



ONCE UPON A TIME  
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*Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of the dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains ...<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Everyman, 1993, 10.

Spring was just about setting in when I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The garden, although scented and humid, was but a mere promise of what was to come. The still surface of the lake, inert in appearance, reflected barren branches, faint shades of coloured greys remnant from last year. Everything was yet to happen – for someone who was to study gardens, I found the right time to begin. And the right place. Later, as the weeks went by, foliage filled the trees and bushes; shy early flowers started a seemingly endless succession of colourful and perfumed blossoms.

Studying gardens to know better about architecture had been my desire for some time. The idea I wanted to develop – and following this successful beginning, I now want more than ever – was to construct an idiosyncratic theory of architecture based on a theory of the spaces surrounding architectural objects proper. Receiving the Mellon fellowship was the eagerly-awaited opportunity to commence my research on gardens and landscape: it was only now that I could finally begin reading and thinking about them in a consistent and purposeful manner. To my delight, the matter proves not only worthwhile; its implications reach way beyond my most ambitious hopes and shall eventually provide ground for my theoretical preoccupations for years to come. Having had to prepare the Dienstagskolloquium gave a boost to my work by forcing me to tailor the yet rather raw mass of knowledge into a structured shape. In following my bookish enquiries, the help provided by the Wiko library cannot be praised enough. By bringing to hand every book I could think of, besides owning most of the necessary bibliographic reference and providing the friendliest milieu to consult it, to me the library is the embodiment of The Library. The more so because it allowed me to be a recluse at the Kolleg when I wanted to read and write. Those were times of quiet and happy work in room W4 to be remembered for their precious rarity.

However, I often left this peaceful harbour driven by restlessness, curiosity – and by my sense of duty. For besides learning about them, looking at gardens in their material, ever-changing presence is part of the enterprise I have in mind. I went out quite a lot, spending time and most of my ambulatory energies to walk many kilometres across parks, gardens and woodlands. In this sense too, Berlin was of immense importance. It is a green city. It has a great variety of public gardens – from castle parks to tiny urban squares, from *Laubenpieper* colonies to socialist leisure establishments for the working people. Amidst one of the latter, hidden in an extreme-oriental suburb of Berlin, there is even a splendid, recently created Japanese Zen garden. The city also has a dramatic recent history: on the vast areas formerly occupied by the infamous *Mauer* and its no-man's-land, there are

interesting examples of newly laid gardens. Besides all this, the Kolleg being situated in a proper “garden city” development, it seemed destined to be the auspicious setting for the debut of my project.

The voyage to the Erholungspark Marzahn, though endeavouring, was merely a foreshadow of the longer study trips I undertook within Germany, Denmark and France with the intention of visiting several gardens and parks of different age, size and significance. Friends from Berlin took me to see the castle park in Bad Muskau on the Polish border (literally on it: the Neiße happens to be the park river, so the ominous Oder-Neiße frontier ridiculously cuts the castle park in two); Danish friends took me to see a newly “re-naturalised” river delta in Western Jutland, thus showing me a real – though artificial “by nature” – landscape restoration. Re-visiting the art-park of the Insel Hombroich Foundation in Neuss was as illuminating as it was delightful. On a very different scale and almost in a different cultural context, this experience is fairly comparable to my re-visiting of the gardens in Versailles after more than twenty years since my first and only other journey there.

The hundreds of photographs I took during these wanderings are useful by-products because they will hopefully do a good service by illustrating my future lectures. Already a colleague and friend from the Bucharest School of Architecture and I have started to shape a new series of lectures bearing the title: A Theory of the Non-Built Spaces, where my newly acquired knowledge might prove reasonably useful.

Yes, the Wissenschaftskolleg is in many senses – as a matter of fact, in every sense – the best imaginable place for performing academic work. From the first minute of my arrival, I was cordially taken care of, comfortably put up and gently led by the hand until I could manage by myself. All this was more than mere efficiency and competence: it was human concern to help one find one’s place. Everything was put into place with infinite care to permit one to see to one’s work under the best circumstances. Indeed, this story is about the Wiko people: the wonderful men and women inhabiting the Kolleg who, on the one hand, work hard to ensure that all things go smoothly; I can imagine what it takes to achieve this aim without visible effort. On the other hand, there is the group of Fellows who work hard on their research and give talks, thus responding to the work of the others. Staff and Fellows together are the performers and audience of impressive academic events: there was an unforgettable series of colloquia, conferences, informal seminars and conversations. Even the small talk was sparkling with ideas: The Wiko people constitute one superbly diverse, brilliantly symbiotic community that I was most honoured to join when my lucky star brought me to the Kolleg. Every minute I spent there remains a valuable proof

that such a society is possible, that interest in each other's work, understanding and communication can be intensely shared, joyful and fertile. One's confidence in humankind cannot but come out strengthened, after having had the privilege of being a Wiko Fellow.

When it came time to write an account of the three months I spent between April and June 2003 at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin as a Gast des Rektors, it would never have occurred to me that such a pleasurable task should be in any way difficult – until I set myself to write it. Now why should it be problematic to speak about an experience that was in every single respect interesting, rewarding, intense? About a time that was thoroughly engaging to me in both the intellectual and the affective sense? Surely, what is to be done is a sensible report concerning my work during the time spent at this institution. Yet, it is precisely this kind of detachment that is so difficult to find when one feels hugely involved in personal terms. For the Wiko is a place with powerful identity and charm, being also fundamentally different from what one usually assumes an institution to be. Attempting to capture in words the unique quality of this place is what I should have done in the lines above. If I have failed, it is certainly because there is so much beyond words – beyond plain prose, at least – that ought to be said. Unless one can write poetry, which unfortunately is not within my means, any attempt to give an account of the Wissenschaftskolleg is bound to be insufficient.

When I left the Wallotstraße (it was scented with the blossom of the linden tree), it seemed as if I was closing behind me the door of childhood. For this is what the Wissenschaftskolleg experience is miraculously related to: an existence devoid of the worries and responsibilities of adulthood, where one is “kept” to look, learn, understand and admire. I have been a happy child for three months; of course, innocence could not be recovered. Yet tasting once again the strong flavour of unbound exploration and imagination while having already in mind a good deal to compare it with, enhanced the experience with an awareness to which actual childhood could hardly pretend. Thus, when I was nervously throwing the envelope with the key into the mailbox – will it not be lost? – I was almost re-enacting gestures of Alice fumbling with the key of the door leading to the rose garden. Except that, symmetrically, I was about to leave Wonderland for good. Gone are the roses of the Parc de Bagatelle, but the memory of their magnificence will keep me company, fading but slowly, never to be separated in my mind from the serene gravel sea of the *Garten des zusammenfließenden Wassers*.



Upper: Großer Kolloquiumsraum of the Wissenschaftskolleg  
Middle: White Villa; red chestnut tree seen from room W4  
Lower: Garden of Bagatelle in Paris; Garten des zusammenfließenden Wassers in Marzahn