Historically contextualized, the seemingly general term ‘naturalism’ helps to illuminate a specific tradition in German garden culture. From around 1900, ‘naturalism’ can be associated with discourses in aesthetics that were informed by sensation physiology and psychology, revolving around notions of ‘empathy’ (‘Einfühlung’) and ‘expression’ (‘Ausdruck’). This may be seen in connection with nature-inspired art practice, as dealt with in several recent publications. The little-researched contribution of landscape architecture to modern naturalism combined opposites: natural principles of formation and the will for abstract expression. German scholars sometimes describe landscape architecture as an inherently conservative profession, stating that modernist expression was limited to few examples and cut short by the rise of National Socialism. The avant-garde has also been largely defined in formal terms: as geometric. Designers of non-geometrical organic spatial concepts were often suspected of an anti-democratic longing for natural order and ‘organic’ social systems—a perspective defined by historians during the 1960s. However, the widespread belief during the early 20th century in a typically German sense of nature, superior to an alleged ‘Latin’ ratio, is only part of
In the 1920s, a second, progressive naturalism developed. Its two best-known proponents were Herta Hammerbacher (1900-1985) and Hermann Mattern (1902-1971). Mattern was personally connected to the art scene and the Bauhaus, and his organicist maxim did not contradict an affirmative stance towards the modernization of an increasingly urbanized society. Around 1930, new scientific findings, above all from phyto-sociology (Pflanzensoziologie), influenced the work of many leading garden designers. However, ‘ecological’ guidelines were not considered mandatory but used as a catalyst for design ideas. Mattern’s and Hammbacher’s biographies reveal a distinct aestheticism and spiritual leanings. Thus, for an understanding of modernist naturalism it is important not to underestimate the idealist dimension.