



## TEMPELHOF AIRPORT IN BERLIN IS NOW AN AD HOC PARK WITH A WIDE-OPEN FUTURE.

BY MICHAEL DUMIAK

**U**NDER THE OPEN SKY AT TEMPELHOFER FELD in Berlin, on the edge of a wide meadow, there is a tree of heaven. Ingo Kowarik pointed this out while skirting the tall grass, looking up from damp Saint-John's-wort and thick *Calamagrostis* brush.

Kowarik, an urban ecologist and the capital's commissioner for nature conservation, says trees of heaven, *Ailanthus altissima*, first arrived in Germany as ornamentals from China in the late 18th century. Perhaps they stood together with the follies and pagodas in the royal parks where Voltaire strolled in Potsdam and Napoleon napped in Charlottenburg. The tree of heaven is common enough now. The species really took off in Berlin by spreading through demolished areas after World War II. It appears to have made its way by chance to Tempelhof, the former central airport and sprawling 900-acre site of the Berlin Airlift.

Happenstance and the past are good lenses through which to take the measure of Tempelhofer Feld and its surprising present. Right now it is a vast city playground of unusual openness, a spectacularly undesigned and beloved public space. It lacks many of the usual markings, objects, and design elements that say "public park." Instead, Tempelhofer Feld's main defining pathways are gigantic old runways. The place has official status as public space but is made into a big city park by virtue of what people do there: stroll, cycle, kitesurf. Or stretch out, relax, and do nothing.

Like much of Berlin, Tempelhof is a portal to recent history. It is a place directly connected to Nazi visions of grandeur and was host to slave labor camps. It has also been a former American air base, a mooring mast to the Graf Zeppelin airships, a parade ground to Prussian troops, an exhibition ground for Wilbur and Orville Wright's pioneering aircraft, and more recently a home to rock and roll and fashion festivals. Viewed as a landscape, it is meadowland. Kowarik talks about it as a new instance of urban wild. Tempelhof's flat fields are home to a rare species of beetle, notable *Oedipoda caerulea* grasshoppers, skylarks, meadowlands of fescue and yarrow, as well as a disused radar station.

Talking with architects, planners, land-use experts, botanists, and Berliners clarifies what you notice now just by stepping through the gate onto the field. It's been five years since the airport closed; three and a half years since it was opened as public space. The place feels unique and free. Even so, it is a giant piece of extremely valuable real estate in the heart of a capital city and a place that may soon be the site of hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of development.

At the moment, nobody's exactly sure what that will look like.

Tempelhofer Feld was Berlin Tempelhof Airport until the airport closed in the fall of 2008. It is a 909-acre oval, an oblong mirror larger than Central Park. The site is bounded to the west and north by large avenues and to the south by a commuter rail line and city highway. On the northwest corner is the flat 56-acre concrete apron. It is shaded under the curving three-quarter-mile wingspan of the hangar complex and passenger terminal. This single structure is still one of the largest freestanding buildings in the world. It's a monumental centerpiece, and the attendant offices, all made from



shell limestone, have an architectural lineage caught between Nazi ego and modernist aspiration. From the apron, taxiways lead to the parallel mile-and-a-half-long runways that split the field. Far across the meadows on the eastern side is the first row of the Schillerkiez, a neighborhood marking an edge of the large, scrappy, poor, artsy, and slowly gentrifying borough of Neukölln.

At the end of a late autumn day, Tempelhofer Feld is bustling, even with an early chill in the air. Skateboarders roll down the runway pulled by parachute-sized kites. Cyclists glide. Kowarik, a soft-spoken and thoughtful Berliner with wire-rimmed glasses and a sensible jacket, walks across the avenue from the commuter rail station and through a gate near a sign blaring: "Who Owns the City? Preserve 100% of the Tempelhofer Field!" The sign is the work of a group, 100% Tempelhofer Feld, that is trying to collect enough signatures for a referendum on the site's future. It is by now the third attempt at a public referendum. The first, in 2008, was from a group that, with the support of

AERIAL VIEW OF TEMPELHOF IN USE AS AN ACTIVE AIRPORT. COURTESY FEDERAL ARCHIVE



**ABOVE**  
The apron at Tempelhof.

**INSET, OPPOSITE**  
Planes lined up on the apron at Tempelhof during the Berlin Airlift of 1948.



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German Chancellor Angela Merkel, wanted to keep the field open as an airport. The second was from a group agitating to make the place a UNESCO site. This latest effort aims to keep Tempelhof exactly as it is right now—a public park with minimal design and no development.

Right now, Kowarik is more interested in spotting small, late-blooming flowering plants. An older man getting the hang of an electric unicycle whirs by, and a woman on bouncy stilts *boings* down the taxiway. Kowarik grins and points to perimeter asphalt and more weathered concrete along the edges. “People think you have to remove everything to make a nice habitat. This is not the best idea,” he says. “The grasshopper likes the concrete here; it’s a good habitat for lichens and



**ABOVE**

Cricketers—mostly immigrants from Pakistan—play a match on the runway in the far distance along the edge of one of Tempelhof’s newly mown meadows. The asphalt grid to the right is part of the old airfield’s taxiways gone to seed, now home to lichen, pioneer plants, and grasshoppers.

**OPPOSITE**

Kite- and windsurfing down the runways is a popular pastime on a sunny day.

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pioneer plants. It is a reminder of the history of this place, and an important biotope as well.” A little farther into the lawn there are sprays of small yellow flowering perennials—narrow-leaved ragwort, Kowarik says. *Senecio inaequidens* is a newcomer. “It comes from South Africa and [is] spreading here only for a few decades. It’s blown by the wind.” Starting in western Germany in the Ruhr valley, *Senecio* traveled along the sides of the autobahns. It arrived in Berlin a few years after the Wall fell. Kowarik, who is also a professor at Berlin’s Technical University, specializes in invasion biology. “This is alien, for sure,” he says. “I think there are really problematic alien species, and then there are others. The majority is not problematic.”

*Senecio*, he says, blooms along the taxiway, where it sprouts here and there until the first deep frost. The former taxiways on the Tempelhofer Feld make what is effectively an inner ring inside the oval site. From here inward begins a gently sloping green meadow, short and sweet smelling if recently mown, but up to your calves when not. In the distance it is wilder and overgrown, tipped in pale yellow and waving strands. In short order, Kowarik spots cocksfoot, flattened meadow grass, *Potentilla argentea*—silver cinquefoil—and, as the meadow gets thicker, hedge bedstraw, and then, finally, the wilder tansy and thigh-high bushgrass. The mix is abnormal for a park. “It is typical of meadows and grasslands. If you don’t mow or graze the areas, then tall herbs will emerge like this one,” he says. Most of the Tempelhofer Feld is a grassland because of the history of the place. “These areas have never been built upon, first because of agriculture and then because of the airport. They’ve been kept open for centuries. Unlike your prairies in the United States, we have almost no natural grasslands. If you do not mow it or allow grazing by animals, it will turn into a forest.”

And so the Tempelhofer meadows are mown on a regular schedule with a high degree of precision. The rolling area with the tansy and the old airplane once used for firefighting practice is due to be mown this year; it is one of two large areas mown on a three-year schedule. The majority of the field is mown, in varying quadrants, once a year. The meadows are a large habitat for skylarks, the “LBBs” or little brown birds that sing over the park in spring and summer. They are protected.

Because of intensifying agriculture their habitat is shrinking rapidly. “They build their nests on the ground. They need a good view because they want to see their enemies approaching,” Kowarik says.

Along the northern edge of the field, continuing clockwise, there is what is called the Old Harbor, which was the first site for the nascent airstrip and is a little more developed. A line of trees, old poplars and oaks, shelters what’s known colloquially as the picnic ground of the Americans—during the Cold War, half of Tempelhof was used as a U.S. Air Force base. Two baseball fields are here—the ping of the aluminum bat still rings out now in the summer—as are the park’s sole biergarten and shade groves. These areas, running up to the community gardens that are sprouting up along the Schillerkiez edge, are mown more frequently, 10 to 12 times a year; they are bustling.

Along the southern edges of the field, the broad flat meadows return. Part of this region is reserved for skylarks.



The person responsible for keeping the lawn mowers running on time sits in an office in the deep end of one of the terminal hangars, one of only a few Berliners with a ground-level, mile-long unobstructed view from his window. This past summer, the band My Bloody Valentine played a hugely loud set in the

hangar section outside his window during a blissfully warm weekend festival. Michael Krebs, the park manager for the state-owned park management company Grün Berlin, seems more of a Mozart fellow. He has a fondness for subtlety in action. “I’m a little proud of the point that many people do not mention or realize that the park is managed,” Krebs says. “People have the idea or impression that it is completely free. But it isn’t. We try to conduct it carefully and sensibly, and are quite tolerant to most users of the park.”

The carefully designed mowing patterns are an important part of the management regime. Big parts of the meadows with skylarks are kept short but unkempt; a much more frequently mown 30-foot strip is shaved very close around the edges. The meadows aren’t fenced, but visitors get the message to tread carefully and give the skylarks a break by staying mostly on the strips. The skylark population is stable and actually increased last year. And Krebs is right about the free feeling.

COURTESY TEMPELHOFFER FREIHEIT



Tempelhof, first slated for closure in 1996, had been a bone of contention for years. Traffic dwindled, neighbors complained about the noise, and Berlin had three airports—one in the west, one in the former east, and one in the middle—but Tempelhof had its supporters. As the city finally made moves in 2007 to shut Tempelhof, posters plastered neighborhoods asking: “Berlin: World City or Backwater?” in support of a public initiative to keep the field open and functioning as an airport. The initiative garnered enough support to get on a ballot in 2008 but failed. It closed that October.

The site sat fenced off until 2010, when the city emerged blinking from a long dark winter to find new gates open in several places around the field. It drew double takes from Berliners who’d forgotten about the whole thing: Now anyone can come into the place? And ride a bicycle...down the runway that bore the airlift? It was exhilarating, odd, but not so odd. In this city, it’s easy to forget that it’s only been 15 years since the federal government convened back in Berlin after moving from Bonn. So many artfully distressed buildings in this city have been repurposed on boho budgets—into clubs, squats, pop-up shops—while the authorities figure out what to do on an official level. It didn’t seem so strange that it could happen to an airport. Like the tree of heaven out in the meadow, it might feel like a patch of color that just drifted in. But what’s happening around it is more complicated.

“There was a big discussion within the administration whether to open the field to the public or not,” says Martin Pallgen, sitting at a conference table in another hangar office overlooking the park. Pallgen is a colleague of Krebs and an energetic spokesman for Tempelhof Projekt. The Projekt is responsible for the concrete—the huge building—and developing the overall site.

Grün Berlin is responsible for the green—managing the park—and also for developing. Both report to the city senate. “Some said it would be better to keep it fenced until we start with the development of this area,” Pallgen says. The pressure was too great, with 900 acres of the city bordering on three boroughs, for it to stay locked up. “It is well-used by the public in the condition you see outside—pure, vast, without any incentives,” Pallgen says. “There is nothing and people love it.” Figures for Tempelhofer Feld are holding steady at between 30,000 and 50,000 visitors a week.

As last winter came on, though, Krebs and Grün Berlin planted the next stand in what’s planned to be 260 trees near the picnic ground of the Americans—oak, linden, honey locust, wild cherry, maple, poplar, and willow. Pallgen’s group is in the process of filing the opening papers for building rights on the first of four strips along the southern edges of the Tempelhofer Feld. “Let’s say, nothing is decided yet,” is one of the first things Pallgen says when sitting down. He’s been around the block. But there is a plan.

Drawn up by the landscape architecture studio GROSS.MAX., headed by Eelco Hooftman and Bridget Baines in Edinburgh, Scotland, this plan won an international design competition held by the Berlin senate over several months in 2010 and 2011. The €60 million (\$81 million) GROSS.MAX. concept smooths the edges of the park and allows for residential development while—Krebs and Pallgen are at pains to argue—retaining both the meadows and the wide feel that is essential to the place and that critics of Tempelhof development fear will go away. Centered around intersecting sets of ellipses—new pathways, the former taxiways, and a new landform built as a slope between the quarter mile separating the two runways—

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—THE COMPOSER LISA BIELAWA, WHO WAS INSPIRED TO CREATE A NEW PIECE WITH MUSICIANS PLACED THROUGHOUT THE PARK.



**TOP**  
One of the concepts for the new €270 million public library, part of the city's effort to develop Tempelhof.

**LEFT**  
GROSS.MAX.'s master plan, chosen by the city to be the template of the future.

**RIGHT**  
Rendering from raumlaborberlin, a design collaborative commissioned to imagine ways for the airfield to develop in the future.

COURTESY TEMPELHOFFER FREIHEIT, TOP, COURTESY TEMPELHOFFER FREIHEIT, DE., LEFT, COURTESY RAUMLABORBERLIN, RIGHT

COURTESY TEMPELHOFFER FREIHEIT

the plan aims to accommodate other people who might want to use the park but are not right now. "We can really understand people who would say, 'why do your intervention?'" Hooftman says. "I don't agree with that point of view. That's a bit like Darwin. It's for the young and hedonistic who can interact with this huge meadow. But what about old people, or children? Or people from different ethnic backgrounds? We have to make it more public, especially along the edges."

As it stands now, the city plan carves 340 acres from the parkland area, mostly on the southern edge, for residential development, a technology park, and a €270 million new central city library. A Berlin jury recently tapped Zurich-based architecture studio MOA and Stuttgart's Kohlmeier Oberst as finalists in the competition for the library, with a decision to come this spring. Pallgen says 570 acres will remain free space. Hooftman says that will remain meadow, an urban prairie. "It's very clear that the sheer beauty and strength and power of Tempelhof is its sense of openness."

Just how open it will feel after new residential development is a pivotal question. The neighbors—many of whom are nervous, to say the least, about rent hikes and gentrification—already have a long taste of the park as it is now. Large residential buildings will make the park smaller and at the same time much more upscale. So there's good reason to be nervous if you're a renter: Although a piece of this project is slated for affordable housing at \$10 per square meter, a development on this scale facing sculpted public green space is going to increase the upward pressure on rents that already exists in the surrounding neighborhoods. And although the legal details are still being debated, it seems likely the land itself will be sold outright to the residential developers. Of course, Pallgen points out, if this were happening in Seoul there'd be finished high-rises covering everything by now, or so he was told by incredulous South Koreans visiting his office. Hooftman says there's no reason to hurry; he is not fazed by the prospect of a new city vote. Parks are defined by their edges. Over time what that means for Tempelhof in Berlin is being decided. "It's a fair discussion."

Krebs realizes any designer would be in a pickle. "We opened this area at the same time we were planning to make a park out of it. This is a big difference from other parks," he says. It's nor-

mally a decade-long affair that ends with a politician cutting a red ribbon. Over and over again in the past decade, Tempelhof has absorbed the vision of the huge variety of people looking at it. A *London Times* writer in 2006 had it becoming a giant luxury clinic for plastic surgery financed by the Estée Lauder family. The science writer Sybe Rispen and the graphic artist Martin Brosch gained Berlin's attention by proposing that Tempelhof should be flooded into a huge lake. An equally colorful idea passed around had a giant mountain built on the site. "What sense does it make to preserve two landing strips in mothballs and pretend that you are conserving one of the greatest airports in history?" says Rispen, a Hollander from the sea-blown flatlands of Friesland. "Everything around it will be gone and changed. What you'll have is an autobahn without cars. Why would you do that?"



The lake wasn't part of the official design competition, though Rispen does have an angle on conserving the space. "The only way to be sure that future generations will not build apartments is to make it a lake," Rispen says. "How do you preserve an area like this in Berlin? The idea has to be superbig."

Tempelhofer stands in some contrast to another nearby park newly opened in Berlin, the Gleisdreieck (see "Neue Nature," p. 116), designed

by the landscape architects of Atelier Loidl. On a late summer afternoon, Loidl's Gleisdreieck project manager, Leonard Grosch, took a stroll through the meadows at Tempelhof. He made comparisons between the parks as a mowing machine whirred over the sweetgrass. "There are no objects here. Only surfaces," he says. "People use the surfaces as they like; they use the vastness and distance of the space. In many parks barbecuing is forbidden. Here you can do it. People are astonished all the time, as I am now, that it is so vast and big and fresh here."

Tempelhofer Feld may well be headed for a future more manicured than wild. Currently, though, it remains caught in the city's unpredictable urban flux. One of the GROSS.MAX. plan's notable features is a seven-acre water basin—an object that will also serve as a catch for rainwater. As winter began there was a fence around the perimeter but no digging going on. One of the 100% Tempelhof initiative's allies appealed to a court to stop it because they had not been consulted. And now, since that recent public referendum effort has succeeded,



**ABOVE**

Classic view of the airport's large apron in front of the hangar and terminal complex.

**INSET, OPPOSITE**

Through meadow and bushgrass a visitor to Tempelhofer Feld can still find small paths worn by the past. On this ridge is the hulk of an old airplane once used for firefighting practice.



COURTESY FEDERAL ARCHIVE, TOP; MICHAEL DUMIAK, INSET

it seems that yet another vote will be held on the direction of this transitory green place.

So spare a thought for Michael Krebs: He's managing a park that either hasn't been designed yet or has been conceived already thousands of times over in the imaginations of quite vocal people, one of whom, Ingo Kowarik, later recommends to Grün Berlin that the tree of heaven has to go. "It's producing a lot of fruit, and that could be difficult because of the invasion potential," he says, laughing. "Usually I like them very much. Normally it comes back. It's persistent." ●

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