

Ludger Gailing

## Regional open space strategies



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URN: 0156-55996552

*This is a translation of the following entry:*

Gailing, Ludger (2018): Freiraumkonzepte-regionale. In: ARL – Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung (Hrsg.): Handwörterbuch der Stadt- und Raumentwicklung. Hannover, 735-746.

*The original version can be accessed here:*

urn:nbn:de:0156-5599655

Typesetting and layout: ProLinguo GmbH

Translation and proofreading: ProLinguo GmbH

Recommended citation:

Gailing, Ludger (2018): Regional open space strategies.

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0156-55996552>.

# Regional open space strategies

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Regional parks, green belts, and other regional open space strategies form part of the regional management of the landscape in urban regions. This takes place through project-oriented, collaborative processes, with coordinated measures intended to protect open spaces by ensuring their use and enhancing their aesthetic qualities. They thus supplement the formal instruments of regional planning.

# 1 Reasons and relevance

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Today's agglomeration areas (▷ *Agglomeration, Agglomeration area*) are the product of past land take from open spaces (Selle 2000). The transformation of an open space into a settlement and transport area (quantitative loss of open space) results in structural changes to the open space, such as fragmentation (▷ *Open space*), and a qualitatively negative change to the remaining open spaces in urban regions, whereby their functionality and aesthetics are constricted (Gailing 2005). Fragmented urban landscapes have developed as a result of the mutual interpenetration of settlements and open space. Their appearance and the quality of life they offer are influenced by the remaining open spaces.

Planning efforts to protect open spaces traditionally focused on the formal instruments of ▷ *Spatial planning*, ▷ *Urban land-use planning*, and ▷ *Landscape planning*. The goal was to enable or prevent building or other uses of open spaces as a defensive move to preserve them. Such instruments were required to support project-based strategies or other measures to improve and qualitatively shape these spaces. As the content of formal plans for open spaces tend to be highly abstract and difficult to visualise in the flesh, local residents and the relevant decision-makers rarely had a clear awareness of their implications. The regional associations, bodies responsible for landscape outline plans, and specially established organisations which initiated the development of strategies and concepts to the regional development of open spaces from the early 1990s intended them as a response to these intrinsic weaknesses of the formal planning instruments in the face of the unabating, significant loss of open space. These types of collaboration-oriented solutions were also obvious because market mechanisms also cannot contribute to the protection of open spaces due to the 'common good' nature (▷ *Common assets*) of open space (Maruani/Amit-Cohen 2007: 3).

Another reason for developing regional parks was the need for a new structure arising from the growing complexity of the urban region. Hybrid terms such as ▷ *Urban region* and ▷ *Urban landscape* (Kühn 1998) testified to the new spatial structures that had emerged as the discrete city, town, and landscape (▷ *City, town, ▷ Landscape*) as they were traditionally understood hybridised. At the latest, the debate about the 'in-between city' initiated by Sieverts (1999) made it clear that as agglomeration areas emerged, the traditionally dichotomous notions of a town or city and their surrounding open spaces had dissolved. On the one hand, deindustrialisation and economic stagnation were leaving derelict land (▷ *Brownfield site, derelict/vacant site*), which meant that open spaces and the cultural heritage of industrial modernity were becoming the basis for qualitative improvement strategies. On the other, the competition of the urban and metropolitan regions (▷ *Metropolitan region*) intensified the pressure on open spaces, such that enhancing them seemed necessary. Open spaces were increasingly being identified as development resources (Hartz/Kestermann 2004), and thus those responsible for spatial development began to focus on regional parks and regional networks of open spaces.

## 2 Clarification of the term

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Regional open space strategies are not, however, a phenomenon of the past 25 years, but rather have a long conceptual and developmental history. Examples referred to here include 20th-century concepts of green space in urban regions, such as in the Ruhr area or in Hamburg (von Petz 2001), as well as the associated representations of greenbelts, 'green fingers', or green corridors in spatial plans (Maruani/Amit-Cohen 2007). The basic logic of these early concepts stemmed from the classic, rational model of planning (Amati 2008), and they were ultimately dependent on the formal instruments of regional planning. Collaborative organisational forms (▷ *Cooperative planning*) for implementing projects that went beyond the formal protection of open spaces did not yet form the basis of these approaches.

Since the early 1990s, strategies for regional open space have formed part of the ▷ *Regional management* of open spaces and landscapes, focusing on 'city outskirts, the spaces between settlements, suburban spaces, or periurban landscapes' (Hokema 2013: 156). Open spaces in urban regions are to be protected by enhancing them through various ways. Regional open space strategies aim to develop green belts, green corridors, regional landscape parks, networks of cultural landscapes, or – and this is often used as the umbrella term – regional parks.

A regional park can be understood as an attempt to transfer the concept of a *park* to a city-regional scale (▷ *Urban region*). Parks are generally green spaces set apart from the open ▷ *Landscape* and built-up areas, which require intensive upkeep with their woody plants and garden elements (Siebert/Steingrube 2000). As it is hardly feasible to develop all of the open spaces in an urban region on the basis of these characteristics, spatial focal points of design are set with regional parks. Moreover, non-designed open spaces are included under the designation. As a concept, the regional park merges the traditional notion of a park on the one hand and the park as an instrument for or means of protecting nature (▷ *Nature protection*), whereby the entire ▷ *Cultural landscape* is defined as a park, on the other. Most regional park strategies in Germany are based on a formally protected system of regional open space. The regional planning categories by which open space is protected – in particular regional green belts (▷ *Green belt*) – are complemented by proactive measures for developing open spaces in the form of regional parks.

The strategies for developing regional parks comprise project-based instruments. They aim to upgrade open spaces on an urban-region scale and incorporate both spatial and institutional measures for developing, connecting, and designing open spaces as well as promoting appropriate forms of land use. The public task of enhancing regional open spaces is a governance task (▷ *Governance*), as it involves 'steering and coordinating (or even governing) with a view to managing interdependencies between (usually collective) stakeholders' (Benz 2004: 25). This entails both horizontal coordination between different demands placed on open space (Hokema 2013) and vertical coordination between such demands which are formulated at different spatial levels of action (project, town, urban region, federal state, etc.). Regional parks can be considered as examples of landscape-related action arenas (Fürst/Gailing/Pollermann et al. 2008) in urban regions.

### 3 Overview of practical examples

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A total of approximately 30 regional parks or similar strategies for regional open spaces are being developed in urban regions in Germany (Gailing 2012: 132 et seq.). While some have not yet got past the initiation stage, others – in particular the Emscher Landscape Park (Dettmar/Ganser 1999) and the RheinMain Regional Park (Rautenstrauch 2001) with the Frankfurt Green Belt – have been under development since the beginning of the 1990s, with a significant amount of organisational and financial investment.

One of the main strengths of such strategies to develop regional open spaces is their flexibility, because they can be adapted to different spatial and organisational contexts without constrictive formal stipulations. The following examples are also worth mentioning in addition to the aforementioned pioneer projects: the Stuttgart Region Landscape Park (Baumgärtner 2015), the Leipzig Green Belt (Hokema 2013), the Wedeler Au and Rosengarten Regional Parks in the Hamburg metropolitan region, the Hanover Green Belt (Klauffke 2009), the Cultural Landscape Network of the Cologne/Bonn region as part of Regionale 2010 (Reimer 2012), the Saar Regional Park (Hartz/Kühne 2007), and the regional parks around Berlin (Kühn/Gailing 2008).

In other European countries, the term *regional park* usually refers to areas that would be called *nature parks* in Germany (e.g. the *parcs naturels régionaux* in France or the *parchi regionali* in Italy). Other forms of open space developed on the urban-region scale are, however, comparable, such as the Vienna Green Belt (Breiling/Ruland 2008), the green ‘fingers’ in Copenhagen (Primdahl/Vejre/Busck et al. 2009), or the ‘Green Heart’ of the Randstad in the Netherlands (Koomen/Geoghegan/Dekkers 2009).

### 4 Common denominators and potentials

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Unlike ▷ *Conservation areas under nature protection law* – such as national parks, biosphere reserves, or nature parks) – there are no legal definitions of the term *regional park* or of other forms of strategies for regional open spaces. The following, therefore, aims to set out common denominators of planning approaches to regional open space on the basis of actual practice (cf. Gailing 2007; Hüchtker/Scholz/Selle et al. 2000).

#### The urban-region scale

Open space strategies combine and link decentralised projects and landscape development measures at a regional level (Hartz/Kühne 2007). They are increasingly considered to demonstrate the capacity to act on the urban-region scale in the interregional competition between locations, as they help constitute an urban or a metropolitan region as an action arena.

#### Hybrid urban-rural approaches to development

Visions and projects are being developed to upgrade the urban landscape (van der Falk / van Dijk 2009). These open up potential for developing new approaches to the use and design of such spaces in order to better interlink open space and built-up space together in the cultural landscape of an urban region. They often focus on the protection and innovative further

development of cultural landscape elements in rural areas (for example, agricultural use such as meadow orchards or pasture) as well as typically urban uses such as leisure facilities, parks, and monuments of industrial or ► *Built culture*.

### Multifunctionality as a basis for development

Elaborating strategies for regional open space is an interdisciplinary task that integrates environmental, sociocultural, and economic interests. Rhetorically, this is often about strengthening and integrating these various interests in relation to the dominating issues of settlement and transport development. The multifunctionality of open spaces (Gailing 2005) includes the following. Firstly, the ecological functions of open space such as ► *Soil conservation* and protecting water resources or habitats for plants and animals. Secondly, the social and cultural functions of open space such as local recreation or as a social gathering place, as a space to experience and identify with nature (► *Place identity*), or for sensory appreciation or communication. Thirdly, the economic functions of open space such as food production and renewable resources, as well as creating the conditions for ► *Services*, private follow-on investment, or increasing the value of real estate. The improvement of open spaces in urban regions is also a regional economic strategy to boost the ‘soft’ factors that make a location economically competitive (► *Competitive location policies*) and to qualitatively manage structural economic crises.

### Focus on processes

Rather than sovereign planning activities with a restrictive effect, the focus is first and foremost on project management activities such as tapping financing options, putting in place economic incentives as well as advocacy and intermediary work. ► *Informal planning* and active implementation take place in parallel; planning is a flexible process adapted to the specific circumstances and which involves various stakeholders (Hartz/Kühne 2007). Local and state administrations are open to cooperation with societal stakeholders. The direction of development of open spaces is formulated on the basis of collective negotiation processes and locally adapted solutions and strategies, and is implemented in project-based alliances with the specific funding body (Peters 2012: 280 et seq.). Regional parks and other types of strategies for regional open spaces are considered an expression and symbol of a new planning culture with their dialogue-based, interconnected and informal processes (Reimer 2012: 163 et seq.). The process-based approach to regional open space also includes orchestrating the respective mix of steering instruments when the formal steering instruments of regional planning, preparatory land-use planning, or landscape planning are used in developing regional parks.

### ‘A park in the mind’

It is only when the residents and policymakers of an ► *Urban region* identify with open spaces and when open spaces are ‘embedded as valuable in the collective consciousness of large swathes of the population’ (Curdes 1999: 337) that the protection of open spaces will be successful. This process of embedding a sense of ownership in the public’s consciousness is primarily based on a discursive strategy of giving open spaces in urban regions symbolic designations: landscape parks, green belts, and green corridors are examples of such attempts. ‘Open spaces are to be readily visualisable, classified, and experienced in their context. If a viable formula is found and they become a symbol for enough people and this is communicated accordingly, the “park in the mind” can become a reality’ (Selle 2000: A66). Besides the issue of what one calls them, policy measures

for interlinking previously isolated open spaces, improving them aesthetically, presenting them properly through good design and other aesthetic interventions, endowing them with a wide range of recreational uses, and providing them with public infrastructure (▷ *Provision of local public infrastructure*) such as footpaths and cycle paths are all required. Enabling the public to develop an active sense of ownership in this way should stir the public's emotional response to open spaces and increase their sense of identification with them. The hope is then that residents of the region will develop a commitment to protecting open space and defend those open spaces 'rendered taboo by their design' against interventions (Ganser 1993: 174). If open space policy seeks to create a 'park in the mind', further communications, education, and advocacy work will be needed.

### Protection through use

Regional parks or green belts are not conservation areas protected by formal regulations and no restrictions are placed on them. Rather, open spaces should be protected through being used in various ways, for example for local recreation, landscape art, or urban agriculture and forestry. The involvement of economic land users (Lohrberg 2006) poses a challenge to implementing regional open space strategies. In order to protect open spaces through use, planning is becoming more communicative; it directly involves local people in public relations campaigns and events; it creates constellations of stakeholders and interested parties by forging alliances between the various decision-makers along a green belt or a regional park and by forming partnerships (for example with schools, businesses, tourism operators, historical societies, farmers, and artist initiatives) (Danielzyk/Gailing/Kühn et al. 2012: 389).

### Visions and projects

The strategic planning approaches (Lehmann 2003) to regional open space combine the macro level, with its spatial visions and guiding principles for the regional landscape (Reimer 2012), with the micro level of the concrete physical, material implementation of projects (Peters 2012: 197 et seq.). Planning through projects is considered the 'child of economic stagnation, public financial crisis and deregulation. It manifests itself in very different ways, of which the "politics of major events" is just one of the extremes. [...]The other extreme of planning through projects is the mobilisation of endogenous potential with a "strategy of a thousand flowers": various projects are initiated at different locations within a region where exemplary solutions are to be developed for the region's problems' (Häußermann/Siebel 1993: 14).

## 5 Differences in approach and challenges for planning policy

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The differences between the various approaches to enhancing regional open space in German urban regions discussed below are also – at a general level – challenges for planners and policymakers.

The objective of multifunctionality is seen in all regions, but is weighted differently in different places. For example, the green belts in the municipal association of Lower Saxony/Bremen are barely more than cycle paths, whereas the Leipzig Green Belt brings together aspects such as

agriculture, watercourse development, environmental technology, and local recreation. The RheinMain Regional Park is based on a system of park-like regional park routes which are to connect a range of existing and yet to be created landscape elements such as recreational facilities, nature protection areas, and landmarks as the backbone of the green belts. The focus of the Emscher Landscape Park is also on the green corridors protected by formal planning; its main mission, however, is to shape the process of transforming the industrial landscape. The objective here is an urban cultural landscape that uses its industrial roots as potential for new developments; thus the built heritage of the industrial culture is included in the regional park plans. In the suburban regional parks around Berlin, the existing rural structures are part of the backdrop of the regional parks; however, little effort is being made to find solutions to the specific problems of the suburbs with their settlement areas, commercial real estate, and roads. Likewise, the new Rosengarten Regional Park south of Hamburg is being developed in the area of tension between the growing metropolis and places that are still quite village-like.

There are also differences in the type of organisational structure chosen to implement open space strategies: project companies (GmbH) are one example of organisational structures driving regional open space development. For example, the activities of the state-owned IBA Emscher Park GmbH/Projekt Ruhr GmbH made a significant contribution to the work of the Ruhr area association of municipalities and the Ruhr regional association in the Emscher Landscape Park. A regional park umbrella company has been operating in the RheinMain Regional Park since 2005, supporting intermunicipal project companies in different areas of the park. Registered associations are active in the Berlin-Brandenburg regional parks; the advantage of these is that partners from civil society can be involved through intermunicipal cooperation (> *Cooperation, intermunicipal and regional*). Ultimately, it is not the organisational form itself that matters, but rather how it is structured and its power base: without sufficient funding and without involving municipalities and sources of funding, these types of organisation cannot act.

While formal institutions have been used in some urban regions to secure the development of regional parks (e.g. in state development planning in Saarland as well as in preparatory land-use planning and landscape planning in the RheinMain Regional Park), other open space strategies are based solely on informal planning. Informal planning can also be successful when it is developed incrementally (> *Incrementalism/perspective incrementalism*): for example, in the RheinMain Regional Park, experience was initially gathered in a pilot area, and in the metropolitan region of Hamburg, the first regional park (Wedeler Au) was funded as a pilot project.

In urban regions that tend to have one centre like Berlin – and also the metropolitan region of Hamburg –, a model is being tested here in such a way that open space is developed in the individual in-between spaces between the settlement axes running radially towards the surrounding areas. Landscape areas in the core city are only integrated at the outer edge. Regional parks are thus – like green belts – focused on their suburban area. In polycentral urban regions, on the other hand, regional parks take the form of networks and are based on what is left of the open spaces between the settled areas that are expanding towards each other, which are usually formally protected as regional green corridors. This is the case with the RheinMain Regional Park and the Emscher Landscape Park. In polycentral urban regions, regional parks are not necessarily limited to the suburban area.



How an urban region is governed is a determining factor for the development of regional parks. The capacity to act depends on whether the cooperation between towns and their surrounding areas (Priebes 2005) is only informal, or is based on a network or holding model, or is characterised by formal structures under public law. The degree of regional institutionalisation, however, is not the only indicator for the success of strategies for enhancing open spaces. Rather, the quality of the development objectives, how well established they are with municipal and regional policymakers, the existence of active promoters of regional park development, an effective organisational structure, and the orchestration of synergies with formal planning instruments are much more important. Multi-level governance is also key, because responsibilities must be exercised between the respective federal state, the regional organisation, the towns and cities, districts, and local authorities as well as the societal stakeholders.

## 6 Critical outlook

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The approaches to developing regional parks and other strategies for regional open spaces are far from being established as instruments. Just like all informal instruments for spatial development, they rely on collective learning processes and the willingness to cooperate. Moreover, because of the complex reality of open spaces, where aspects of landscape ecology come up against issues relating to landscape appreciation or the property markets, planners have to deal with many uncertainties (Antrop 2004).

Local solutions for the project-based design, recovery, ▷ *Temporary use* or re-presentation of new and old open spaces in towns and cities can lead to significant innovations. They are, however, no substitute for the advantages of a strategy on an urban-region scale, which opens up opportunities in terms of cooperation partners and funding sources and increases the lobby for the open spaces overall. Yet a means of evaluating (▷ *Evaluation, audit*) the instruments is still lacking: can regional parks and green belts really be considered instruments for the purpose of securing open spaces in quantitative terms? Or, conversely, could they potentially even enhance the further development of settlements (Koomen/Dekkers 2013)?

One of the risks involved in strategies for presenting open spaces is that they can divert attention away from social or environmental problems in a region. Although producing communicable images of open spaces increases the exchange value of such spaces as part of a marketing strategy, there is a risk that doing so rather disregards their use value for the region's residents (Keil 1991). If strategies for regional open space primarily result in 'flagship projects', there is also a risk that the 'common or garden' open spaces in residents' immediate living environment receive less attention from planners, as all eyes are focused on spectacular, marketable projects (Oppermann/Schalaster/Steffen 2009: 79).

Advocates of the approaches to open space discussed here often highlight their potential for integrating development objectives, stakeholders and the various demands which are placed on open space and on space more generally. This is particularly true in suburban areas, where private users and users under public law as well as those pushing sectoral development proposals compete fiercely. There are competing demands placed on almost all rural and urban space, which illustrates the particular heterogeneity of suburban cultural landscapes. The typical

demands of planning in relation to open space policy in the suburban sphere include moving 'from confrontation to collaboration' (Boczek 2004: 136) and using 'the holistic nature of the landscape' as a basis to develop strategies that all stakeholders will support 'to bring their respective interests together in new alliances' (Boczek 2004: 151). This vision of suburban togetherness is, however, diametrically opposed to the reality of suburban coexistence and conflict. Any approach to open space is always going to come down to managing interdependencies, where the various uses of land are subject to different institutional arrangements with varying degrees of power. Problems of institutional interplay are inherent to open spaces, and the protagonists of strategies for regional open spaces do not have an outstanding primacy of development to guide them compared to other stakeholders.

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Last update of the references: December 2016