

GUNTER SCHOCH

AT WINNIPEG PARKS AND RECREATION AND AT METRO PARKS

That Gunter Schoch was able to persevere and finish his training in horticulture and landscape architecture amidst the chaos of post-World War II Berlin was a tribute to his steady character. With dreams of becoming a forester, he was to have taken up an apprenticeship on the estate of the Count von Arnim after completing high school. Instead he was drafted at the age of 17 during the last days of the war and spent almost a year in Denmark in military training and in West Germany as a prisoner of war and farm worker. When he came back in early 1946, his home city had been devastated by intense bombing and had been carved up into zones of influence by the western allies and the Soviet Union. Many options for training and education were simply unavailable but Schoch found that his love of nature could find expression through a course in horticulture and landscape architecture. He completed the necessary two years as an apprentice and one year as a journeyman with two commercial nursery and landscape contracting businesses in Berlin before beginning formal study at the Horticulture College of Quedlinburg am Harz. After graduating in 1950, Schoch became a landscape technician with the Berlin Parks Department in the district of Reinickendorf.¹

Here at least the devastation of the city worked in favour of the beginning landscape designer. It was necessary virtually to rebuild the entire parks system of West Berlin. In addition to bomb damage, parks had been cultivated for vegetable gardens and their trees hacked down for firewood. With funding from the Marshall Plan pouring into West Berlin, Schoch found himself designing and supervising eight to ten projects at the same time ranging in scale from children's day care centres to large regional parks and sports grounds. He describes his horticultural training as "old style horticulture," with very little of the modernist influence of the Bauhaus. In fact, many of the projects of that time involved the restoration of parks and gardens that had been created, in some cases, centuries before. The work was intense, with a lot of variety and a whole range of interesting problems to be solved. But the rest of life in the divided city continued to be difficult. Married now and with one child, Schoch could not see a future for his family in Berlin. Canada was taking immigrants and the Schoch family set sail from Bremerhaven in January 1953. They arrived at the train station in Winnipeg in the midst of the famous prairie winter.

After two years working with commercial nursery and landscaping contractors, Schoch got a job in 1955 at the Winnipeg Board of Parks and Recreation. His title was “landscape technician” and he did design work right from the start, putting projects into plan form during the winter and working on the construction crew during the summer. The board was only slowly recovering from its almost 20 year low period during the Depression and the war. During that time park improvements had been stopped, few parks or facilities had been acquired or built, park and boulevard maintenance had been severely cut back and it was all the city could do to keep the gates of parks and recreational facilities open during the summer season.²

Winnipeg city services got a much-needed burst of energy, money and political will with the formation of a two-tier system of city government in 1960. This system involved a separation of powers between those services that would be provided by the local municipality and those services that were of city-wide importance. These city-wide services—planning, major streets and transportation, water and sewer services, policing, regional parks—were to be administered by a separately elected council whose members represented pie shaped wards the boundaries of which crossed municipal lines. The Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg, popularly known as “Metro”, was initially comprised of 19 member municipalities.³ The Metro system was to last only a decade before it collapsed under accusations of lavish spending and infighting between the member municipalities. During this decade, however, Winnipeg gained more elements of infrastructure than it had in the previous 40 years: Winnipeg International Airport; the Disraeli Freeway; the St. James bridge and interchange; the St. Vital bridge; the George Maclean Pumping Station; and the perimeter highway to name a few. At the same time, the city was finally able to devote some attention to its parks and open spaces. The Metro Parks and Protection Division embarked on its decade of growth with two main goals: to make regional parks accessible in winter as well as summer by providing winter facilities and catering services; and to add an additional 1,000 acres to the Winnipeg regional parks system within five years. Metro also announced that new parks would be developed in a style that required less intensive maintenance than had the English landscape style parks of Assiniboine and Kildonan. The existing landforms were to determine the design of the park, without the extensive grading and construction that had taken place earlier in the century.⁴ The division was true to its pledge, acquiring parkland on the then suburban fringe of development in excess of the 1,000 acre pledge by 1970. Winnipeg gained, during this period, La Barriere, Maple Grove, King’s and Little Mountain parks among others.

In 1962, following a transitional year, the Winnipeg Board of Parks and Recreation ceded to Metro its responsibility for regional parks and with that, many employees including Gunter Schoch.⁵ The next decade was to be Schoch's most productive as a landscape designer. He came into his own as the first professionally trained landscape architect to take up permanent residence in Manitoba.⁶ As "Landscape Architect" for the Metropolitan Parks and Protection Division, the title he was given in 1966, he designed the most extensive improvements in Winnipeg's regional parks since the heyday of George Champion almost 40 years before. It is also significant that this was the first time a government agency in Manitoba had recognized the term "landscape architect" within its staff complement.

The Assiniboine Park Zoo had always been popular with Winnipeggers, but it was little more than a haphazard collection of animals housed in various makeshift and inadequate shelters. Along with the new zoo director, Dr. Gunter Voss, Schoch put together a five-year plan for large scale refurbishment of the entire zoo. The idea was to improve the conditions of care for the animals with new enclosures that involved minimal visual interference between zoo patrons and the animals. Conditions for people, too, would be improved with extensive walkways and landscaping, and improved restaurant, rest areas, and washroom facilities.⁷ Distressed at the prior shabby appearance of the zoo, Schoch chose a high maintenance style for the zoo whereby no public areas would be ungroomed. All areas outside the animal enclosures would be paved, mowed, or cultivated into flower or shrub beds. Prior to this time it had been possible to drive through the zoo. But Voss and Schoch wanted a strictly pedestrian environment both for the good of the animals and the people. A 500 car parking lot was to be built east of the zoo with the main entrance, suitably laid out with flower beds and shrub plantings, located off this parking lot.⁸

Both the 1913 City Planning Commission Report and the 1948 Metropolitan Plan for Greater Winnipeg had recommended that the aesthetic treatment of major streets and thoroughfares of Winnipeg needed to be dealt with not as an afterthought but as an intrinsic part of the planning process. However, it was not until the time of Metro that the city began to include a routine budget line for landscape work in major street improvements.⁹ Gunter Schoch became involved in the aesthetic treatment of the first modern street interchange in Winnipeg, the St. James interchange, which directs traffic onto the St. James Bridge. Here Schoch softened the loops of the cloverleaf on the north side of the Red River by providing a small lake with rocks, trees and shrubbery in one quadrant and a formal wind-controlled fountain and plaza in the other. On the Academy Road side of the bridge he provided a more naturalistic triangular park space.

4.1 St. James interchange, lake and shrubbery, Winnipeg, 2003, G. McCullough. Designed by Gunter A. Schoch. This fantasy of a lake with rock outcropping and waterfall required a high level of maintenance that became hard to sustain later during the era of government cut-backs. Pictured here in 2003, bullrushes have been allowed to grow up, hiding the original Tyndall stone edging of the lake and creating a more natural looking shoreline.



The construction of a new pavilion at Kildonan Park in 1964 drew upon all of Schoch's experience both as a designer and as a hands-on craftsman. The new pavilion, designed by Blankstein, Coop, Gillmore and Hanna, was a modern box of concrete and glass in which the horizontals created by the floor and roof slabs dominated in dynamic contrast to the vertical lines of the large trees on the site. The first park pavilion to be used year round, it was set into the bed of the Lord Selkirk Creek, which would provide a quiet pond in summer and a busy skating rink in winter. Schoch's job was to provide a pond and landscape that worked year round and gave the building beautiful views from its expansive windows and upper storey deck. Because the grades of the creek bed were so complicated that there was no point in trying to express them in a drawing, he had to be on the site most of the time in order to give direction to the work crew in excavating and placing stones. The result is a patio leading from the pavilion to a groomed pond with stylized island, the whole paved and edged in cream coloured limestone. The valley walls and island were planted with native trees and shrubs and the steepest grades were stabilized with limestone retaining walls, something of a Schoch signature.

Before the Metro decade was over, Schoch designed numerous green spaces including two jobs close to his heart: the first major improvements to St. Vital Park since the Depression and the design and construction of Crescent Drive golf course. When Metro's two-tier city government system was replaced by a fully amalgamated urban municipal government dubbed "Unicity" in 1971, Gunter Schoch still had many contributions to make, but from then on he would make them as an administrator. In January 1972 he joined the unified Winnipeg Parks and Recreation Department as City Landscape Architect, was promoted to Manager of Planning and Resources and ended his career as Director of Planning and Development, retiring in 1989.



4.2 Landscape construction, Kildonan Park Pavilion, Winnipeg, 1964, CW. Gunter Schoch stayed on site to direct the work crew as they placed stones for the patio, stairways, pond edging and retaining walls.



1962

4.3 Kildonan Park Pavilion, Winnipeg, c.1970, CW. Designed in 1964 by the Winnipeg firm Blankstein, Coop, Gillmore and Hanna, the building entrance is located on the upper level while the lower level is nestled into the creek bed. Gunter Schoch's job was to design a landscape that would be usable as a passive recreation space in summer and a skating pond in winter.

By the time Schoch joined the unified department in 1972, he did almost no design work himself. There was now a staff to direct and too much work to do entirely in-house. The first landscape architecture firms were underway in Winnipeg by that time and Schoch developed good relations with the tiny community of landscape professionals. He shared out city contracts in an equitable manner, making sure not to favour one firm over another. He enjoyed the company of other landscape architects and had a strong belief in the importance of working for the good of the profession as a whole. Initially rebuffed by the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects, which did not recognize his German credentials, Schoch had become a member of the American Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA). He worked hard for AILA, eventually assuming the vice-presidency. By 1973, when he was elected to the AILA College of Fellows, Schoch was already immersed in the creation of the new Manitoba Association of Landscape Architects, an association that would benefit greatly from his organizational talents.

1972