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From Companion Mounds to Ruderal Ecologies. Reconstructing Land as a Medium of Resistance in Berlin's Housing Estates

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Abstract: This paper examines two artificial mounds – landscape features embedded within mass housing neighborhoods in former East and West Berlin – as sites through which to reconsider land as a medium of subtle and discursive resistance against institutional control. Berlin's history of unruly urban ecologies converges at every layer of these former waste and rubble landfills, from the deepest stratum to the plants casting their roots into the topsoil covering the physical vessels of past memories and trauma. Based on the comparison and production of the Lübarser Höhe adjacent to Märkisches Viertel in the northwest (formerly West Berlin) and the Kienberg near Marzahn in the east (formerly East Berlin), the paper uses a land(scape)-oriented methodology that blends archival research, oral history interviews, and contemporary site analyses. Seeds, plants, animals, and people appropriated the byproducts of modernist urbanization to produce counter-spaces shaped to their collective desires, transforming the mounds into rich, ruderal ecologies. Today, they represent significant places of encounter between newcomers and long-standing residents, children and insects, and wind and kites. This approach reinforces the shift from strictly building-oriented spatial studies of modernist housing estates towards an enmeshed emphasis on the land and landscapes, able to facilitate a just climate future in Berlin.

Keywords: Berlin; Mass Housing; Landscape; Rubble; Ruderal Ecology; Appropriation; Post-War History.

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Temporarily divided and subsequently unified, Berlin has a long history of rebellion against the institutional exercise of power over urban space and land. There are movements against territorial enclosures through clandestine fence cuttings, market speculation via uncompromising squatting, or the absence of public services, which demand the enforcement of human rights (e.g., Sontheimer and Wensierski 2018; Gruppe Panther & Co. 2021). Beyond the human perspective, the city's history between World War II recovery and the Wall's separation made it a site of novel ecological collectives on fields and mounds of rubble, as well as appropriated industrial sites and landfill negotiations across the Wall (e.g., Sukopp 1990; Gandy 2022; Stoetzer 2022). This story of ruderal resistance (rudus, Lat.: rubble) is unveiled through a land(scape)-oriented methodology exploring two mass housing estates in former East and West Berlin, Marzahn and Märkisches Viertel. The approach involves a multi-temporal investigation into the accumulated layers of two adjacent and accompanying mounds, Kienberg and Lübarser Höhe, each serving as a nexus to understand the estates comparatively and the land features as intersecting companion phenomena. The housing estate and the mound are mutually dependent; neither would exist without the other.

Although the architectural discussion against the paradigmatic myth of mass housing as »failed« has prevailed since the early 1990s (e.g., Bristol 1991), the stigma against inhabitants and architecture persists. Particularly in countries across Europe and North America, widespread criticism of modernist, post-war neighborhoods persists at the national and municipal levels (Harnack 2017; Mack 2023). While architectural history has recently shifted its perspective on this criticism – highlighting the value of buildings for preservation as cultural heritage – recent studies reveal the ensuing challenge to question the dominance of buildings and their construction (cf. Urban 2018; Braun 2019). This shift in focus is significant because much of the life growing in these neighborhoods, from maple trees and water sedges to raccoon families and beaver lodges, has occurred between the buildings in expansive communal spaces of encounter, simultaneously capable of addressing an aggravated climate crisis. These mass housing landscapes have become increasingly relevant as biodiversity in those spaces has increased and flourished over time, contrasting with the decay and decline often seen in aging built structures. This angle highlights the reciprocal relationships between housing estates and the long-term human transformation of their land(scape). It does so by delving into a pre-construction history and

considering more immediate and forward-looking events, such as environmental protests by residents after completion.

The land(scape)-oriented methodology that comparatively and relationally explores one housing estate in former East and one in former West Berlin from the ground up consists of three interfering temporalities (AGE). *Assembling* (A) operates on a slow-moving, geo-climatic level, accounting for the pre-construction era that renders the land as already layered and complex before the arrival of modernist city planning. *Governing* (G) describes a medium-length period in the development of macropolitical state systems between the end of World War II (1945) and German reunification (1990), thus scrutinizing the disruptive impact of mass housing construction on formerly agricultural land. Lastly, *enmeshing* (E) includes a more immediate timescale of events and spatial appropriation in the sense of an ontological meshwork of continuous, interwoven, and future-oriented becoming (cf. Barad 2007; Ingold 2011). While each step comes with its own set of methods, the situated tools of *enmeshing* are hypothetically most relevant for the study of resistance in housing estate landscapes. They focus on how the land(scape) eventually becomes a medium for multispecies collectives, including humans, to resist the institutional power of state-owned housing companies, senates and »politburos,« or municipal cleaning services. They include a mix of archival research, oral history interviews, empirical data gathered during field research, and a secondary literature review focused on the history of both case studies. For example, oral history interviews with allotment gardeners and long-standing residents, as well as empirical data, served as primary sources, subsequently cross-referenced for verification with aerial photography from the German Federal Archives (1945-1996) and secondary literature. Other archival research centered on an independent newspaper, the *Märkische Viertel Zeitung*, and the private collection of Eveline, a first-generation resident who provided a Super 8 film roll after prior interviews (for more information, cf. Hueppe 2025).

Berlin offers two distinct spheres for studying the role of land, where two very different approaches to developing the post-war periphery have stood in opposition for over four decades. While the East German Democratic Republic (GDR) operated under a single-party socialist system with a centrally planned economy, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) adopted a democratic capitalist framework, characterized by a parliamentary republic and a free market, complemented by social welfare. While they cover only five percent of the city's surface, today, more than one-fifth of Berliners

live in the housing estates that both states constructed from the mid to the late twentieth century. Besides providing a significant supply of affordable housing in a capital plagued by a housing shortage, the estates also contribute to the housing and integration of newcomers from conflict-torn territories (Hunger 2021: 95–96). The case study neighborhoods, Märkisches Viertel and Marzahn, were built within approximately one decade each, from 1963 to 1974 in West Berlin and 1977 to 1989 in East Berlin, as densified successors to the garden city concept.

Like many of Berlin's more famous and well-researched rubble mounds, such as the Teufelsberg, East Berlin's Kienberg started as a landfill for remaining war rubble and demolition debris from inner urban areas in 1969 (Gutsche 1969). Following the vision of a later dismissed 1946 master plan for Berlin by Hans Scharoun and Reinhold Lingner in which rubble mounds were envisaged to emphasize the glacial plateau edges and natural elevations of Berlin's topography, it became a convenient location for the disposal of some of Marzahn's excavated soil and construction site rubble. Hans-Georg Büchner, East Berlin's Director of Technology at the Publicly Owned Enterprise for Green Space Construction (VEB Grünanlagenbau), wanted the

> »[e]xcavated material and debris from the Marzahn construction to be deposited as fuel-efficiently as possible […]. Following Lingner's vision, elevated points in the surrounding landscape were to be intentionally raised to create a harmoniously graded integration of infrastructure and topography« (Büchner 2015: 33, author's translation).[1]

Unlike Marzahn, the master plan of West Berlin's Märkisches Viertel did not incorporate the adjacent mound due to its location in a different district. Thus, it developed independently as a landfill site in the 1950s under state administration. When West Berlin became a territorially confined island within East Germany in 1948, the municipal waste management services (Berliner Stadtreinigung/ BSR) pressured the Senate to find new sites for the disposal of the growing household waste (Park 2004: 44). The cheaply available meadowland near the medieval village of Lübars, just north of the future housing

1 »Verdrängte Massen und beim Bauen der Wohngebiete anfallender Schutt waren möglichst kraftstoffsparend, […]. Insbesondere hinsichtlich der Generalneigung des künftigen Kienberges […] wurden im Lingnerschen Sinne mit den anfallenden Massen Hochpunkte in der nahen Landschaft aufgehöht.«

estate, became one of West Berlin's five main waste disposal sites, simultaneously serving as a convenient disposal site for construction debris (Schlickeiser 2024). Studying the accumulated matter layer by layer, which makes up both mounds, offers a land(scape)-oriented way to trace the history of resistance in Marzahn and Märkisches Viertel. This stratigraphic reading is particularly suited because it studies the history of the discarded in three moments of resistance, revealing subaltern histories emerging from the remnants of allotment garden homes preceding the housing estate, the governance of toxic consumer waste during Berlin's division and the ensuing protest, and the eventual retreat of governance, leaving ruderal ecologies thriving in its shadows. These counter-narratives thus include resistance against evictions, environmental pollution, and an anthropomorphic control of »nature.«

Signs, Gardens, and Dwellers: Enmeshing the Deepest Layer

In both East and West, the first and deepest layer of the mounds (1975 and 1963, respectively) contains the remnants of demolished allotment garden dwellings that preceded the housing estates. Mixed with war rubble, construction debris, household waste, and excavated soil, the traces of allotment gardens point to the land's long legacy of gardening practices. During Berlin's modernist planning practices after the war, which often formalized and regulated the land use of formerly unregulated or overlooked areas, allotment dwellers lived in a state of informality or semi-legality. As the communities of Marzahn and Wilhelmsruh (later Märkisches Viertel) self-organized within the institutional framework of a planning authority, their ambiguous status as »dweller-gardeners« made it challenging to assume a clear legal stance (Urban 2013; Hilbrandt 2021). The Senator of Urban Development (Bausenator) Rolf Schwedler (in office from 1955 until 1972) understood the terms »allotment gardener« (Kleingärtner) and »dweller« (Siedler) in an ambiguous tension: While he considered allotment gardening a highly use of green space, allotment dwellings were seen as the least valued use of residential land, presumably due to the lack of modern infrastructure and an increased risk of diseases (Hildebrandt/Schlickeiser 1989: 192). Nevertheless, the first resistance arose when allotment dweller-gardeners in both East and West organized protests against the institutional seizure of land. The absence of municipal response to reported injustices prompted autonomous action.

When the West Berlin Senate began discussing the future development of Wilhelmsruh throughout the 1950s, the Reinickendorf District Planning Department's development framework (Richtplan) still respected the existing communities. In preparation for a legally binding plan, Senator Schwedler commissioned the district planning department to map the existing allotments, which ultimately led to the evaluation of most sections of the allotment gardens as unhygienic, underdeveloped, and poverty-ridden (Schwedler 1972). By 1960, planners had transformed the density of the guiding development framework from a single-family garden suburb to a more profitable, technologically progressive master plan for a housing estate (Bodenschatz 1987: 237). Additionally, the estate's location, situated right next to the Berlin Wall, which was built in 1961, allowed West Germany to demonstrate West Berlin's defiance against East Germany in the context of its border confinements (Hildebrandt/Schlickeiser 1989: 187). Driven by national interests rather than local concerns, West Berlin's Senate assumed control over planning from the district authorities in 1962 and established Berlin's so-called Guidelines for Urban Renovation. These provided a legal basis for low-rate land and real estate buyouts from leasing allotment dwellers and, in many cases, for their eviction and displacement (Wilde 1989: 39). These guidelines were in line with Germany's nation-wide first urban renewal program (Erstes Stadterneuerungsprogramm), favoring the entire clearance of historic, »unsanitary« city quarters and the modernization of urban infrastructure.

The consequences of these measures disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable. Those living in properties leased from farmers-turned-landlords could not sell their homes at market value but had to settle for small compensation sums for their built-up homes. Upon vacating, their precarious leasing contracts demanded the removal of all built structures from the land, leaving those dwellers with little financial security or alternative. At the same time, one-third of the area consisted of land-owning dwellers, who had managed to buy the land from the farmer and profited from either a market-oriented selling price of their plot or from moving to a more prestigious or better-developed neighborhood in Berlin or elsewhere. The land-owners who stayed and resisted a buyout because their plot was in one of the areas foreseen to be integrated into the master plan of Märkisches Viertel benefited from the modern infrastructure coming with the housing estate, like a sewage system, central heating, water, and a reliable electricity grid (Wilde 1989: 47; Thiel 2024). Previously, the inhabitants were largely

disconnected from the electrical grids, most drew drinking water from wells located on their properties, and lacked a connection to the sewage system, relying on outhouses or cesspit toilets (Urban 2013: 223).

Despite previous infrastructure deficiencies, the families had primarily lived self-sufficiently and had a sense of mutual support. Those who protested against eviction, the leasehold protestors, were situated between pride in their independence from public infrastructure and the additional costs attached to its comforts, and a sense of helplessness in the face of the state's legal power and housing companies. Hundreds of allotment dwellers in the Wilhelmsruh area, who held leaseholds, resisted the looming evictions by founding an emergency association for legal action Not- und Prozessgemeinschaft in 1963, arguing that the destruction of allotment homes was unconstitutional. Many members of the emergency association installed large signs on their lots with slogans such as »No new millionaires at the expense of allotment gardeners!« (Wilde 1989: 54, author's translation).[2] Several daily newspapers began to cover the dispute, including a twenty-minute report by the public television channel Sender Freies Berlin (SFB) (Hildebrandt/Schlickeiser 1989: 189). The campaign also attracted the attention of the state-owned housing company GESOBAU, which had been put in charge by the Berlin Senate in 1961 to facilitate the »urban renewal« and first buyouts of 3,000 plots. Besides small compensation amounts, the housing company offered a replacement flat in the new development, which – at 344 D-Mark (915 EUR in 2025) for a 2.5-room apartment, despite rent control and state subsidies – was still unaffordable for many (Autorengruppe »Märkische Viertel Zeitung« 1973; Bodenschatz 1987; Wilde 1989).

Although the emergency association took 70 announced evictions to court, their legal leverage as dwellers on agriculturally designated land was too marginal for the district and federal courts to prevent GESOBAU and the municipality from displacing the families (fig. 1). Only one leasing allotment garden community, Kolonie Fechner, managed to strike a deal with the housing company since the location of their allotments overlapped with planned garden plots in the master plan of Märkisches Viertel. Preserving their buildings instead of demolishing and reconstructing convinced the district to grant housing rights until the end of life without the possibility of selling, bequeathing, or giving away the parcels (Hildebrandt and Schlickeiser 1989: 192–194).

2 »Nicht auf Kosten der Dauerbewohner und Kleingärtner neue Millionäre!«

1.
Haus Genzmann, 1971: The last holdout at Märkisches Viertel, later demolished. © Bernd Hildebrandt and Klaus Schlickeiser, 1989.

2.
Single-family housing in Marzahn spared from demolition. © Author, 2022.

In contrast to planning practices in West Berlin, East Berlin generally refrained from evictions due to a lack of financial resources for replacing homes (Urban 2013: 238). However, clearing the site for redevelopment still foresaw the demolition of 575 dwellings and 35 hectares of allotment garden plots, so that at least 475 out of 931 families had to leave their homes. The »freedom to build« (Baufreiheit) in the GDR building legislations legalized the expropriation of property owners for the public good, given that they could receive an appropriate replacement, mainly in the new high-rise buildings (Rubin 2016: 54–55). Many accepted the replacement offers, which were significantly more affordable than those in West Berlin, with 134 East German marks for an 80-square-meter, 4-room apartment, while the average monthly salary in 1975 was 889 East German marks (Zobel/Zobel 2024). Still, the wave of administrative appeals (Eingaben) from several of the 475 households surged in the summer of 1975. Not only were 339 apartments in single- and multifamily buildings, but also 180 permanent dwellings on allotment gardens, as well as 56 homes in the medieval village of Marzahn, were required to be vacated (Schnitter 1996).

The Ministry for State Security (Stasi/Ministerium für Staatssicherheit) surveyed the resistance of families unwilling to vacate their properties, blaming their »stubborn behavior« on petty bourgeoisie striving for the most lucrative compensation possible, as well as their distrust of the promises made by state authorities (Danicke 1979). The Stasi also recorded concerns of inhabitants of Marzahn's historical village, who feared that preservation and restoration measures would never evolve beyond the planning stage. Particularly in the demolition of Marzahn's historical farmsteads, some of the evictions led to suicides (Fahrner 1986). The partial preservation of the Marzahn village predominantly served as an ornamental contrast to the new construction, picturesque shells stripped of their original functions to symbolize socialist progress. Instead of maintaining its complex village life and small-scale agricultural production, the development intended to feature many buildings hosting gastronomic and cultural facilities. While East Berlin's head architect, Roland Korn, and Director of Construction, Günter Peters, tried to persuade the appealing families through phone calls, their protest eventually led to an adaptation of the master plan in the second building phase (WG 2) that spared a section of 83 homes from the planned 575 units (fig. 2) (Rubin 2016: 54–55).

A few years later, some residents in both Marzahn and Märkisches Viertel not only found themselves in a flat overlooking their previous allotment

garden but also brought their agrarian life into the towers, farming pigs on the balconies or keeping birds in bathtubs (Plato and Scholz 2024; Dietmann 2025). The remnants of their dwellings, the bricks, timber, tiles, bitumen sheeting roofs, and zinc tubs, material witnesses of the territorial struggle and displacement, were disposed of at the nearby landfills. While most of the preceding *Kolonien* have since disappeared, more so in West Berlin than in East Berlin, their inhabitants' resistance has also led to the preservation of certain communities, such as the Kolonie Fechner, and the formal integration of allotment dwellings into the housing estates by permanently changing the land use to residential land. Therefore, the allotment garden communities also represent a continuity in Berlin's modernist city planning of the twentieth century, showing the deep interconnection of gardening practices with life in and around the housing estates (fig. 3).

Newspapers, Wall Blockades, and Contract Workers: Enmeshing the Middle Layer

The landfill at Märkisches Viertel, one of five major landfills established in West Berlin in the late 1950s, continued to coexist with completed buildings from the first phases of the master plan throughout the 1960s. In 1972, two years before the completion of the building activity, the housing estate's residents began to protest the landfill's multi-sensory disturbances, including smell, sound, and sight, as well as its planned expansion. Their resistance took various forms, such as motorcades, towels and bedsheets hung from windows as a collective protest, or garbage church services against the landfill site and rent increases (Beck and Reidemeister 1975: 160–163; Park 2004: 83). Although some protests were spatially manifested, scholars have typically studied this resistance in the housing estate through a sociopolitical and art-historical lens, rather than an environmental or spatial one (cf. Reinecke 2022; Vasudevan 2022).

In West Berlin, the newspaper Märkische Viertel Zeitung (MVZ), a print medium created by a self-organized group of students and residents, regularly reported on environmental and territorial issues arising from the continuing landfill operation. One report concerning the growing landfill appeared in the first issue of 1972 under the headline »Werden wir im Müll ersticken?« (Will We Suffocate in Waste?) The article sarcastically claimed that residents could look forward to a rent reduction due to the elimination

of garbage collection fees, as they might have their own garbage mountain right on their doorstep (Autorengruppe Märkische Viertel Zeitung 1973: 4, 1972/1). Regularly placing itself in opposition to the housing company's professionally distributed information sheet for residents, the MVZ claimed that the GESOBAU would obscure its decision-making power when reporting on the ongoing landfill operation. Instead, MVZ called for the participatory inclusion of residents in the landfill planning process (fig. 4).

The newspaper filled a gap in critically reporting on public decision-making, motivating residents to become politically vocal. In the second section, MVZ reprinted a dialogue between the Senator for Finance (Finanzsenator) and the delegate of the Reinickendorf Social Democratic district party (SPD/Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) at a state parliamentary session. The delegate opens by asking if the press releases regarding the landfill expansion in the direction of the Märkisches Viertel are true, and how the expansion contrasts with the previous plans of the Senate to close the landfill soon. In the answer, the Senator refers to a landscape master plan foreseeing the transformation of the landfill into a public park, supposedly commissioned by Senator Schwedler before the landfill extension. Although the municipal cleaning services had proposed a landfill transformation in the 1960s, territorial restrictions on waste disposal, imposed by the Berlin Wall in West Berlin, delayed the original plan. The newspaper editors interpreted the dialogue as a passive public relations strategy of the Senate, presenting citizens with accomplished, unchangeable facts. They continued by highlighting the northeast wind that would carry the smell from the landfill into the entire neighborhood, along with crows, rats, and other »pests.« Their article also addressed other environmental disturbances emerging from the growing mound, such as the noise emissions of garbage trucks and the contamination of surface water running from the landfill through historical water streams into the neighborhood's retention basins, where their children would play (Autorengruppe »Märkische Viertel Zeitung« 1973: 5-6 1972/1).

Due to the resident protest, among other entities provoked by the MVZ reporting, West Berlin expedited a long-term contract (Langfristvertrag) with East Berlin in 1973 to ship waste across the Wall, enabling the landfill to be partially decommissioned and transformed into a public park starting the same year (Park 2003: 98). While the partial coverage and park transformation began east of the landfill, it was eventually extended to the southwest

3.
Allotment garden at Märkisches Viertel. © Author, 2024.

4.
»Will we suffocate in waste?« MVZ, March 1972. © Free University of Berlin, Archives of the Extra-parliamentary Opposition (APO).

5.
»In East and West, it reeks like the pest.« East-German protestors. © Bundesarchiv, Klaus Oberst, 1990.

before the landfill was entirely closed in 1981, and the park completed in 1985 (Schlickeiser 2021: 72).

A lesser-known aspect of this history is the political arrangement of waste exports to the GDR, which also stirred resistance and protest among East Berliners. Enabled by churches, among the few relatively autonomous spaces in the GDR's political field, an ecological movement (Ökologiebewegung) began to lobby against the growing signs of environmental exploitation (Wensierski 1986: 162). By the late 1980s, several waste transports from West Berlin had to return because members of the movement blocked the gates to the landfills of Vorketzin and Schöneiche near East Berlin, where the trucks brought most of the West German waste (Park 2003: 85). When a formerly secret environmental report about the pollutant contamination of groundwater near Vorketzin became public, the West German TV program in 1988 (»Kontraste«) intensified the concerns about waste shipment to the East. On November 2, 1988, environmental groups in West Berlin, such as Robin Wood and Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND), blocked the Wall's checkpoint Kirchhainer Damm in solidarity with their East German allies, while East Berliners blocked the crossing on the other side (fig. 5) (Park 2004: 193).

Open resistance against state governance in the GDR was rarer than in the FDR. However, protests occurred in more clandestine ways, especially in moments when the state's control over labor forces was particularly severe. Vietnamese contract workers (Vertragsarbeiter) were involved in several tasks on the Marzahn construction site, including the prefabrication of concrete panels. Many who were deployed at East Berlin's Housing Construction Combine (Wohnungsbaukombinat) lived in a residential complex adjacent to the concrete panel factory, which supplied construction materials for buildings and pathways up the Kienberg. Overall, the GDR assigned hundreds of Vietnamese contract workers to Berlin's housing construction combine, illustrating state control and the material products of Vietnamese contract labor. Other deployments at state-owned enterprises included the production of electric appliances and construction tools. The externalized and exploited labor renders the (landscape) architecture as both a product of the world and a world-making structure, unveiling the carceral character of the GDR-Vietnam labor agreement (Tieu/Bentcheva 2023). Despite the systematically overlooked hardships keeping the contract workers in a legal gray zone, many individuals defied the imposed regulations and limitations to preserve everyday liberties outside the racist and

eugenic system that would threaten Vietnamese women with forced deportations in case of pregnancy (Weiss 2011: 264). Regular visits between residential complexes were a freedom, but controlled and documented by the Stasi. Despite the permanent surveillance, the Vietnamese community maintained lively networks that operated beyond the rules of movement and authority, for example, by leaving through the main entrance and entering through a window. These networks also helped individuals establish secondary sources of income through the illegal manufacturing and trade of goods, such as leather clothing or blue jeans, which helped fill the production gaps in the GDR economy (Weiss 2011). In some instances, contract workers openly complained to their superiors about their lower salary tier in contrast to their East German colleagues, highlighting their exploitation for the East German reconstruction project. In some instances, they were backed by their colleagues (Plamper 2023: 96–97). The concrete panels that were used to pave the way up the mound Kienberg and the excavated soil of the monitored residential complex are physical vessels for the histories of Vietnamese labor and exploitation. However, their material reality is also imbued with the everyday resistance of Vietnamese communities defying the East German drive to control and police their contract labor.

6.
Bird sanctuary at Lübarser Höhe (Vogelschutzgebiet). © Robin V Hueppe, 2022.

Ruderality, Collectives, and Gardeners (again): Enmeshing the Top Layer

After Marzahn and Märkisches Viertel transformed the rubble and waste landfills into parks by 1985, the necessary technical requirements of waste compaction, venting, and settling, paired with a lack of financial resources, led to a hands-off maintenance and management strategy of the District Parks and Garden Departments. As discarded byproducts of the modernist dream, a mix of technical, economic, administrative, and security concerns required the sites' planned and partial neglect. As seen on many ruderal sites in Berlin, this receding level of control allowed for a steady increase in species diversity on the mounds (Gandy 2022: 21). The absence of pesticides, leftover deadwood, and reduced mowing and weeding enabled ruderal plant growth, offering a rich habitat for pollinators, fungi, and earthworms.

In West Berlin, the landfill's early years of waste and soil accumulation in the 1950s already brought pioneering diaspores – plant dispersal units like seeds carried along with the waste – such as heat-loving tomatoes, tobacco, or squash. The afforestation with pioneer tree species, such as ash, maple, poplar, black locust, and black alder, on the former landfill was accompanied by ruderal, low-growing herbs of the Sisymbrium genus and later by higher-growing herbaceous perennials. These plant communities would transform the covered landfill into Berlin's most significant bird-nesting habitats within a few years, also attracting insects, fungi, and various mammals (fig. 6) (Sukopp 1990: 339–342; Tietze 1988). On Kienberg in the East, similar tree species, including oak, chestnut, and ash, were planted by volunteers from Marzahn. The communal efforts to plant saplings helped residents identify with their neighborhood and the land by watching the trees grow taller over time in the sense of a »green affect« (Mack 2021). However, the relatively thin topsoil layer of 25 cm and still partially contaminated sublayers impeded the process of ecological succession, challenging management and maintenance, as the growth of certain plants pushed out others (Hauser 2020: 219; Samstag 2024).

While the relatively low financial investment in park maintenance at Lübarser Höhe has remained consistent since the 1980s, the mound now provides a bird sanctuary around one of the two ponds at its base. Located adjacent to Märkisches Viertel but under the jurisdiction of the neighboring Reinickendorf district, the Public Parks Department manages the mound with minimal intervention. The transfer of green space maintenance from

the Public Parks Departments (Gartenämter) to commercially operating state-owned companies, such as Grün Berlin GmbH, weakened Berlin's Parks Departments all over the city, leading to a low-budget, hands-off strategy on the remaining public green spaces (Flierl 2019: 14). To fill the vacuum of a formal design program and more intensive care, residents of Märkisches Viertel historically appropriated West Berlin's Lübarser Höhe with self-made pastimes and plays (Albrecht 1983). These ranged from winter activities such as sledding and skiing to exploiting the windy elevation for paragliding, flying kites, and model airplanes. Specific uses, such as paragliding, seemed inherent to both West and East elevations, as they provided optimal training grounds on windy days in a city whose topography offers only a few natural elevations.

Initially, due to financial constraints, East Berlin's Parks Department also left the Kienberg to itself after its completion in the late 1980s, followed by further neglect during the period of reunification, due to unclear maintenance responsibilities (Samstag 2024). As in West Berlin, this period created vibrant habitats for an array of tree species, fungi, insects, and mammals, including deer, foxes, and badgers, all of which appreciated the disturbed but soft soil, green moss, and plentiful bark. In a subtle way, these multispecies collectives resisted the lack of care by reclaiming the heavily transformed waste landscape. Simultaneously, humans adopted the mound as a primary site for outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling, paragliding, or flying model airplanes. However, collective habitat-shaping did not always remain without conflict. When a temporary construction fence for the 2017 International Garden Exhibition on the mound Kienberg in Marzahn created undisturbed conditions, native beavers returned to Marzahn's river valley at the mound's foot after they had gone extinct in the region. Their presence benefited the ecosystem by forming new wetlands (Treblin 2022). While Grün Berlin GmbH, a formerly West German state-owned non-profit organization that assumed management of Marzahn's Kienberg, protected trees with wire mesh, some individuals saw their tree-gnawing habits as such a nuisance that the beaver's growing presence ultimately led to the autopsy-confirmed killing of a beaver (Dassler 2020). This incident illustrates how the hierarchies between native and non-native, welcome and unwelcome non-human activities are historically contingent. At times, biodiversity, referring to the benefits of the beaver for the local ecosystem, and biosecurity, such as the preservation of a specific landscape aesthetic by preventing the spread of beavers, intersect and legally contradict each other. This tension makes beavers more than passive objects

of law but active participants in shaping territorial arrangements around the mound Kienberg (cf. Ojalammi/Blomley 2015).

The identification of unwelcome plants has similarly marked the history of plant sociology, where artificially defining native and non-native species falls together with ideologies of excluding ideas of belonging, blurring the terrain between plants and people (Hauser 2020; Gandy 2022; Stoetzer 2022). Examining domesticated companion species, such as sheep, reveals how humans relate to and make sense of their habitats through a species-to-species relationship. Many of the first gardener-dwellers brought their pigs to their new balcony, and other residents were fascinated by the stark contrast between the agro-industrial land history and the novel architectural modernity. East Berlin's newspapers portrayed this contrast by showing shepherds and sheep roaming around the construction sites, coining the becoming rubble mound Kienberg a new gate to the surrounding landscape (fig. 7) (Unlabeled Footage of Märkisches Viertel 1972; Hahlweg 1981). More recently, some residents argue that particular species, such as Columba livia, or rock doves, often reduced to »common pigeons,« share the struggle of stigmatization with the residents of mass housing estates. A neighborhood-specific website for Märkisches Viertel features an article that empowers the birds by raising awareness among other residents about their rich history. As the author highlights, the species feels exceptionally comfortable between the towers of the estate since they imitate the cliff structures of their original habitats (Trautsch 2025).

In this light, Lübarser Höhe and Kienberg have become refuges for both long-standing and recent species, including humans, to dwell in the overlooked remnants of Berlin's modernist urbanization. The mounds render artificial hierarchies between native and non-native, welcome and unwelcome activities, not as fixed »natural« facts but historically contingent and in flux. Once again, the mounds resist the human drive to categorize and label, as the uncertainty of their exact origins and compositions renders this endeavor futile. This impossibility of a taxonomized origin implies an openness to multiple origins, with nobody and nothing »belonging,« to them as their very core consists of countless »elsewhere.« This tolerance emerging from incomplete initial design programs lacking predefined uses, paired with partial governing absence after their covering, enabled the (human) inhabitants of these landscapes to identify with the mounds and neighborhoods as new homes. In the 1970s and 1980s, observers and critics criticized the unwelcoming »barren plains« between buildings. Today, plant growth

and the transformation of mounds have contributed to a temporal awareness that impacts the changing recognition of these landscapes, leaving green space among the most appreciated qualities among both recent and long-standing residents. Some recent Syrian residents of Märkisches Viertel consider the neighborhood's parks and mounds among its most remarkable attributes (Amad 2024). Renate, who moved to Märkisches Viertel in 1970 with the first generation of residents, also enjoys the space between buildings the most. The *Platanus x hispanica* tree, a hybrid of Platanus orientalis and Platanus occidentalis, which she had observed growing over the past fifty years from her window, gave her a sense of passing time. She also used to own an allotment garden on the slopes of the Lübarser Höhe mound, where she and her husband spent their summers and hosted parties for friends and neighbors. When the Berlin Wall fell, right next to the mound and her garden, the constant crushing of concrete left a layer of fine particles on her lawn. Every weekend, she cleaned up the white concrete dust, settling over everything like toxic snow (Schaaf 2024).

7.
»A Gate to the Landscape,« 1981. © Wulf Olm/Bezirksmuseumsarchiv Marzahn-Hellersdorf.

Ruderality After Trauma

Three moments of resistance have touched this story from the beginning: Allotment gardening as a past practice buried *under* yet still present *above* the mounds' slopes; a violent separation of the city into two parts continuously facing protests; and the final collapse of the division and governance retreat that leaves the dust of the Wall's demolition and the regrowing ruderal ecologies to the care of the gardener – a soft resistance emerging from the cracks in institutional management. Over time, the mounds acquired the character of a *Brache*, an urban fallow, typically described as disused industrial sites reclaimed by vegetation after heavy industry left European regions in the late twentieth century. Landscape architects of the 1980s and 90s created an aesthetic tension by showcasing the productive past against its fading and ecological regeneration, transforming industrial sites into public parks, such as the Parc de la Villette or the Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord. However, without any (visible) industrial heritage to expose, the two rubble mounds circumvent this aestheticization, sharing the relational characteristics of multispecies appropriation without a post-industrial form. On the edge of Berlin's border towards the city's administrative edge, they are situated within a broader traditional visual culture of landscapes, historically assembled into an imaginative, coherent whole called »nature.« However, this imagination collides with the intensive reality of industrialized agriculture or highly controlled plantation forestry around Berlin. In contrast to that imagination, they maintain the ecological character of formerly enclosed territories, initially securing and protecting the already established, then opening up to those who administered and accounted for them, until subversive appropriation becomes central to their existence.

These are the layered histories emerging from a land(scape)-oriented methodology, tracing the trauma of displacement and erasure from the deepest layer in the buried rubble to the ruderal ecologies that have since grown on the two mounds. Despite the disruptions in the mounds' land history, a traceable continuity of protest and resistance is etched into the land's many layers. Therefore, this contribution aims to demonstrate how – despite the power and influence of housing companies, ministries, senates, and planning departments – the land simultaneously becomes a medium for multispecies alliances, including humans, to resist in diverse ways. More tangibly, allotment dwellers resisted buyouts by staying and negotiating their right to the land with much more powerful institutions, while others used a landfill

as a cause for protesting their tenant rights. In a more abstract sense, the history of land becomes a medium to revisit the history of migrant contract-worker resistance, going beyond a one-sided representation of powerlessness. As regularly seen in counter-movement histories, some oppositional activity eventually transitions to formal planning processes. Today, formalized successors to informal alliances working toward peaceful coexistence, such as the GESOBAU »Beettinchen« garden for social work with marginalized groups, rely on the financial support and land ownership of the state-owned housing company. As seen with the church's role during the GDR's ecological movement, there are historical precedents for the institutional involvement in the seemingly independent organization of counter-movements. In many instances, progress emerges through the translation of bottom-up protest into policies and laws, complicating the antagonism between governance and resistance. While undeclared gardening on empty plots once stood in conflict with unambiguous land use plans, it has evolved into a planning tool that fosters community outreach and cohesion in social neighborhood work.

Kienberg and Lübarser Höhe are significant biotopes for the present and growing Berlin, adjacent to the city yet relatively undisturbed. As the movement of matter and beings enabled the mounds to come into existence, they neither fit into the visual culture of pastoral landscapes nor into the more recent idea to turn this tradition toward the city as a landscape. Discarded material brought the diaspores of pioneering plants and herbs, which were similarly discarded and discriminated against, like the buildings and their residents from the 1970s onwards. The change in the collective appreciation of the mounds as an infrastructure and their assigned meaning to the public over time is significant, transitioning from material deemed worthless, an environmental threat, and reminders of displacement in the beginning, toward a unique environmental quality today, despite decreasing remnants of soil pollution. Thus, their emergence resonates with Berlin's distinct history of resistance and the emergence of urban ecology as a discipline. In a broader sense, the landscapes of the two mass housing estates might be future-oriented spaces for the entire city, deeply connected to the land through the entanglements of their multispecies inhabitants within and around the buildings.

The exploration of the two rubble mounds through the land(scape)-oriented methodology led to findings that add complexity to post-war housing history. The material histories of waste disposal after the rise of construction and consumerism are intertwined with the social histories of addressing

the post-war housing crisis. In other words, the history of devaluing and discarding things such as rubble and consumer products converges with a much more problematic history of devaluing people, relocated in thousands to Berlin's peripheries. Their history is also context-specific in that institutional control resulted in friction at almost every step along the way, making the two rubble mounds suitable examples of counter-activity in the emergence of Berlin's housing estates. At first, the State of Berlin turned former agricultural land into a disposal site to accumulate matter considered worthless, leading to the first resistance of inhabitants of that land, effectively disagreeing with the price tag of 1300 German Marks attached to their homesteads (Wilde 1989: 54). As the mounds of waste grew, so did the environmental movements, the perception of limits to post-war growth, and the consciousness of the violence in labor exploitation, again leading to cooperating resistance between East and West Germans, citizens, and non-citizens. Reimagining the companion mounds as ruderal ecologies can inform the reimagination of housing estates at large: Instead of reducing them to the one-sided history of building design and construction technologies that fail to reclaim the neighborhoods from a stigmatized public image, reimagining modernist housing estates through their landscape features renders them as different places, capable of addressing the crisis of a warming planet and urban housing shortages simultaneously.

Considering the changing practices and consequences for architectural knowledge in academic terms, this research puts land and landscape first when approaching Berlin's post-war housing estates. For architectural pedagogy, this implies a design approach that requires thought and practice in interdependent meshes, leaving behind the ideological dichotomies and spatial fragmentations introduced by modernism. This research assembles an argument for the exceptional quality of these landscapes as they are, without the need for intervention, by outlining the history of resistance as it relates to the two mounds, the housing estates, and Berlin as a whole. It seeks to restore the connection between interior living spaces and their external counterparts, which nurture both ecological and social relations. Drawing from situated and relational approaches to the environment, constructing such a dense inhabitation mesh of mass housing estates calls for critical densification that acknowledges that abundant open space does not equal the necessity to build, that open space is not empty space, and that both not-building, building-elsewhere, or care-management are considerable alternatives in the design repertoire.

In professional terms for (landscape) architectural practitioners, this contribution highlights notions of hands-off maintenance and care over interventionist design or the process of these notions as a design objective itself. Engaging with the multi-layered land under any given site forces designers to engage a deeper temporality that might reveal unforeseen historical details shaping multispecies life around the site, often embedded in the collective consciousness of residents. Land(scape)-oriented research also renders the invisible visible, legal forces that divide and shape the built environment, where architectural design alone remains almost powerless as the last member in the chain of architectural creation. Although rarely operating without institutional frameworks, practitioners could facilitate better opportunities for multispecies collectives to shape future development by entering the design process at an earlier stage of politics, law, and finance. Resonating with this conclusion, the field is currently shifting on a broader level, and notions of architects as public servants and civic advocates are gaining more widespread acceptance.

Revisiting and rewriting the quotidian lives of housing estates is crucial, as they are often self-organized, resistant, and sometimes in collaboration with a governing entity, such as a state-owned company. Such an understanding might push academic and professional practice, along with the land itself, toward a mediating position between policymakers and inhabitants, neither as service providers nor guerrilla activists. The mounds' history also unveils the immense exploitation of labor involved in the creation of the built environment. As there is almost no way to avoid interfering with a life unconsidered, we can try to become aware of whose stories our project tells and excludes, and consider designing with sensitivity, particularly towards those who are potentially ignored, offended, or exploited. While aesthetics and beauty can sometimes distract from it, building almost always means destroying, just as speaking is always a mode of silencing. Before we speak architecturally, we might consider how the land on which we built already spoke before us, perhaps in different keys and languages, and how we might not only answer softly but remain silent altogether.

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