

Get off my swing set, Grandma!

NAOMI BUCK

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BERLIN — At first glance, there is nothing distinctive about Preussen Park. A pleasant green space in West Berlin, it has an expansive lawn where sunbathers hang out, outdoor Ping Pong tables and an uber-German statue of Borussia (the female incarnation of Prussia) looking down on the comings and goings.

But rising up from a pile of wood chips like a postmodern sculpture garden are also eight new stainless steel and red plastic structures. Restricted to “citizens 16 and up,” they are part of an outdoor fitness park unveiled this month – billed as the country's first playground for seniors.

One thing Germany certainly doesn't need are more slides and teeter-totters for children. Last year, the Federal Statistical Office reported that the country had the lowest birth rate in Europe. By 2050, a third of the steadily shrinking population will be over 60.

All of which has spawned anxious public debate as tax, pension and health systems undergo major changes to accommodate a top-heavy demographic. The rapidly aging population has also led to business innovations ranging from grocery stores with magnifying lenses hanging from the shelves to half-price discounts for elderly customers at a brothel in Cologne.



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Berlin's 'playground' for grownups is limited to those over five feet. (*Christoph Mayerl for The Globe and Mail*)

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Although Preussen Park's new fitness area is not limited to elderly Berliners, oscillating leg trainers, flexibility machines and a back massage pole that looks like a cat-scratching post do offer gentle opportunities to improve strength and balance and stimulate circulation. A revolution in recreation, in other words, for a country that will undoubtedly need to reinvent public facilities for people past their physical prime.

Renate Zeumer, a Hamburg-based engineer who developed the fitness area, got the idea on a trip to China five years ago. She was impressed by the country's approach to exercise – holistic, inclusive and public – and particularly taken with machines that municipalities were making available in parks and subway stations to encourage people of all ages, shapes and abilities to keep active.

“I wanted to take a picture of some of the women exercising on these machines and they waved me to come over and try. I couldn't get over how good it felt and how clear my head was afterwards,” she recalls. “In China, exercise is not just about breaking a sweat. It's fun and communicative, good for body and soul.”

Convinced that Germany could benefit from at least some aspects of the Chinese approach, Ms. Zeumer has modified machines developed by chi-gong, tai chi and traditional medical specialists to suit the European market: They are larger, to accommodate taller body frames, and more durable, to keep maintenance costs down.

The first inquiries for the machines came from retirement homes and institutions for the disabled and Ms. Zeumer hopes to expand in this direction. But she is also interested in its civic applications – which is why she found sponsors to cover the €20,000 (\$30,000) cost of the equipment's first urban showcase.

As for its success? The deputy mayor of Charlottenburg, a borough of West Berlin, was immediately sold on the machines. But his main hope is that they will help “improve the park's image” after recent controversy over illegal drug and alcohol use at Preussen Park.

Pensioners seem to be a harder sell. When the fitness area launched, newsmagazine Spiegel reported a lukewarm reception from a 71-year-old man shown the leg trainer. “Yeah, but what's it good for?” he asked. Two elderly women got their walkers stuck in the wood chips surrounding the machines.

On a sunny morning this week, a white-haired woman with a cane sat on a park bench, watching the passing scene. The fitness park behind her was empty – but for two bunnies. Asked what she thought of the concept of a playground for seniors, she balked: “Forget it. At my age, nobody's going to tell me what to do!”

Come noon, the playground did begin to fill up: A middle-aged Hong Kong businessman, now resident in Berlin, did an expert round on the machines before continuing his run. Another man parked his bicycle loaded with garbage gleanings to have a good scratch on the back massage machine. And a Turkish toddler supervised his father as he trod on the walker.

Then a bevy of women with Tupperware and lunch bags took to the leg trainers.

“It's perfect for our lunch break,” thirtysomething Petra Stegk panted as she took swinging strides alongside her colleague. “We work across the street.” She pointed to a row of office

buildings flanking the park – fittingly occupied by the German Pension Fund.

On this day, 47-year-old Gabriele Neumann seemed to be the oldest local resident on the machines. And she was less than impressed.

The instructions for the machines are posted at strange angles, she said, and the print is too small for less-than-perfect eyes. The nubs on the massage rollers are also too hard.

“Plus which, I wouldn't be caught dead massaging myself in public,” she said.

Perhaps that revolution in recreation still has a way to go. For now, though, those under five feet – and who can read the signs posted by the city – best steer clear of the big kids' turf as they warm up for what could become Germany's next fitness trend.

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