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# From graves to gardens: Berlin's changing cemeteries

Samuel Holleran 

*Declining burial rates and limited grave tenure mean that many cemeteries in Germany's capital are largely empty, in contrast to the increasingly crowded city around them. Some have been left to go wild: sprouting trees and underbrush that are home to birds and foxes. Their unsanctioned use—by guerilla gardeners, beekeepers, and dog walkers—is common. In an effort to normalise these activities, the Protestant Cemetery Association invited community groups to 'activate' several of their sites, showing a willingness to recast cemeteries as 'green infrastructure.' These activations follow a long history of repurposing 'fallow' lands in Berlin, which has increased as skyrocketing land values have intensified competition for space. The spatial politics of 'sunsetting' burial grounds are complex and highly contingent. Through interviews, photographs, and participant observation, this piece asks how emotionally charged sites for memorialisation transition to neighbourhood amenities, with a particular focus on the power of greening as something bordering on a civic religion in Germany. It also looks at the future of ageing cemeteries that, in the next decade, will close completely. These desanctified lands have been promised twice—as sites for housing and community facilities, and as climate-mitigating parklands—putting densification and urban greening at loggerheads.*

Keywords **cemeteries, urban gardening, green space, planning, memorialisation, land use**

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When describing my project on the reuse of Berlin's ageing cemeteries to a friend she noted that, in Paris, there's the promise—as the famous slogan of the '68 demonstrations goes—that below the pavers (*les pavés*) lies the beach (*la plage*). In Berlin, she joked, everything belowground could be assumed to be a cemetery. Berlin is not unusual in that respect, like most cities that have been settled for over a couple hundred years, it is built on bones. These older cities generally have a less tidy demarcation between burial grounds and their surroundings, or, in the words of the novelist Karen Russell, 'any place ... can become a cemetery. All it takes is your body' (Russell 2006, 222). Berlin is, by European standards, not that old and its sepulchral planning is fairly well organised, but it's hard not to think of its ground as riddled with bodies. In some cases, this means literal remains—as in the district of Treptow where the bodies of the 80,000 Soviet soldiers who were killed in their conquest of the city were deposited below a park—in others, it is just the implied presence of skeletons from the city's dark history (see Figure 2(a)). This ghostly subterranean sphere is visible in the 'underworld' tours advertised on the sides of buses, in the just-below-the-surface *stolpersteine* (stumbling stones, see Figure 2(b)) that mark the homes of those deported and killed by the National Socialists, and in the over 70 escape routes that were tunnelled beneath the Berlin Wall (see Figure 2(c)). But, to the disappointment of my friend and many others, my research on cemeteries stays mostly above ground and intersects only tangentially with the Shoah and the Wall. It looks at cemeteries not as places characterised by past evils but as players in conversations about the future, particularly those around green infrastructure, urban leisure, and affordable housing.



Figure 1: A grave visitor looks on at a cemetery park-goer. Photo: Samuel Holleran.



**Figure 2:** Berlin underground imaginaries. (a) Book burning memorial at Bebelplatz. Photo: Luis Alvaz, CC; (b) Stolpersteine in Mitte. Photo: Christian Michelides, CC; (c) in-ground plaques show the route of 'Tunnel 57' below the Berlin wall. Image: N-Lange.de, CC.

My initial interest in Berlin cemeteries came from jogging. While living in the city (from 2017 to 2020) I began to take runs to get outside during the grey winter months. These took me through several parks in Neukölln and around the back of an old cemetery. Jogging is almost universally banned in German cemeteries—even in those that are so overgrown as to be unrecognisable from woodlands—so I would skirt the cemetery's exterior, peeping in to catch glimpses of red squirrels flitting over ivy-covered headstones. One day, I cut through the cemetery via a gap in its cast-concrete fence. From there, my maps app advised, you could cross Hermannstraße and enter a tree-lined avenue that connects to Tempelhofer Feld, the airport turned giant park. After squeezing through the hole, I noticed a giant pile of headstones, many cracked, seemingly tossed onto a heap (see [Figure 3](#)). I was taken aback. What had happened to these graves? Why had they been piled up so carelessly?

Today, five years after my first exploration, I'm able to answer that question. I've moved from a career working on parks and urban design initiatives, to researching cemeteries. As a 'cemetery expert', and a member of a death-focused research group at the University of Melbourne, I know that grave tenure in Germany is only 20-odd years. After this 'period of rest' (*Ruhefrist*), a right of interment can be renewed or left to lapse. Once lapsed, a spray-painted dot appears on the grave, followed by a sticker warning that it will be removed (see [Figure 6](#)). After that the old grave can be disinterred, and the remaining bones are re-buried in a communal area of the cemetery. The grave marker is thrown on a heap of other headstones in the back. This process is meant to make cemeteries space efficient, and it reflects a certain 'neco-pragmatism' that is typical of Germany, and several other Continental European countries, but totally alien to the Anglo-American culture I was raised in, where a certain sentimentality towards the cemetery exists.

Many cultures share a notion of cemeteries as 'cities of the dead'; but the land use policies within the 'city' walls vary considerably. In the United Kingdom (and many of its former colonies), it was assumed that 'sprawling cit[ies] of the



**Figure 3:** Discarded headstones in a Neukölln cemetery. Photo: Michael Waldrep.

dead' would 'like any metropolis' preserve 'the haphazard, unregulated heart of the old city' from which graves might spread out in a 'series of radial fans' (Dyer 1994, 122). By contrast, German cemeteries have very few preservation measures in place, and headstones in the city centre can be razed to make way for new 'inhabitants'. It's difficult to track down how this system came to be, most 'modern histories of cemeteries in Germany ... simply take it for granted that it arose from the 'rationalising' tendencies of the Enlightenment' (Black 2010, 34–35). However, it is worth noting that the practice was not universally applied; Jewish cemeteries granted burial in perpetuity before the Holocaust (today, they are mostly preserved as national monuments and maintained with state funds, see Figure 4), and the lavish family tombs that line the walls of many of Berlin's protestant cemeteries often benefited from what amounted to unlimited tenure. Also protected are what the cemetery researcher Julie Rugg calls 'Pantheons', (Rugg 2000) all-star cemeteries that take on a national importance, like Dorotheenstädtischer Friedhof in the city's centre, the final resting place of notable artists and writers like Heinrich Mann, Bertolt Brecht,



**Figure 4:** Frozen in time: Jewish Cemetery at Schönhauser Allee, where graves are protected in perpetuity. Photo: Samuel Holleran.

and Anna Seghers. Grave renewal is therefore limited, primarily to post-war burials in outlying Protestant cemeteries (see [Figure 1](#)).

In many cemeteries, headstones have been removed to create space for new burials that have never occurred. This is particularly true in Neukölln, a district that, since the 1970s was synonymous with Turkish and Lebanese migrant communities, but has experienced rapid gentrification in the first decades of the 2000s. Empty Neukölln cemeteries speak to changing preferences for disposition, including communal interment of ashes and burial in 'forest cemeteries' far outside urban areas; as well as high rates of burial abroad encouraged by community funeral funds that 'provide material incentives for the repatriation of dead bodies', particularly to Turkey (Balkan 2015, 19-20). The result is large swaths of unused land with sparse graves that led some to see them as abandoned, spurring trespassing, and misuse (see [Figure 7](#)). One heritage researcher I interviewed noted that, after the fall of the Wall, some cemeteries became sites for parties and cruising. 'The Friedhof der Märzgefallenen [the burial ground for the uprisers of the 1848 March Revolution] was particularly famous', he noted, 'you'd have tour groups of Bavarian schoolkids showing up and the whole place would be littered with empty bottles of *Rotkäppchen* [East German champagne] and tied-off condoms'. In Neukölln, Protestant cemeteries lay mostly forgotten for years, in contrast to the increasingly crowded streets around them. Some, left to go wild, sprouted trees and underbrush and became home to birds and foxes.

Along Hermannstraße, one of Neukölln's biggest thoroughfares, disused cemeteries abound, with several backing onto Tempelhofer Feld airport. During the 1948-49 airlift, the cemeteries served as a de facto landing zone, with multiple planes per minute descending over the headstones. American Sector authorities even erected approach lights for the southern runway in the St. Thomas II and Jerusalem V cemeteries (see [Figure 5](#)). The pylons, which still stand today, were to help pilots in the 'skytrain' safely bring down their cargo. Their construction ran across plots, and critics from the Soviet sector jumped on the potential for 'grave desecration'. In the following 50 years, headstones were slowly removed and, by the early 2000s, there were hardly any graves left to 'desecrate'. Neighbourhood residents figured out ways to slip past a locked gate and access the overgrown spaces, planting unsanctioned gardens and letting dogs run off lead. One user even went so far as to pour two concrete steps at a gap in the fence to provide easier entry.

Starting in the early 2010s, these disused cemeteries came into focus for policymakers and DIY 'urbanists', as the result of several changes. First and foremost, was the closure of Tempelhofer Feld in 2008 and its reopening as a park in 2010. The airport was initially slated for redevelopment; with one infamous plan, bankrolled by the billionaire Ronald Lauder, aiming to keep a runway open for private jets and build out the adjacent land as an exclusive health centre (Kimmelman 2008, see [Figure 8](#)). On-the-ground activism held off this and other development plans and Berliners began to enjoy the transitional space as a park dubbed 'Tempelhofer *Freiheit*' (freedom). This early name did not stick but goes a ways towards describing the unplanned nature of the 386-hectare open space where one can find napping partiers, kite-surfers, barbecues, and bird-watchers occupying huge lengths of former runways and their grassy



**Figure 5:** Pylons for the approach lights to Tempelhof Airport still poke up from the Jerusalem V Cemetery on Hermannstraße. Photo: Michael Waldrep.

outcroppings. The reclamation of the airfield as leisure infrastructure suggested that other ageing land uses might also be ‘activated’ through a combination of community use and greening. Cemeteries sat at the top of the list.

City planners started to see ageing cemeteries with dwindling revenue along the lines of Tempelhofer Feld: as moribund infrastructure ready for repurposing. A 2006 plan by the city’s Department for Environment and Climate (SenUVK) affirmed this, recommending that some cemeteries slowly transition into parks. While the plan was nonbinding it put cemeteries on the table, suggesting new modes of use that went well beyond burial and memorialisation. In positing cemeteries as future green infrastructure SenUVK hoped to kill two birds with one stone: they would formalise the role of DIY gardeners as stewards of underutilised space, allowing the Protestant Cemetery Association (EVFBS) to direct their resources at cemeteries with active burials, and they would help fulfil an election promise of putting every Berliner within walking distance (500 m) of a greenspace. The fact that Neukölln’s overgrown cemeteries were already home to woody meadows and trees meant that new greenspaces could be provided without land acquisition.

The city’s acute housing crisis has shifted the conversation on greenspace. As providing new homes for rent-burdened residents and refugees (from Syria and, more recently, Ukraine) became a priority, ‘unclaimed’ urban spaces were offered up as sites for new housing. Yet, when put to a vote, greenspace fared better in the eyes of development-sceptical Berliners. In 2014, a referendum halted the city’s plans to build housing on Tempelhofer Feld. Nearly two-thirds of voters chose to maintain the runways as 100% open space. Some voiced concern that the Berlin Senate would pull a bait-and-switch, developing housing only as garnish for a commercial precinct; soon, they claimed, it would be unrecognisable with ‘green pastures giving way to condos and shopping plazas’ (Sevcenko 2014). Others were simply displeased with a measure that



Figure 6: A headstone marked for removal in a Neukölln cemetery. Photo: Michael Waldrep.



Figure 7: A disused wall memorial covered in graffiti, Mitte. Photo: Samuel Holleran.

pitted greenspace against affordable housing. For many ‘the “wild” grass and the land it occupies’ spoke to something deeper, a German ideal of the sylvan ‘as standing against the technocratic state and its planning apparatus’ (Dümpelmann 2021). Still others made an argument along the lines of park equity: while other neighbourhoods had huge stretches of green reserves, working-class Neukölln had always lacked nature, and the runways could be ‘rewilded’ to remedy that (see Figure 8).

The ‘discovery’ of Tempelhofer Feld as an urban leisure zone helped address a shrinking supply of space in a city unaccustomed to land shortages (due to the large amounts of interstitial vacant land available after the War and after the fall of the Wall). The airport—built as a Nazi megastructure, bombed to bits, and then repaved to sustain West Berlin during the airlift—proved an irresistible metaphor for a city where creativity and fun are layered on top of abjectness. The dangers of the shallowly buried past were seemingly reinforced in 2014 when a tabloid ran an article claiming that Tempelhofer Feld’s ban on pegs (for securing volleyball nets and beach tents) stemmed from the danger of unexploded ordinance under the lawn (B.Z. 2014). The past may be buried but not all that well.

Starting in 2015, residents of Schillerkiez—a four-by-six block neighbourhood wedged between the cemeteries and Tempelhofer Feld—were invited to take part in a participatory design process. The aim was to reimagine the St Thomas II Cemetery as a public park. Notifications appeared at the offices of the district manager,<sup>1</sup> online, and via posters hung on the cemetery gates, schools, and *spätis* (corner shops). The district brought in a firm specialised in community engagement to lead three tours of the site and organise a workshop.

There were several competing needs to be balanced. Surprisingly, families and church officials readily accepted the cemetery’s deconsecration. A larger problem came from the ‘dog people’ who had grown used to letting their pets



**Figure 8:** Tempelhofer Feld visitors in September of 2022. The former St. Thomas Kirchhof II is visible at the end of the runway. Image: RealPixelStreet, CC.

run off lead in the overgrown acreage. They worried that the space would grow overly formalised as a park, and new rules would impede their dogs' play. Because the cemetery was used by unhoused people and intravenous drug users, local police officers also had a say, and a different interest, in the development. Their initial advocacy for 'clear sightlines' across the park did not come to pass, nor did a plan to create a cafe kiosk at the front gates, that would provide 'eyes on the street' surveillance of the park.

After the initial community engagement, the project was handed over to a landscape architect firm. Their plan redefined the trunk route of plane trees that served as the site's east-west access and retained the cemetery's historic gates on Hermannstraße, while creating pass-throughs for cyclists and pedestrians that would remain open night and day (see [Figures 9\(a,b\)](#)). Benches and play structures were created from fallen trees and other 'near natural' materials. In 2016, the District held a naming competition for the cemetery-turned-park, and it was rechristened as the 'Anita-Berber-Park', after the cabaret artist who, after succumbing to tuberculosis in 1928, was buried there in an unmarked grave.

The park's creation was paid for by Germany's federal government in a largely bogus deal: they purchased the deconsecrated cemetery and then gifted it back to the city as compensation for a green space that was taken by the expansion of the highly controversial A100 highway project. The paved-over land is nearly three kilometres away from the Hermannstraße cemeteries, in an area that is by no means contiguous. 'This kind of cemetery-to-park conversion is unlikely to happen again', one landscape architect noted, 'in part, because it's bullshit ... the land isn't near the A100'. The cemetery's suitability as a 'green offset' for a roadway was nil: 'a totally disused cemetery with trees and scrubby meadows already contained biodiversity, so it was already functioning as a park in that sense'.

The park's tree-lined path creates a pleasant pathway linking Tempelhofer Feld to Hermannstraße, but it was expensive to plan and build. As one cemetery consultant put it, 'without money from the A100 swap it would have been hard to imagine' a cash-strapped district taking on a project of that nature. 'It's nice',



**Figure 9:** (a) A field in the Anita-Berber-Park. Photo: Michael Waldrep; (b) A pathway in the park. Photo: Assenmacher, CC.

she concluded, but not 'a viable model' for the re-use of other ageing cemeteries. A more organic transformation process lies about 300 metres south at the New St. Jacobi Cemetery, another ageing cemetery that, since 2019, has also been used as a community garden.

The creation of the Prinzessinnengarten Jacobi in 2019 stems from a memorandum of understanding signed by the Prinzessinnengarten Kollektiv, a not-for-profit gardening group, with the EVFBS. The memorandum allowed the Kollektiv to run day-to-day operations at the cemetery, including the tending and preservation of the most recent burials and the stabilisation of older headstones mixed into areas with tall grasses and mature trees. The original Prinzessinnengärten, established on a remediated brownfield in 2009, spawned an impressive network of volunteer gardeners, public sculpture installations, cafes, and an eco-learning installation. In 2019, the Kollektiv faced eviction and the cemetery deal gave them a new base from which to operate.

As with the St. Thomas cemetery, locals had discovered Jacobi first, making use of piles of dirt at the lot's edges (that were not used for recent interments) to plant guerilla gardens, and setting up small apiaries. One beekeeper explained that the hives were actually permitted by EVFBS; a sign that the space was already up for grabs. '[We] filled in some forms and gave a €50 deposit to receive a key [to] ... come and go as we pleased'. Keeping bees in the overgrown cemetery was, in their words, 'peak Berlin', but it was also hard work and, after parenthood and persistent stings, they gave up. Prinzessinnengarten replaced these informal practices with a broader network of volunteer gardeners and green urbanists, a formalisation of DIY practices that rubbed some the wrong way but also modelled how a cemetery might be slowly shaped into a public park.

By the summer of 2020, the Prinzessinnengarten Kollektiv had fully established themselves on the site, creating raised vegetable beds, a cafe, and a small performance area for events (see [Figure 10](#)), and their own beehives and worm farm. In that first COVID summer of outdoor gatherings and shuttered clubs, many neighbourhood residents came to the garden for coffees and pay-what-you-wish vegetarian lunches, where most of the ingredients were grown in the planted areas just past the last cluster of headstones.

I had planned to return to Berlin to study the cemetery's transformation, but was stuck in locked-down Australia. I asked my friend, the photographer Michael Waldrep, to document the space for me (many of the pictures he sent are included here) and I began to look for articles and posts about the new garden in the cemetery. I came across a Deutsche Welle (DW) video on the Princessingarten's move to the cemetery. It shows Robert Shaw, a representative from the Kollektiv, and Ekkehard Gahlbeck, of the EVFBS, sitting at a picnic table, celebrating their collaboration in true Berlin fashion: with roll-up cigarettes and beer straight from half-litre bottles. It was heartwarming, and, in the Melbourne winter, I desperately wanted to join them in the garden.

In the sense that the greenspace and topology of Berlin are still being shaped, the Prinzessinnengarten/Jacobi hybrid model might be, like Tempelhofer Feld, another example of 'unfinished openness' (Beveridge, Kip, and Oevermann 2022, 298). Their lease will expire in 2027; by that time all the graves will have lapsed,



**Figure 10:** The cafe at the Prinzessinnengarten in the New St. Jacobi Cemetery, summer 2020. Photo: Michael Waldrep.

and the cemetery authority could choose to remove all headstones to dramatically reshape the 75,000 square metres. While a wholesale overhaul of the land is unlikely, it is very possible that the end of the lot facing Hermannstraße will be redeveloped. In this sense, the cemeteries are different from Tempelhofer Feld (which is bound by the referendum to stay 100% green), their status as green oases could be capitalised on. Plots of land at the perimeter could be developed to fund upkeep and, possibly, to provide housing.

Because entrance areas often contain service buildings like sheds and stonemason's ateliers they can safely be assumed to have no active burials and are already eligible for redevelopment (see [Figure 11](#)). Indeed, two other cemeteries up the block from St Jacobi have had new buildings built along the street: a wood-clad box, at Hermannstr. 182, that is rented to an ophthalmologist and an urban design firm; and a new brick building at Hermannstr. 184, that, when completed in early 2023, will be home to several charitable groups. While the development of market rate housing would be hotly contested, it is possible to build dwellings on deconsecrated cemeteries—although the cemetery authority maintains that their preference is for social housing and schools (recently, they gave a *Baugruppe*, 'building group', permission to fill the narrow entrance to a Prenzlauer Berg cemetery with flats built on a community co-financing model). The development of sites ringing cemeteries seems a likely future but perhaps one that is less equitable.

Without a clear streetfront presence old cemeteries might function as lush back gardens for those who are lucky enough to live next to them. 'There's a real danger that, with cemeteries closed to the street, the demographic that comes...will become more exclusive', a Prinzessinnengarten Jacobi visitor

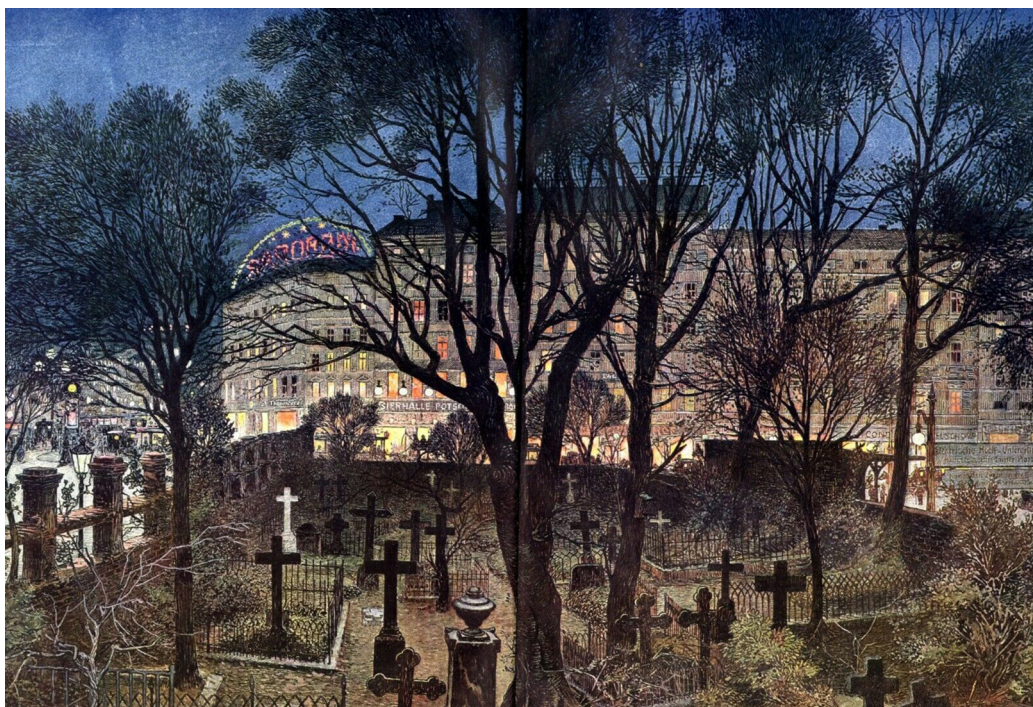


**Figure 11:** The gate to St. Michael-Kirchhof, a Hermannstraße cemetery that is still in use. Photo: Michael Waldrep.

told me. The gardeners and environmentalists who have worked to transform cemeteries into community spaces are well aware of the possibility of green gentrification and the fleetingness of their own tenure.

When I finally made it back to Berlin, in July of 2022, I volunteered at ElisaBeet, a cemetery garden in Wedding, a working-class district that, like Neukölln, is undergoing gentrification, albeit at a slower pace. On a blazing hot afternoon, I helped weed a patch of lettuce with another volunteer. When I asked her about the garden's future she said 'it's clear we won't be here forever but we can do what we can now. One day they will use this space for something else ... maybe turn it into a park, although what we need is [affordable] housing'. The answer surprised me, and riding back on the Ringbahn with three soil-covered heads of greenleaf in my backpack I turned it over in my head. Limited tenure means that old cemeteries can 'sunset' and take on new uses, as parks, hybrid-cemetery parks, as market gardens, and as sites for future development. As the train moved counterclockwise around the city and I caught sight of the trench that will become the A100, I felt angry that these important land uses—memorialisation, housing, and leisure—are asked to cohabitate, while car infrastructure is still allowed to sprawl and grow. Since the pandemic began there's been a new appreciation for urban greenspaces and an uptick in cemetery strollers, perhaps those looking to learn about death and mortality from lichen-covered epitaphs. Yet, for Berliners desperate for affordable housing, any option, including flats built on bones, will do.

On my last day in Berlin, I visited Potsdamer Platz, the epicentre of urban life 100 years ago, where the continent famously got its first traffic light. I had discovered an illustration of the Dreifaltigkeits Cemetery that sat, improbably,



**Figure 12:** Wilhelm Thiele, *Der alte Dreifaltigkeitskirchhof am Potsdamer Bahnhof in Berlin*, 1907. Image: Wikimedia.

in the middle of the action. The lights of the square shine through a meshwork of spooky crosses and gnarled trees; tram rails, streetlights, and pissoirs are visible just beyond the masonry fence (see [Figure 12](#)).

I walked around tour buses and scooters to trace the edges of today's Potsdamer Platz in search of a plaque commemorating the cemetery. I had seen a stone cairn at the spot where the cemetery's wall once stood, but, when I approached it, I realised it was another kind of 'skeleton': the never-used podium for a Karl Liebknecht monument, constructed just after the Second World War and then sealed in the demilitarised zone by the Wall. Three years after Liebknecht and Luxemburg's murders, in 1919, the Potsdamer Platz cemetery was cleared but never exhumed. Those bones are underfoot too.

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### Note

- 1 The district management office (*Quartiersmanagement*) is a government-sponsored office in neighbourhoods

undergoing change, its focus is officially on 'social stabilisation', sometimes including information on social services and the facilitation of neighbourhood greening, clean-up, and civic projects. The focus of Quartiersmanagement on green regeneration and placemaking has caused critics on the left to view them as spark plugs for gentrification processes.

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