

# Berlin Dispersed: A Genealogy of Ideas



Laura Veronese

The image of Berlin as a Horizontal Metropolis, placed on a continuous green surface is the result of a long tradition of projects and concepts that is worth reconsidering. In particular today, in a time where this prolific and peculiar tradition appears to fail with the risk of being forgotten. In this article the juxtaposition of theories and projects emerging from the German tradition serves to provide an understanding of the peculiar condition of Berlin's urban landscape and it may lead to a reappraisal of notion of the contemporary Horizontal Metropolis. I will focus on three theoretical positions, laid out in three different publications: *Die Inflation Der Grossstädte* (Erich Gloeden), *Berlin Das Grüne Stadtarchipel* (Oswald Mathias Ungers) and *Zwischenstadt* (Thomas Sieverts). These three books were written in different cultural and temporal contexts, (respectively in 1923, 1977, 1997) and are concerned with the concept of the Horizontal Metropolis. The hypothesis is that the primary arguments of each converge in a common theme, with several shared features. Although it is important to take into account the dissimilarities, the juxtaposition of these text makes a fundamental contribution to the understanding of the contemporary Horizontal Metropolis in Germany.

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## Archipelago, Fragment, Cell

In Germany special consideration has always been given to the design of the open space, despite the indifference to the shape of the territory by most modern architects and urbanists. Lereberecht Migge proposed an urban development for a city shot through with open spaces designed for several activities and in 1918 in his *grünes Manifest* he demanded that the disused hectares of the city would be replaced by public gardens, allotments, farms and community gardens. Migge's vision of open space was very forward-thinking, he believed that the greenery or urban landscape should provide space for agriculture and for recreation/leisure and acting simultaneously as a catalyst for urban waste prevention.

The picturesque tradition with well-established sense of nature and a deeply anti-urban sensibility, traced the ideological and cultural bases as well as the premises for complex thinking, imagining and drawing the open space. Particularly in Germany, several concepts—and diagrams—regarding the unbuilt space (or voids) have been produced, from the green-belt to the cellular metropolis, to the archipelago and the *Zwischenstadt*.

In the first part of the essay I will outline an introduction with some relevant theoretical positions on the concerns of the project of open space in Germany which, in my opinion, support the second part of the article, in which the emphasis will be placed on three contributions from three different moments in history: *Inflation der Gross-Städte*, 1927, *Berlin as a Stadtarchipel*, 1978, *Zwischenstadt*, 1997. These three books deal with the open space and the relationship between built-up areas and open space, and despite the dissimilarities, there are consonances and elements of convergence.

Gloeden's sequence of diagrams is maybe the most radical representation of the cellular project. The organic metaphor is very clear: indeed Gloeden used the word 'Zelle', cell, to express the core (nexus) of the settlements. Paola Viganò dedicated noteworthy contributions on this almost unknown author. To mention is her article *The Horizontal Metropolis and Gloeden's Diagrams: two parallel stories* and part of the second chapter of her book *I Territori dell'Urbanistica. Il progetto come produttore di conoscenza*. It is important to clarify that in this article I mostly retrace some of Viganò's positions concerning Gloeden's model.

As Viganò pointed out, Gloeden's work might not have had the impact and the circulation that it deserves: in literature it is not often cited despite the value of his contribution. Hilberseimer in his book *New City 1944* defined Gloeden's work as a "new city type," but he did not go further in the interpretation of Gloeden's diagrams. The background and context of Gloeden's book identifies the problematic of the dramatic and rapid growth of cities. *Inflation der Gross-Städte* delineates a city model for liberating the city from miserable conditions and outlines a theory for a better-functioning metropolis. The diagrams outline an alternative model to change dramatically overcrowded urban conditions. Gloeden advances a general proposal, he does so not referring explicitly to Berlin in the text, even if it is clear that he used Berlin as a model.

Indeed, Berlin in the 1920s was an overpopulated city, with not enough infrastructure to support the mass of people living in the capital. The living conditions were terrible due to a lack of space, air and light.

By the turn of the twentieth Century, the theoretical construction of the metropolis opened the debate about “internal occupation” (*innere Ansiedlung*), a model which was meant to improve living conditions in large cities, in contrast to the migration to America, which was defined as the only possible solution to the devastating urban living conditions<sup>1</sup> in Germany.

The first diagram in Gloeden’s book concerns territorial scale and is constructed on two conceptual planes. The first expresses the real territory and the second its geometry. The territory is an abstract surface, no topographic information is given but a river is visible. The grid is the implied geometry, which serves as a background for the cellular project.<sup>2</sup> This geometry leads to an isotropic association of cells with no dominant centre, not even the historic centre that becomes a *primus inter pares*. (Gloeden 1923).

Ludwig Hilberseimer compares Gloeden’s diagrams to Raymond Unwin’s for Greater London. According to Hilberseimer Unwin’s proposal (inspired by Sir Ebenezer Howard) does not clearly solve the problem of the rapid growth. Instead, Gloeden’s diagram, by not supposing a primary city in the territory, suggests that the growth can be potentially infinite around the initial cell. The cells in Gloeden’s project are closer to each other, thus composing a more compact schema than Unwin’s.

A remarkable aspect about Gloeden’s work is that the void, i.e. the space between the cells, defines the scale of the metropolis in which a hierarchically organised street-network does not exist. The entire territory is isotropically organised and the only preferred ways are indicated by the railway or tram. This aspect could be seen as an omission of information, but it is actually a very relevant point of the work: Gloeden’s proposal for a large city can be interpreted as a no-car metropolis.<sup>3</sup> In the second chapter of the book he stresses the importance of locating work and study environments no further than the ten to fifteen minutes walk from residential areas. For this reason Gloeden proposes a return to the decentralised rural settlement system, indeed the close proximity of home and work would solve the enormous problem of the overloaded transport system. Thus, his book’s first chapter starts with a remarkable quotation: “Jede großstädtische Verbindung ist unbequem im Verhältnis zu den Verkehrsmitteln der Kleinstadt, dem Gehen zu Fuß über kurze Strecken.”<sup>4</sup> (Cornelius Gurlitt in Gloeden 1923)

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<sup>1</sup>Hegemann cited in Viganò, p. 83 recalls that the migration to America was considered by Goethe in his work “*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*” to be the only possible solution to get out of the enormous crisis that cities were facing.

<sup>2</sup>On this concern Viganò did some interpretative redrawing of his model where one can see the layers by which the plan is composed. See Viganò 2011, pp. 86 and 88.

<sup>3</sup>See Gloeden E., chapter II paragraph I.

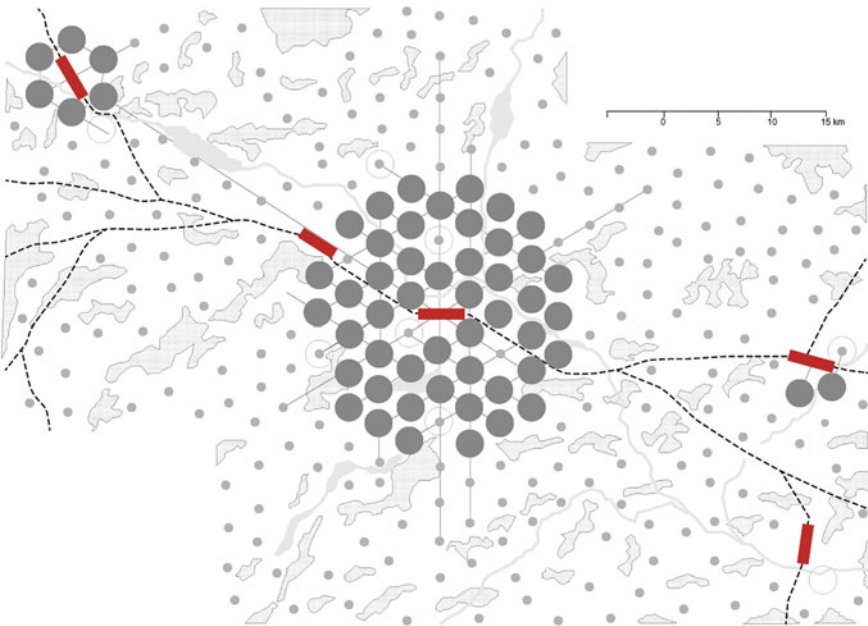
<sup>4</sup>Each large city connection is inconvenient in relation to the transport needs in small cities, where walking for short distances is feasible.

As Viganó stressed, in Gloeden's model the mobility is optimised, freed from heavy traffic. His metropolis is a well-organised, a Horizontal Metropolis, potentially infinite.

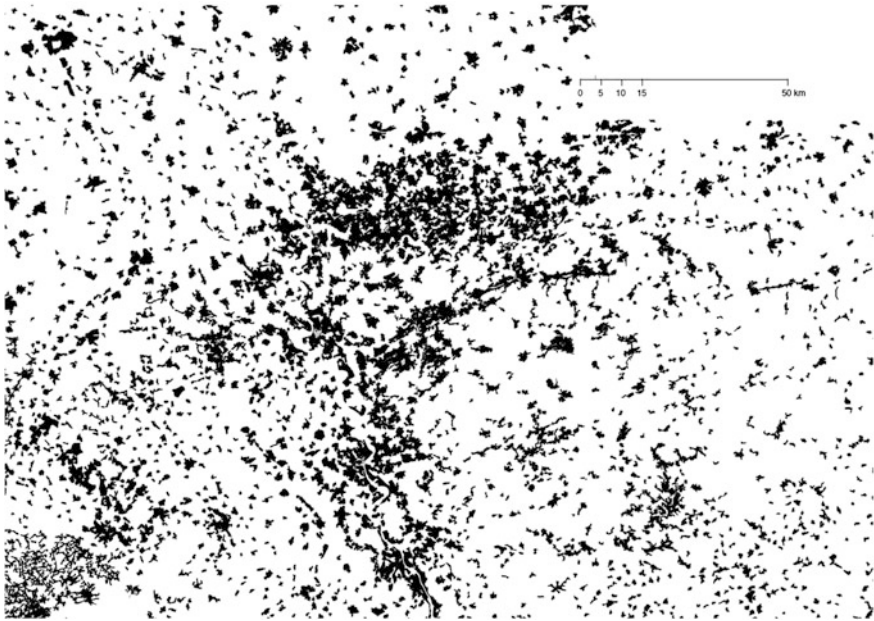
The mobility attracts particular attention as it improves the quality of the system: indeed by moving in the city-model one experiences the multitude of green spaces such as forests, meadows and only from far away can one glimpse the silhouettes of the buildings and eventually recognise landmarks of specific locations or a factory in the city-cell (*die Stadtzelle*). Every element is united by the green belt, which conceptually functions as an ancient city wall. Gloeden effectively defined a new urban condition (Fig. 1).

In real contemporary territories, such as the Ruhr region among others, one finds evidence of Gloeden's cellular hypothesis. The urban-units are extremely heterogeneous and consequently they are interpreted as 'fragments' instead of cells (Viganó 2011, p. 204). With this term 'fragments' Sieverts describes the condition of the *Zwischenstadt*. Conceptually, if the cells in an urban tissue are interpreted as fragments, then it becomes necessary to dig deeper and investigate the relationship between them (Fig. 2).

The relationship between urban fragments implies the expression of the multiple as a whole and introduces the idea of the 'archipelago'. The idea of the archipelago, instead of the cellular tissue, relates fragments to each other, yet leaves intact the



**Fig. 1** Gloeden's territorial plan. Redrawn by the author on the trace of Viganó's interpretative redrawing of the plan (see Viganó 2011, p. 92)



**Fig. 2** Fragmented condition of the Ruhr region, in black are built areas. *Data* CORINE Land Cover, elaborated by the author

singularities. Indeed, the archipelago collates the dissimilarities of the fragments and sets a ground for coexistence.

The metaphor of Berlin as a green archipelago, the *grün Stadtarchipel* (as coined in German in its first appearance in 1977) is without doubt one of the most fascinating metaphors in the history of urbanism.

This city model was developed in eleven theses during the Summer Academy in 1977 and was contained in a very modest publication called *Berlin das grüne Stadtarchipel*. Certainly the simplicity of the publication explains why its circulation was quite limited at the time. It contained an urban design concept for the future development of Berlin and was presented by Oswald Mathias Ungers. This idea took form in the context of his teaching at Cornell University.

For about twenty years now, the notion of the archipelago has started appearing frequently and it is no coincidence that the archipelago manifesto was relaunched in 2013. As Sébastien Marot writes in the introduction, “republishing the collective ‘manifesto’ that introduced this concept into the contemporary urban design debate, and unravelling the circumstances in which it was written, our intention is to set off and amplify its delayed effect”.

Before delving deeper into the archipelago concept, it is important to reflect briefly on the theoretical background of this model. Indeed, Berlin composed of heterogeneous islands—fragments in a way, even though after an accurate observation of Ungers’s drawings, one can see that those islands left are actually compact

units with a very clear and identifiable identity—dispersed in a diffuse green lagoon, is to be considered part of a long tradition. The genealogy includes among other theories, the English garden design, Schinkel’s concept of landscape, the ‘garden city’ concept. (Hertweck and Marot 2013: 14)

Jansen’s plan for the Gross-Berlin (Greater-Berlin) presented to the public in 1910 is also to be considered part of this background. In addition, it has been an important point of reference for Ungers. This is the reason why it deserves close attention in order to provide an as exhaustive as possible understanding of the archipelago manifesto in juxtaposition with the cellular project and the *Zwischenstadt*.

Jansen’s plan for the Gross-Berlin presented on the occasion of the competition ‘Gross-Stadt Berlin’ includes a complex design concept for open space. The large corridor traced by the river engages a set of green spaces organised in a ring. The corridor not only represents the continuity between the green spaces, but imposes the issue of the transition to the absence of sharp edges between one open space and another. In the map *Wald und Wiesengürtel* colours are enriched by nuances which indicate the transition from forests to agricultural fields to parks, expressing the actual transition between different ecosystems. What appears here, although not yet explicitly, is the concept of ecotone.<sup>5</sup> (Viganò 2011)

A quite remarkable fact about the competition is that the area is extended even beyond Potsdam. This considerable leap in scale was due to dramatic population growth around the turn of the century and its effects on the polycentric arrangement of Berlin’s urban areas: it had led to the various urban entities each developing their own economic and social dynamic. This has created a situation of functional and social dissociation that could be no longer be countered with an urban plan restricted to the old Berlin.

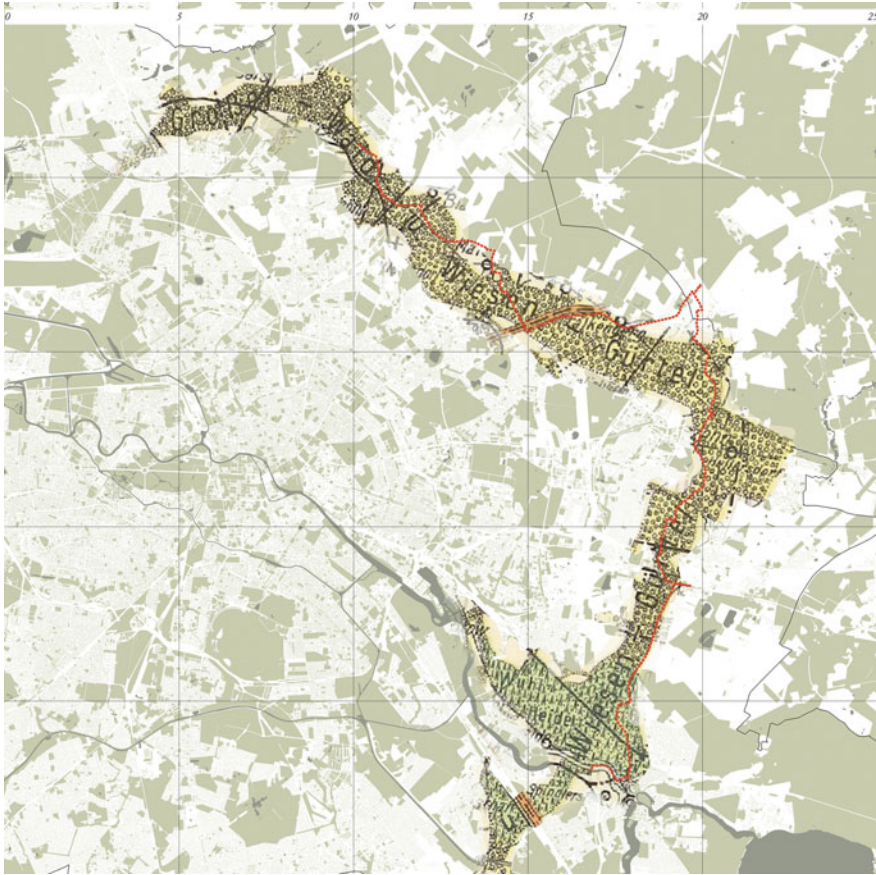
In the map *Wald-und Wiesegürtel* the green layer is more than a ‘strip’ or a ‘band’ (the translation in English is “woodland and meadow strip”): it appears as a green network (Fig. 3).

The stream of ideas that calls for the dispersion of the metropolis in the landscape culminates with—maybe the most radical of this history of ideas—Scharoun’s concept for an extensively greened *Stadtlandschaft*. The plan was the first to be proposed right after the Second World War in an exhibition in Berlin in 1946 called “*Berlin plan-erster Bericht*.”

The Collective Plan (Kollektivplan) is the result of the collaboration of a group of architects (Wils Ebert, Peter Friedrich, Ludmilla Herzenstein, Reinhold Lingner, Luise Seitz, Selman Selmanagic and Herbert Weinberg) under the supervision of Hans Scharoun. It calls for a decentralised, green urban landscape composed of islands and connected by a system (or a network) of freeways. The plan breaks radically with the city’s structure, with the metaphor of “stony Berlin” and with the

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<sup>5</sup>With this word it is intended the transitory area between different biomes and a the integration of two communities is supposed. This implied a in-depth understanding of the landscape and its ecology.



**Fig. 3** Portion of green belt of the Wald-und Wiesegürtel system (proposed in Hermann Jansen’s 1910 plan “In den Grenzen der Möglichkeit”) superimposed to a map of the contemporary territory

concentric form of the city. Scharoun and his team envisioned a dispersed city with modern architecture in a permeable green space. In this vision the only named monuments are the one Museum Island, Brandenburg Gate and the Charlottenburg Palace. Also a general urban concept was presented: an ideal large city composed of agrarian-industrial belts consisting of parallel sub-belts which contained cells for industry, mobility infrastructure, housing and green spaces. The belt (*das Band*) is designed to be infinitely continuous and it connects regions, and countries.

However, the Kollektivplan went far beyond a functional urban plan. Scharoun played with the Kollektivplan’s concept, the “*Stadtlandschaft*”, which leads to a further debate: the idea of the city as a natural organism. In the text accompanying the exhibition in 1946, Scharoun used a complex organicist terminology for an urbanism which legitimised itself through the analogy to nature. This organic urban structure as general plan would be intertwined with the concrete landscape and it would define a unique, distinctive *Stadt-Land-Schaft*. (Sohn 2008: 121)

The organic metaphor—such as the city as a biological element or the city as a cellular tissue—finds a persistence in the German tradition. Baumeister in his manual published in 1876 argues for the “natural” growth of cities. Martin Mächler wrote in 1920 about his plan for Berlin using terms from biology, using the metaphor of ‘the cell’, speaking about a single architectural unit able to be part of a large architecture—a large organism—in a shared cellular tissue. The cultural stratification of the passage of time on this concern is certainly very common in German literature.

Indeed, urbanists have often worked with naturalists or natural philosophers, and the numerous collaborations between urbanists and monists in the garden movements (*Gartenbewegung*) is noteworthy.

Especially the monist’s<sup>6</sup> definition of nature, seemed to be inspirational for urban planners and vice versa; a monist naturalist like Raul Heinrich Francé for example examining the city as a living creature.

All these attempts to decentralise Berlin and to stress the horizontality of the large city on a natural surface were facing the condition of anticipated growth in population. Instead, the archipelago manifesto was dealing with the loss of population. The archipelago expressed a methodology that would neither preserve the city and its historical structure, nor reinvent it, but rather the new urban entity would be generated through a selective *tabula rasa*, which by selections and eliminations of existing morphologies, would define a new order. The selection of the fragments to maintain is based on the identification of those areas that already have a strong existing identity that deserve to be preserved and reinforced. (Hertweck and Marot 2013: 14). Those named ‘fragments’ are actually architecture with a clear identity, therefore they lose the significance of ‘fragments’ to be islands.

The shrinkage in population is intended as an occasion: “around the ‘tuned-up’ and ‘completed’ enclaves, the remaining fabric of the city would be allowed to deteriorate and turn slowly into nature” (Hertweck and Marot 2013: 14). Those city districts that no longer serve a purpose will be returned to nature and will become a system, a green grid made by a variety of natural spaces, from parkland to young forests or agriculture areas.

This nature grid would isolate the islands and establish the metaphor of a “green” archipelago (Hertweck and Marot 2013: 14).

The archipelago project was basically demanding that Berlin be made the testing ground for an alternative model of urbanism and this was a clear position against what was the dominant and popular urban doctrine of urban renewal, a sort of prototype that could be a model in a zero-growth Europe. The model of the archipelago is the antithesis of planning theory rooted until the 1970s, which was based on the idea of the unitary city, a uniform and clearly recognisable entity.

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<sup>6</sup>As monist I am referring in particular to personality such as Ernst Haeckel and Raul Heinrich Francé and to the philosophical idea according to which every phenomenon is regulated by one basic principle. Especially Francé appear to be very influential in the urbanist discussion.



Ungers recognised in the fragmented urban space in Berlin the properties of a landscape and the model envisioned therefore the dissolution of the compact urban structure in an archipelagos of urban islands in a sea of greenery. (Hertweck and Marot 2013)

This was a radical model and the first manifesto project explicitly addressing the negative growth. In Berlin's heterogenous urban space, Ungers saw Berlin as a *Coincidentia Oppositorum* (Ungers 1991).

Indeed, starting with an understanding of Berlin as a conglomeration of diverging city fragments and not a whole, Ungers developed the figure of the city *within* the city. The fragmentary urban condition that Ungers describes is also politically a pluralistic concept in which several ideologies can coexist with a common ground. The "City in the City" idea corresponds with—the quite contemporary—society's structure, which is made by diversity and heterogeneity, in opposition to the totalitarian meaning of society in which every individualism would be oppressed (Ungers 1991: 214). This is expressing an extremely contemporary condition as well. Indeed, society is now increasingly based on the idea of the individual as unique, therefore customisation is becoming a real doctrine, which pertains the production of open space.

Right after the fall of the Wall, Ungers reintroduced the idea of the archipelago: again he presumed a shrinkage of the city would occur, which proved to be the case, right up until today. Ungers reaffirmed his contrary position to the restorative reconstruction of the city.

With regard to the latter, Ungers declared that every future plan for Berlin would have to reflect the city's history and by doing so not giving the illusion that the city should be 'repaired' in its historical form (Ungers 1991: 214). He underlined the idea of the fragmented urban condition, peculiar in Berlin, and he affirmed that Berlin should be seen as a "gigantic puzzle rather than an ordered and logical whole. (...). Every generation had passed the city to the next as a collection of fragments, no generation has been capable to come to a valid "end". The city remained—as Ungers wrote '*gottlob*'—discontinuous, incomplete and therefore varied and vital." (Ungers 1991: 215)

The conditions of negative growth, depopulation or dispersion and the subsequent creation of alternative models of urbanism is the ghost against which the doctrine of the urban renewal or critical reconstruction is fighting. The doctrine of the reconstruction of the city's ground structure is the negation of the palimpsest produced due the constant cycle of design followed by destruction and partial reconstruction. Berlin's palimpsest contain fragments of all overall designs and the narration of Berlin's landscape is expressed as much by these absences. The film director Wim Wenders underlined his experience of Berlin in the 1980s "the wide dimensions of the city which bring one back to the desolate expanses of the city's ancient glacial sand beds." (Wenders 1991). He noticed that precisely those areas, such as urban void or vacant plots, are those signs that trace the story of the city better than any words.

Both ideas, archipelago and *Zwischenstadt*, led to a criticism of predominant doctrine in the 1980s and 1990s in Berlin. Ungers presented his strategy to the

committee of the German Social Democratic Party in 1977, with the plea for a re-evaluation.

Sieverts' book does not deal directly with Berlin and its reconstruction, but it was written in the time when the predominant thinking was the restorative conception of the city and he was expressing, through the concept of *Zwischenstadt*, a contra-thesis. The fragment is the primary element and the first premise in the concept of the *Zwischenstadt*. The condition of the *Zwischenstadt* is to found everywhere in the world. The grain and density of development of the individual urban areas and the degree of penetration with open spaces and landscapes determine the specific character of each *Zwischenstadt*. Sieverts starts defining this 'strange urban form' which takes up large areas, and it has both urban and rural characteristics.

As known, the dissolution of the cities (*die Auflösung der Städte*) is not a new phenomenon: there are many examples from the history of ideas of urban development that could be mentioned, which demand the dissolution of the city, rooted in a criticism of the densely composed city. Sieverts, in his book *Zwischenstadt* and in a recent lecture delivered in Lausanne, remarks that still today, the 'Old City' is the dominant thinking, even though this is not the condition we experience every day. The search for a term that evokes a peculiar urban condition with features not quite ascribable to the city, nor to countryside, explains the difficulties even naming a condition that cannot be expressed by the word 'city'. *Zwischenstadt* was published in 1997 and the word "*Zwischenstadt*" has become a common term in the discussion of urban morphologies in German-speaking countries. In the English edition of the book there is an introduction to this term which reveals the difficulties of properly naming such an urban morphology. The book deals first of all with the discrepancy between urban reality and the persistent dominant ideology concerning how the European city should be.

H. G. Wells describes the condition of the dispersion quite early, indeed he predicted the emergence of a new city-type.<sup>7</sup>

The precision of his description is remarkable: "The city will diffuse itself until it has taken up considerable areas and many of the characteristics, the greenness, the fresh air, of what is now country, [and this] leads us to suppose also that the country will take to itself many of the qualities of the city". (Wells 1902)

The reality of our contemporary large cities and agglomerations is described as a continuum of built-up areas and open spaces, connected by a network of paths of different size and character.

This dichotomy between the city and the countryside is no longer relevant in the condition of the dispersion, rather it establishes a new dialectic between urban realm, territory and nature.

The concept of centrality also vanishes in the framework of the *Zwischenstadt*. Indeed, the centre of the "old city" is meant to designate a place in which everything important can be found and from which all major development starts. The

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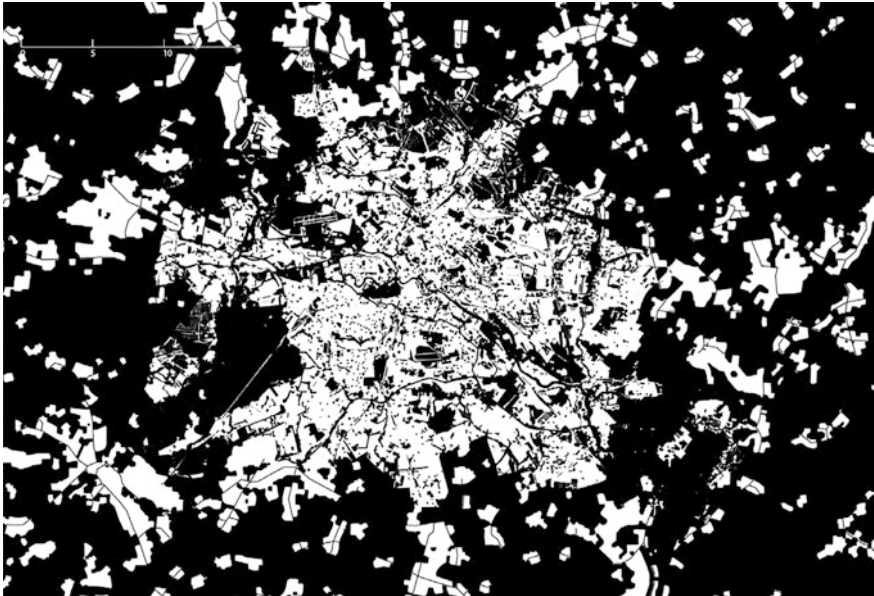
<sup>7</sup>See Sieverts, ix Foreword to the English version.

existence of a centre implies the existence of an hierarchical order in which the centre is the *primus inter pares*.

With the dissolution of the concept of the ‘centre’, the concept of the ‘periphery’ also loses its content, in particular because the periphery is enriching itself with a wide range of different kinds of centres becoming a polycentric infrastructured carpet. For a long time cities have not been organised in a hierarchical ‘tree structure’, instead the system should be interpreted as a network with nodes (Alexander 1965).

In such a network, all elements can ideally be co-equal, and there is no prioritising hierarchy. “The *Zwischenstadt* can develop any diversity of settlement and built form, so long as, as a whole, they are intelligible in their settlement of network and, above all, remain embedded as an archipelago in the sea of an interconnected landscape. In this way the landscape becomes the glue of the *Zwischenstadt*.” (Sievert 1997)

This aspect of the *Zwischenstadt* brings to mind several interpretation. It recalls the image of archipelagos in a green sea. The space between the islands—the fragments of the *Zwischenstadt* and the cells in Gloeden’s model—is not a void by significance, instead it is an infrastructured layer which serves as a ground (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4** Map of the open space (black) in Berlin, 2014. Data from the Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt 2014

## An Interpretation of the Models in the Contemporary Metropolis

The idea of the *Zwischenstadt* in juxtaposition to contemporary Berlin morphology, reveals some extraordinary and unknown convergences. Despite the fact that Berlin's morphology diverges with the case studies described as *Zwischenstädte*, (the Ruhr region for example), Berlin is historically composed by fragments and therefore constructed on multiples and never really exists as a whole. Karl Scheffler as early as 1910 intuited, what Berlin's destiny might be: "forever to become and never to be". The polycentric character of the city has been recognised also before. In 1901 Henry Urban in his book *Der Entdeckung Berlins* wrote: "As a New Yorker, I find it particularly strange that there is no Berlin, only a mass of villages called Berlin." Berlin has a peculiar relationship with its voids and its density, a feature that is still nowadays uncommon in other large European cities. Indeed, it seems to have an osmotic relationship with its urban voids and open spaces. The stratification of events, ideas, projects, bottom-up interventions, have made Berlin a peculiar metropolis shot through with open spaces.

It appears that Berlin has some features of its morphology which can be attributed to a *Zwischenstadt* and a hypothesis is to read and classified Berlin as a type of *Zwischenstadt*.

The accumulation of events and the stratification of theories, has created a broad cultural deposit. The mnemotechnical aspect is highly relevant, as it allows one to perceive the city as a product of its complex history, which creates a project for Berlin. The theoretical proximity of Berlin to a *Zwischenstadt* or an archipelago in a green lagoon, or even more abstract, as a metropolis composed of cells, underlines precisely this peculiarity of Berlin's urban landscape which is gradually falling apart. This juxtaposition might result radical or too abstract, but it delineates the image of Berlin through its open spaces as a challenge that should be protected. It helps to better understand this matter as a value and a cultural heritage of this stream of theories and ideas.

According to several projects for Berlin, 'open space' should be a large system of natural spaces for many purposes, such as playgrounds, urban parks, regional parks, meadows and so on. This consideration leads to further questions. Thus, is this vision still possible, or has the point of no return been crossed and therefore will this peculiar aspect of Berlin's identity vanish and a new identity be established and regulated by market policies? To use Ungers' words, Berlin's future is not in pursuit of a new utopia, but of a design for a better reality. (Ungers 1991: 215)

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