

## Grün in der Stadt. Vom Hortus conclusus zum Urban gardening. Edited by Andrea Pühringer and Holger Thomas Gräf.\*

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Exploring the frontiers of different disciplines is both an exciting and challenging endeavour. Facilitating meaningful dialogue between inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary requires careful thought and coordination. *Grün in der Stadt. Vom Hortus conclusus zum Urban gardening*, edited by Andrea Pühringer and Holger Thomas Gräf, provides an opportunity to reflect on best practices and identify areas for improvement in similar future projects. This review offers a brief overview of the volume.

In her introduction, Pühringer paraphrases garden historian Géza Hajós' (1942–2019) concept of the three dimensions of nature—1) nature as wilderness; 2) nature as cultivation; 3) nature as aesthetics—highlighting how environmental history has gained prominence in recent decades. The cultural turn in environmental history<sup>1</sup> introduced hybridity as a core concept in the study of nature and civilisation, such as the countryside serving as the hinterland of the city. Peter Burke was among the first to interpret knowledge forms in natural history, and today, historians<sup>2</sup> explore the history of natural sciences, particularly plants and botany. More recently, Matthew Hall<sup>3</sup> and a growing circle of scholars (like anthropologist Cornelia Ertl, philosopher Michael Marder and literary scholars Min Wild and Kathryn Gray) have contributed to the emerging field of critical plant studies.

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1 For this, see a brief summary by Richard White: White, “From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes.”

2 For example, Marianne Klemun, Sophie Ruppel, Daniela Bleichmar, Karin Nickelsen, and Stephan Müller-Wille.

3 Hall, *Plants as Persons*.

*Grün in der Stadt* is strictly rooted in urban history. Pühringer traces the volume's origins to the South German urban historian circle, specifically citing Joachim B. Schultis. She also acknowledges the influence of interdisciplinary German garden history marked by Stefan Schweizer, Sascha Winter, Mark Häberlein, and Robert Zink. These scholars emphasise the professionalisation of gardening, urban planning and landscape architecture at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the growing importance of green spaces in modern urban life. While the introduction touches on broader historiographical traditions, a more detailed contextualisation of urban green research would have strengthened the discussion.

The book, the 30<sup>th</sup> volume in the *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Städte Mitteleuropas* (Contributions to the History of the Cities of Central Europe) series published by Studien Verlag, aims to provide a *longue durée* overview of urban green spaces in Central Europe. The series itself was funded by Wilhelm Rausch (1927–2019), a key figure in urban historical research, making this volume a tribute to his legacy. Given this city-focused perspective, Pühringer and Gräf's edition deepens our understanding of the diverse roles and functions of cultivated plant green spaces in densely built urban environments, especially city centres.

The book is structured into three main chapters, each containing five studies. The first chapter follows a chronological framework, while the second and third are thematic. The title, combining German, Latin, and English terms (*Grün in der Stadt, Hortus conclusus, Urban Gardening*), is eye-catching but somewhat convoluted. In general, the main ideas are delivered successfully through a wide array of case studies and a convincingly rich corpus of sources dominated by city redevelopment plans and garden literature. The papers are organised coherently. The organisation facilitates a multidisciplinary dialogue among the eleven historians and six landscape architects and gardeners who contribute to the volume. The fifteen studies explore urban green spaces across different historical contexts, spanning the Renaissance to the postmodern era. The first part (*Grün in der Stadt – Entwicklungslinien vom Mittelalter bis in die Zukunft*) examines the evolving relationship between plants and city centres. The second (*Grün im urbanen Leben: Politik, Kommerz und Lifestyle*) investigates green spaces within the spheres of institutions, politics, commerce, and lifestyle. The final part (*Vom "Grün in der Stadt" zur "Stadt im Grünen"*) explores how green areas shaped—and were shaped by—Enlightenment, nationalism, and environmentalism, particularly in the context of city planning.

The volume largely focuses on German-speaking regions, with nearly all contributions working within these territories. Thus, the papers indicate a German take on Central-European garden and urban history. However, with a few exceptions, the entire volume is dedicated to German cities and sources. While Austria and, to some extent, Germany are commonly included in definitions of Central Europe,

a clearer articulation of the book's geographical scope would have helped manage reader expectations. Alina Payne's recent book<sup>4</sup> provides a useful example of how explicitly defining a research area can enhance a study's coherence. Without a precise delineation, readers might anticipate coverage of Hungarian, Czech, Polish, and Slovak examples, which are largely absent. The omission of these perspectives leads to minor inaccuracies, such as the misspelling of the name of János Boráros, a former mayor of Budapest (p. 91). The broader European context—including French, English, Dutch, and Scandinavian green planning—is addressed in detail only in the contributions of Stefan Schweizer and Gisella Mettele. Stronger engagement with key European trends and more examples would have enriched the discussion of German developments.

Despite these limitations, *Grün in der Stadt* is a valuable contribution to landscape history, enhancing our understanding of urban green spaces. Rather than proposing a radically new interpretation, the volume gradually builds new perspectives on urban vegetation. Chapter one presents the familiar historical narrative, detailing the emergence of the public and the interplay between the bourgeoisie, municipal authorities, and the sovereign power. The essays explore a range of green spaces, from the perspective of political agency, the governance of subjects, and the philosophical-pedagogical backgrounds of these phenomena through the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Chapter two introduces familiar and new forms of urban green spaces: private gardens, parks, groves, allées, squares, community and indoor gardens, and even futuristic green roofs and green walls, linking them to special institutions developed during the late Enlightenment (ca. 1770–1840) such as sports fields, botanical gardens, glasshouses and artist's gardens. In this chapter, the authors shed light on these so-called 'plant-shelters' in the context of sports history, the history of botany, and architectural history. Through a wealth of illustrations and sources, the volume convincingly demonstrates the deep integration of plant life into urban environments, whether through recreation (sports activities on lawn areas, recreation under trees and shrubs in parks), education (in botanical gardens and national parks), or artistic inspiration (private and artists' gardens). The final chapter expands the scale of analysis, examining green cities, suburbs, and spa towns like Merano, offering insights from medical and social history. In this part, the history of medicine (especially *Terreinkuren* or open-air therapy) and social history (the discussion of the German version of English suburbs) are discussed through the lens of the present-day transition of Merano from an imperial spa town to a modern green city. Similarly to this case study, the volume's essays on local history reflect on how micro-landscapes can influence perspectives about the natural environment.

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4 Payne, ed., *The Land between Two Seas*.

In sum, *Grün in der Stadt* successfully blends traditional and newer approaches to urban history. Despite some weaker elements, it serves as an excellent research contribution to German urban history with the well-crafted, comprehensive narrative and the variety of topics it includes. Its interdisciplinary approach will foster dialogue among a wide range of scholars interested in the dichotomy of human-nature relationship, such as experts in landscape, environmental, and natural history and historians of art, as well as urban and political historians. Continued research in this field can further illuminate Europe's natural and built heritage, offering insights that may guide future interactions between urban planning and the natural world.

## Literature

- Hall, Matthew. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438434308>
- Payne, Alina, ed. *The Land between Two Seas: Art on the Move in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea 1300–1700*. Leiden: Brill, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004515468>
- White, Richard. "From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History." *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (2004): 557–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.2004.00089.x>

