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RV#44 • Fall 2003
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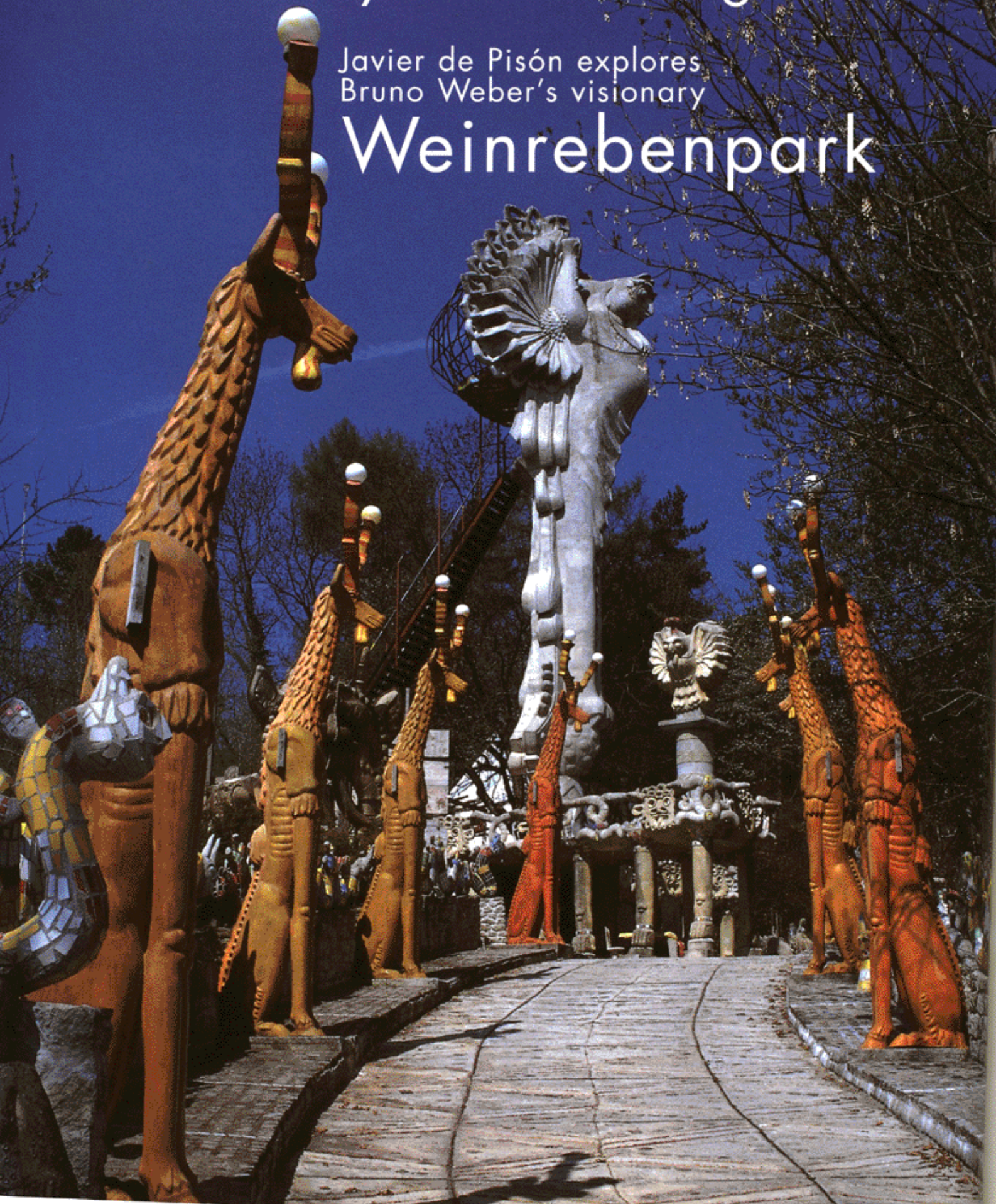


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A Sanctuary for the Imagination

Javier de Pisón explores
Bruno Weber's visionary

Weinrebenpark





'His buildings are a soothing oasis in the desert of functional architecture, precious stones in the grey monotony of the streets, creations of melodic rhythm among the dead mass surrounding them.' The German architect Josef Wiedemann (1) used these words to describe the work of Antoni Gaudí, but he might have been referring to Bruno Weber's Weinrebenpark (Grapevine Park), a proud rival to Gaudí's Parque Güell.

Designed and built by Weber in the Zürich suburb of Dietikon, Switzerland, Weinrebenpark is a work-in-progress, a living organic entity which grows and changes continuously. Thirty years in the making, the park is the work of a contemporary artist who, like Gaudí and Ferdinand Cheval, has sought to escape the constraints of reality through the construction of a complex, visionary environment.

Divided into three different parts, the Forest Garden, the Love Garden and the Water Garden (still under construction), the Weinrebenpark includes an astonishing array of buildings, pavilions, archways, fountains, sculptures, and fantastic creatures of different shapes, colors and styles, evoking a dream-like scenery in which fantasy and reality blend without friction.

Visitors first pass through an imposing stone and granite archway, The Gate of Day and Night, which would seem more at home in Angkor than in the outskirts of Zürich. The roads and pathways are lined with sculpted, totem-like lamp-posts in the shape of equine beasts, including giraffes, horses or deer. Scattered throughout the park, sculptural forms of mythical animals, including unicorns and dragons, and anthropomorphic figures add to the illusionary experience.

The focal points of the environment are a Gothic-style Towerhouse, a row of head-shaped guest houses, two pyramid African tents, and the Bull Pavilion, evocative of a Picasso painting. The large-scale sculptures – all untitled – include a 105 meter long, 35 ton depiction of two winged dogs locked in ferocious battle, an 18 meter high Owl Column, which weighs 180 tons, and a five meter high cat-elephant hybrid, which is one of the oldest works in the park. Among the numerous other structures, there are two 28 meter bridges in the form of snakes.



Bruno Weber celebrates a 40 Year Jubilee at Weinrebenpark on September 12, 2003 from 5pm. The entrance fee for this event is ChFr.200 per person and ChFr.150 for members to include dinner, music, theater and drinks. Book online at www.bruno-weber.com

All photographs by Deidi von Schawen.



The history of Weinrebenpark

Weber was born in Dietikon, Switzerland in 1931, and studied for two years at the Arts and Crafts School in Zürich, where he was trained as a painter. He inherited a piece of land from his parents and decided to build a studio there. It unwittingly became the park's first structure. 'I was primarily a painter and graphic designer,' says Weber. 'I built my studio by myself in 1962. Then in 1969 I started to work on the Weinrebenpark project and it just grew bigger and bigger.'

The park has gradually evolved from a single structure to the sprawling menagerie it is today. Art critic and curator Harald Szeemann explained the process in the Swiss cultural magazine *Passages*, 'By painting murals on the outside walls and adding reliefs, heads and grotesque images he makes it into a work of art....The spirits of the house multiply. The studio becomes a temple-like living and working area with rows of decorated pillars, which in turn calls for a towerhouse. A construction of this type calls for a hall and door, these in turn for a fountain and steps, the forest for population by exotic animals. Benches, king-sized, and monster chairs are set out for the growing number of visitors, and for social gatherings a house in the shape of a head is built, from which in turn the plan for a settlement of head-shaped houses is developed.' (2)

Weber's wife, Mariann Weber-Godon, was the first person to help the artist with the park's construction, and he considers her a collaborator. 'Her spiritual input has been the most important thing,' the artist says. Over many years, Mariann has made the molds, operated the crane, and inlaid the mosaic in the park's sculptures and structures. 'She integrates all the details to make the space work cohesively, manages the park, and has raised our twins, Rebecca and Mireille, who are 30 years old now.'

The artists have also developed their own building techniques. The process begins with Weber drawing his designs on paper, after which he creates lost-casting molds. For his monumental pieces he casts concrete using the clay from his own land. Once cast, most of his sculptures are inlaid with mosaic and glass tiles. Throughout the process, Weber has meticulously planned every detail with the



help of engineers. In this way, he has developed a reputation as a master of intuitive construction.

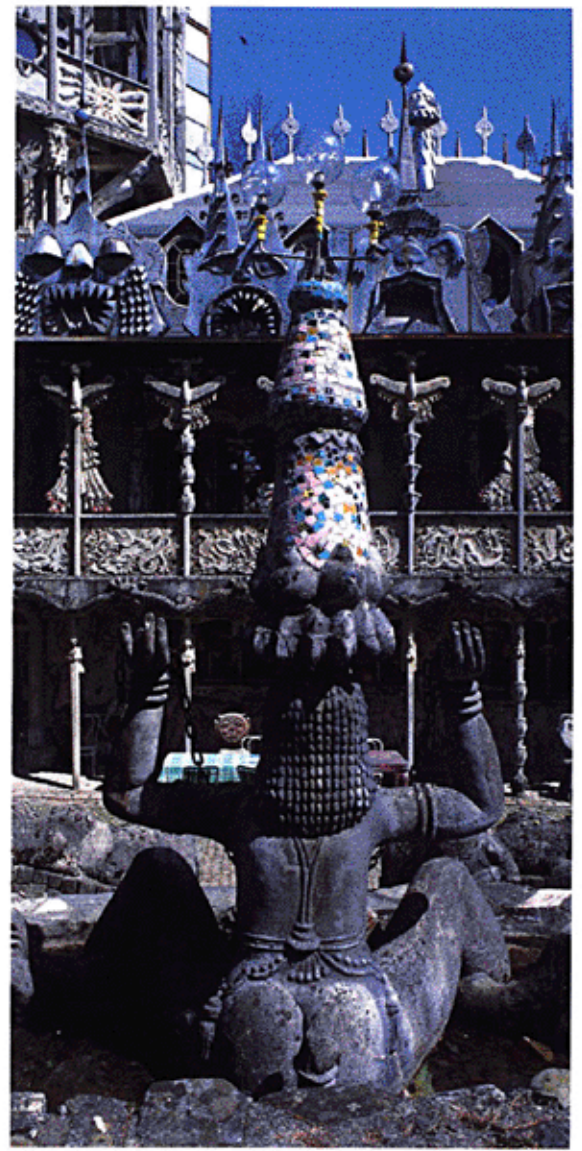
The inspiration for the park came as modernization threatened to overwhelm his hometown of Dietikon, a once peaceful village surrounded by farms. 'The 1960s building boom in Zürich completely changed the rural landscape,' explains Weber, 'and it inspired in me the desire to create a contrasting world up here. A contrasting space for the imagination, where one could just be. I wanted to empower the imagination.'

The Towerhouse

An intricate four story, cathedral-like building crowned by a 30 meter high observatory, the Towerhouse is where Weber and his wife live and work. It features two stories of arched corridors, sustained by several multi-formed female-shaped pillars, elaborate balconies and banisters. A wide variety of painted murals portray the couple's own mythological world. On the roof, a series of large, stylized gargoyles stand watch over the structure. The house looks part-Gothic cathedral and part-Indian temple, but is actually typical of Weber's own unique hybrid style.

The interior, for which the Webers have designed all the furniture, is even more eclectic. Each room is an installation in itself. At the entrance is a tiled floor hallway in the shape of a labyrinth, surrounded by a cactus garden. This space, adjoining the dining room, is flanked by a series of large, winged, goat-like columns (hermaphrodites, according to Szeeman). The dining room table is a four-headed sea creature of red mosaic tile with large open jaws set directly in front of the diners, which Weber says depicts dolphins.

The mural-painted master bedroom, The Room of Leaves, is a bright space where light streams in through sunray-shaped stained-glass windows. Its centerpiece is a round, wood-carved bed with leaf motifs. Carved figures of Papagena and Papageno, characters from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, form a canopy over the bed.







Monumental sculptures

One of the most interesting aspects of Weber's sculptural forms is that they lend themselves to multiple meanings. While the artist says one sculpture depicts fighting dogs, for instance, most people see dragons in the piece. The colossal size of the sculpture (105 meters long), the wings, the yellow spots on the bodies, spiked ears and especially the long, red, curved tongues all seem to resemble that fabulous creature.

The reason Weber's work is open to interpretation is that a large part of the park's pieces are rooted in fables, fairy tales and myths, merged with Weber's own, idiosyncratic universe. The two colorful, slithering, open-mouthed snake pedestrian bridges, for instance, are based on Goethe's fairy tale *The Golden Snake*. Inlaid with blue and yellow tiles respectively, these long, Chinese-looking bridges allow the visitor to cross over a pond by entering through their mouths.

A well-recognised symbol of wisdom, the obelisk-like Owl Column peers over a balconied café sustained by pillars. Sets of black, turkey-shaped chairs, with red-tipped beaks and crests on the balcony provide a stark contrast to the sculpture. Weber received a commission from Karlsplatz University in Vienna for a similar series of owl pieces for the façade of its library.

The Bull Pavilion is a glass observatory that rests on the back of two large, stone, multi-legged bulls. Set in a peaceful part of the park surrounded by trees, it provides a quiet space to relax. Weber believes that Weinrebenpark, with its forest setting and imaginary creatures, is a much-needed therapeutic balm to the stressful reality of modern life.

Fantastic Realism

While Szeemann sees the park as a social 'counterpoint filled with visionary ideas and gags about the current world in which we live,' Weber, a reserved and enigmatic man, simply asserts: 'There's no symbolic meaning attached to my pieces, though different people with different backgrounds see different symbols. For instance, a Mexican might see there an Aztec, while a Norwegian may see a Viking.' Weber admits that his work could be defined as visionary, but 'to me it's just my own style.' He acknowledges however that, artistically, 'Gaudí is like my grandfather.' In addition, he says he has a 'spiritual and mental relationship with Gothic architecture, as well as with artists such as Niki de St. Phalle and Joan Miró.' Though he feels they have not overtly influenced him, he says he benefits from 'a relationship with them that reaches beyond time and language.'

1. Josef Wiedemann. 'Antoni Gaudí: Inspiration in Architektur und Handwerk.' [Lecture in Span. Kulturinst. in München am. 13. März 1974.] Callwey eds.
2. Harald Szeemann. 'The Entire Work of Art of Bruno Weber.' *Passages* magazine #19.
3. Peter Wehrli. *Bruno Weber: Der Architekt seiner Träume*, Bruno Weber und Benteli Verlags AG, 2002.
4. Bruno Weber, *Bruno Weber Phantastische Welt*, Weitbrecht Verlag in K. Thienemanns Verlag, 1996.

For more on Weinrebenpark visit www.bruno-weber.com or www.dietikon.ch



Mariann Weber says that the only label her husband feels comfortable with is Fantastic Realism, a style founded by artists such as Ernst Fuchs, Arik Brauer or Wolfgang Hutter, and continued by H.R. Giger and others.

Regarding other well-known environments, Weber says that he has never been to the Palais Idéal, but would like to go. 'Cheval is more naive in style than me, it's all I can say.' He has visited Barcelona to see Gaudí's works, as well as the Monsters' Grove at Bomarzo, a bizarre Italian park favored by Salvador Dalí. Weber has also been to Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, the imperial complex of parks, sculptural gardens, theaters and baths that was once the main residence of the famous Roman emperor.

The artist was able to finance his Weinrebenpark first by selling his paintings, and later with contributions from sponsors, members of the park, fees from visitors, and commissioned sculptures. Over the past three decades he has had three assistants who have helped him; several others currently work part-time as tour guides on weekends, as the park takes two hours to see.

Although Weinrebenpark is not very well known outside Switzerland, Weber's works have been exhibited in Venice, Düsseldorf, Bern and München, as well as at the 1992 World Fair in Seville, Spain, where he showed a piece entitled 'Bull Gate.' Among his many private collectors is his friend and neighbor, H.R. Giger, who only lives a 20 minute car ride away from Weinrebenpark. Four years ago, Weber participated in Fantastic Art exhibitions in Germany and Italy. In addition, some of his public works can be seen in the towns of Tantris, München and Uetliberg, Zürich. To date, two German language books on his park have been published. (3, 4)

'Many of my ideas probably will never be realized,' says Weber, 'because of time and money constraints. But with the help of friends, park members and sponsors, I can keep on working. This is my life project.' To prove his point, Weber keeps himself busy in the park's Water Garden, which he expects to finish in two years time. He's also building a museum within the park for his own paintings.

Weinrebenpark is astounding proof of the sustained determination and work of an artist who has transformed his dreams into a remarkable, tangible reality. Bruno Weber has absorbed the most diverse artistic influences and turned them into his own, creating a personal, original style. The organic nature of his works seamlessly blends with the natural surroundings of the forest, creating a singular environment, which is both a masterpiece of visionary art and a real sanctuary for the imagination. 🧐



Javier de Pisón is a US-based cultural writer. He has interviewed cultural figures such as William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. In addition, he runs the alternative art space Wild Seduction Gallery in Miami.

The author would like to acknowledge Eila Juergensen, from the German Consulate in Miami, for her help in translating some of Mr. Weber's statements for this article, and Leslie Barany for providing additional assistance and information.

