektiven erfolgloser Olympiabewerbungen. Vergleichende Analyse zur Stadtentwicklung", PhD diss. University of Stuttgart, 2015, 30.
- 14 Geipi, Helbrecht, & Pohl, "Die Münchner Olympischen Spiele von 1972 als Instrument der Stadtentwicklungspolitik", 285.
- 15 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1987, II.
- 16 Quoted from Stuttgart University Archives, Wästenrot Stiftung, Jürgen Joedicke, 1925-2015. *Notes from the Archive*, Stuttgart, 2020, 68.