



**Lecture for the annual meeting of the
Russian Nursery association
07. February 2019, Moscow**

Plants as elements of the story telling in our landscape design

I feel very honored to receive an invitation from the association of Russian nurseries to speak to you today and show some of our work with a special focus on the use and meaning of trees, shrubs and perennials, grasses and ferns.

Since 30 years I am planning gardens and landscapes together with my office partner Silvia Glasser in our office called – glasser and dagenbach, which is located in Berlin.

My focus on landscape gardening and landscape architecture was pre stamped by the profession of both- my mother and my father. My mother was a perennial gardener and my father a landscape gardener and forest man, later a dendrologist working in a research institute for botanic and forest science research in a forest close Stuttgart. We lived in the institute, so I grew up in a forest nursery.

Although my early interests have been led to sculpting with stones I ended up in a hybrid kind of profession as landscape architect and sculptor.

The stone sculpting phase showed me that the role of a sculptor is very rarely the one to influence the place where his sculptures are finally placed. I thought if I cannot create the whole picture it does not make sense to create a sculpture. I know this is the typical hybris of young men, but that is it what has led me to my present state of profession.

First we create the landscape and then we create the sculpture which fits in the whole design, in the story we want to tell with it.

Today we have been working in Belgium, Italy, Austria, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Kazhakstan, Armenia and Georgia.

Outside Germany we work right now in Armenia and Moscow.

We experience landscape design as a kind of stage design for an outdoor theatre in which the client or the user is playing his own piece of theatre.

And now we come to your role in this theatre piece. Trees, shrubs, perennials, grasses ferns, bulbs play a very important role. We do not want to use them as a merely decorative and interesting or exotic element, we want them to play a role as space structuring, emotion and mood creating elements in the “stage design”.

That leads to a different way of choosing plants and evaluate their task.

A big super nice looking Bonsai has no value as long as there is no special role for it.

And even three or five of them mean nothing if there is no idea behind their use.

In 1982 to 1983 I had the chance to work in Mr. Ken Nakajima’s garden design studio in Tokyo in Japan. He was well known and quite innovative. He designed the Japanese garden in Moscow for the Botanical garden which was realized in 1984. His design in Japan was influenced by Russian landscape painters from the 18th and 19th century. He loved the natural Russian grassland with its wild flowers and tried to implement that in his design and also in his contributions for competitions. His design for the competition for Parc Citroen in Paris in 1982 was 20-30 years ahead of the at that

time present landscape design. At that time nobody understood him. His idea we can see now in Zaryadye Parc and at Krimskaja embankment – 35 years later.

So you see that already 35 years ago the Russian landscape was in focus of a worldwide acting landscape designer.

We should take this as sign to research, follow and approach what this Russian landscapes can offer the world.

Yes, I mean this serious and I am convinced that the Russian landscapes are the forgotten parts in a worldwide plant hunting period of the 18th, 19th and 20th century.

While China, The Himalaya region, Asia, Caucasus, South Africa and South America have been harvested by plant hunters thirst for new plant species Russia was too big to understand what it provides and the political situation blocked positive ideas in any way.

But what does this mean for the actual situation and the future. I am deeply convinced that the Russian nurseries should inform the world about the chances the Russia Flora provides. Beside the well known Russian Phlox there is so much more we can discover for the gardens in and outside Russia.

That's why I suggest to create a much broader board communicating this outside Russia.

The markets are always ready to inform about new chances, new possibilities in supplying our gardens with not yet known species.

You have the chances to breed and produce in so many climate zones. Although the distances are so long, today's transport and communication systems provide chances the 20th century could not deliver.

Coming back to the headline of my presentation I want to show you some examples of storytelling through plants which we used the last 30 years.

It is very rare to work on never used land in Germany or let say western Europe. So it is very normal to be confronted with existing vegetation and buildings. Our analysis of the existing structures determines a big part of our planning process.

Existing Buildings and vegetation can be regarded as time layers and we arrange the next time layer on it with our design. With this design approach you can even use ugliest trees as witness of the past.

Following the logic of this thinking, the choice of trees is one of the most important design decision during a planning process. The trees will get old, grow big and fit in the existing tree population. After a tree is 40-50 years old it looks like an always existing tree. Our eyes do not regard it as a newly planted anymore.

That is why the picture of a final, ready situation we have in our thoughts is important.

Our business may it be - nursery or landscaping or forest - is sustainable, because we think in terms of 50-100 years – which profession does that? Short term thinking creates awful gardens and parks, with either too many plants or not enough trees.

To find the right balance is the art of planning and planting.

It is ok to design gardens in which the future take out of trees is part of a concept. So a mass planting of smaller trees which shall create a future grove is a natural phenomenon which we see in every forest after a big tree fell down and so gives space to new seedlings. But during the next 20 years a maintenance concept has to take in account that minimum 50-70% of the growing seedlings need to be taken out – that is a continuation of planning on site which needs a lot of experience and inspiration to be successful.

All cultures in the world loved and still love old trees or the imagination of old trees.

Where does this come from? I think it is that we imagine the story behind their life when we look at them – old trees are story tellers, they express past, present and future.

For us that means the setting of our gardens and parks should provide the chance for the planted and existing trees to become story tellers.

If we are in financially weak situation in a project, I rather advice to plant less trees but in a bigger size. There can always be a second phase of planting some years later. Especially hotel projects need to give an instant good impression to the client – they do not accept a promise that it will look lush in 15 years. The first day guests are coming they have to be convinced by the concept. Especially entrance situation are important. The guest normally decides positive or negative in a tenth of a second – you do not get another chance. This is a skill mankind developed during hundred thousands of years: Is the place I see in front of me save and nice.

Everything which looks not proportional, sick or unsecure is regarded as not good to stay. Unsecure in this case can mean that the entrance situation is hidden through dark trees that block the view – you do not overview the coming in and coming out at the entrance – a clearly unsecure element in our archaic program.

A further very important element is the color and transparency of trees leafs or needles. I personally never liked the compact and dark impression of the Black Forest region in Germany. 90 % of the trees are dark evergreen trees – *Picea abies* and *Abies alba* which are growing densely together.

I find this a kind of depressive setting.

In all our planning we try to follow a certain rule in using evergreen and summer green trees and shrubs: Max 40 % evergreen and min 60 % summergreen.

This does not determine the mixture of green colours in the overall planting scheme. We avoid the use of similar green grades in leafs and needles. There should always be contrast in it . A darker looking groundcover like *Waldsteinia* needs dots of grass planting or other perennial that lighten up the view.

A good example for our way is the Moscow Project Bolshevik factory. The old candy and cake factory, a brickstone factory from late 19th century was transformed to high end loft residences. The court yards are narrow and not bright. The view from one apartment to the opposite side is quite close. That meant we had to create a green semi transparent Green curtain in between. We could realize this project in cooperation with our friends and partners from 'natureform'.

We have chosen multistem *Acer saccharinum* because their height will be min 15- 20 m in future and their leafs are bright green from above and grey silver from below, so they create a good light, bright impression against the darker courtyard – especially when you are walking underneath the tree crown and will see the bright grey under side of the leafs.

The idea of a transparent forest, like they exist often in Russian landscapes helped to select the other plants. *Euonymus alatus Compacta* – umbrella shaped - and *Hydrangeas* and cube shaped *Cotoneaster lucidus* with some *Amelanchier lamarckii* multistems in sunny parts gave the soft landscape structure to the courtyard.

The client helped a lot to get the allowance to design the firefighting pathways different so that we could add perennials and grasses in small 30 cm wide stripes in the pathways.

For the future residents this planting will be like one big plant bed when they walk along the paths, from above you will have a completely different impression of parallel stripes reaching into the

path way. The main species of groundcovers are *Waldsteinia*, as we found out that they are most successful in Moscow region in darker places.

Also a lot of bulbs have been planted. If this was successful we will see in springtime.

So the story the trees, shrubs and plants shall tell is the post industrial history around the old building by creating the vision and soft mood of a transparent forest.

Another project which depends a lot on the story telling that plants can provide is the so called Moabit Prison History Park in Berlin, close to the central station.

The place was built on until 1959 with the first cell prison which has been constructed in 1846 as a copy of the London prison Pentonville.

Only the Inner brick stone prison walls have been left. After the Berlin wall was fallen we have been contracted in 1990 with several research works that lead to protection of the area as a listed building space. In 2006 we finished the project after long year of bureaucratic interruptions.

Before the Berlin wall was opened the area served as a municipal construction material storage.

Nobody knew what happened behind the 5 m high prison walls which survived war times and the destructive post war period.

From the beginning we realized that the existing trees and shrubs are important witnesses of the whole history and that we have the chance to include them in our story telling.

We used trees and shrubs to symbolize the warden and the prisoners in a yard bird situation. *Juniperus communis*, representing 22 prisoners in their morning walk and a red *Acer platanoides* Royal Purple as a warden. Hedges from *Fagus sylvatica atropurpurea* showed the dimension of hedges and the outline of the building where execution have been held.

In front of the prison, opposite the central station, have been the fruit gardens of the prison wardens. There we planted seven *Morus alba*. In old days the Prussian King invited French Huguenots to settle in Berlin to introduce a silk production. As a memory to this period we planted the trees which have been necessary to feed the silk caterpillars. The south bound location with the heat reflection prison wall in the back is perfect for them. The silk production failed due to too rough climate, but some trees are left in protected areas and we have been happy to give a memory to the story again.

The planting scheme for this project we did in a very late phase as we wanted to study what was growing their naturally, no matter if it is local or implemented from abroad – mainly by birds.

The left over trees are a strange compendium of survivors – apple trees which have been grown close together with oak trees. Lime trees which “swallowed” pave stones as they have grown into the trees – nobody took them off for 50 years. A little jungle with *Robinia pseudoacacia*, and *Crataegus* developed in a not used part. Walnut trees redeveloped in the old yards where they have been planted in the late 19th century.

The whole space keeps the spirit of the past decades and works like a book which you cannot read but feel.

This project has won most of our awards during the last 10 years.

Parallel to this story telling approach to design I developed an idea of very minimalistic garden sculpture ideas which for sure have been influenced by my visit in Japan in the early 80ies.

It ended up with a combination of a 1920 avantgarde design combined with minimalistic design ideas of Japanese garden.

Stone and plant reduced to the absolute minimum. Those stone plant sculptures have been realized in several places and won some awards.

Another idea of plant sculptures as innovative topiaries have not been realized yet. I will present them in book on my sketches this year and am keen to realize them the next years.

I think there is a chance to develop a Russian version of topiaries with the plants that are familiar with the specific local climate.

Definitely a product that could good chances in Russia and abroad.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Berlin, 04.01.2019

Udo Dagenbach