Allmänningar och Stråk

essäer, reflektioner och pratpromenader Om gemensamma rum

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To make a park out of a Berlin wasteland

St Thomas Friedhof / Anita-Berber-Park

Mathilda Rosengren

Berlin, spring 2017

In April 2017, a small, rectangular green space in the south of Berlin teetered between two iterations of urban commons. In between the informal and the formal fabric of the city, the defunct cemetery St Thomas Friedhof would soon have its name officially changed to Anita-Berber-Park – a "biodiverse park" and "close-to-nature green area, accessible to the public" (Siebert 2017, QM Schillerpromenade). The name "Anita Berber" had been chosen by the borough of Neukölln to make reference to the area's cemetery past, Anita Berber being an infamous 1920s Berliner singer who was once buried there. Yet, interesting as this cultural history may be, what had first drawn me to the space in 2016 when I began my doctoral fieldwork in the city was something very different. With a research focus on urban wastelands, what fascinated me was what had happened to St Thomas Friedhof *after* it had officially stopped functioning as a cemetery in the 1980s (due to the decline in population, and thus subsequent deaths, in West Berlin).

With this loss of its primary function, the large cemetery gates were permanently locked, fences were put up around the area's edges to keep locals out, and graves were gradually removed from the grounds. Squeezed in the east-west direction between the busy street of Hermannstraße and the Tempelhofer Airport, and in the north-south direction between a dense residential area and another cemetery, the

The photos shown here are all from St Thomas Friedhof/Anita-Berber-Park and were taken over several visits in April 2017. As snapshots into the everyday of the space, they reflect a period when the two kinds of urban commons existed side by side in the former cemetery: the informal one of the wasteland and the official one of the soon-to-be public park.

On page 97-99 this state of the wasteland is put in relation to its 20th century history through the overlay of archival footage of the area: the past and the present of the high street *Hermannstraße*; the open/shut cemetery gates; the old air traffic lights and graves versus the most recent ones; planes descending over the graves, where we now find open lawns, self-seeded shrubs, and children playing.

former cemetery grounds posed various problems for redevelopment. So close to the airport, the space had long been part of its landing path – archival amateur photographs from the post-war era showing crowds of West Berliners milling about around the graves to watch the descent of airplanes that provided one of the few avenues to bring both necessities and people into the isolated, walled-off city. It was thus only after 2008, when the airport permanently shut that the area properly became a viable option to, for instance, build housing upon. Before then, with no formal denomination and a minimum of municipal upkeep, the area had fallen into waste.

In 2016, almost a decade after the closure of the airport, St Thomas Friedhof had still not been redeveloped in one way or another (despite the fact that the residential area north of the wasteland recently had grown significantly in popularity). The reasons for this, I would soon learn, were many. One was local resistance to various plans put forward – for instance, the idea of a commercially-run campsite was swiftly shut down. But the main reason was the historical value of the area. The first time I visited the space I was struck by how, in its wasteland state, the area still retained some structural traits from its cemetery days, such as trees planted in neat lines, a grid of pathways that once led to rows of graves, as well as old taps and pebbled-washed water cisterns for flowers and general upkeep. The latter three were almost made invisible by dense shrubs and grasses that had taken over the unkempt lawns and bushes. The former now intermingled with other tree species that had self-seeded around them, softening their original, anthropogenic lines.

However, there was one great exception: In the middle of the space, starting at the old cemetery gates, was a majestic avenue of tall plane trees. These trees, along with the red-brick gateway, were under *Denkmalschutz*[1]. This meant that due to their established urban historical value they should not be removed or significantly changed. This had markedly restricted the possibilities for physical changes of the area. Simply put, it is hard to construct commercially viable housing or businesses on a narrow strip of land when you must integrate a gigantic avenue of trees right in the middle of it. And, what to do with an urban space that you cannot build upon? You let it be until an opportunity arises that matches the premises of the space. This finally was the case in the mid-2010s but, in the meantime, between the 1980s and 2010s, the local community had managed to turn the former cemetery into a vibrant informal commons.

Die Allmende

The most commonly used German word for commons is *die Allmende*. It shares with the Swedish *allmänning* its etymological root in the Old Norse word *almenningr* (Nielsen 1989:27). And just like its Swedish counterpart it broadly refers to the open lands, woods, and water bodies that a village community made use of in common – to graze cattle, collect firewood, forage mushrooms and berries, to fish in and so on – as well as have a common responsibility for in terms of maintenance and protection. Today, however, in urban environments such as contemporary Berlin, the meaning of the word has expanded from its pastoral origins to encompass critiques and alternatives to individualistic and market-driven land-use structures that have come to define western societies. In Germany and beyond, the notion of the "urban commons" have gained traction through experimenting with forms of cooperative organisation, post-growth concepts, and common good economies (Helfrich 2014). The city of Berlin, with a history of alternative uses of both buildings and open spaces, has provided many examples of such activities throughout the years – from communal housing arrangements to community gardens (Rosengren et al. 2022: 11-14). For instance, in 2011, the aptly called organisation Allmende-Kontor[2] initiated a much-appreciated and still-running communal garden project on

[1] A grade listing that, through Law for the Protection of Historic Properties in Berlin, awards protection to urban structures such as "historic garden property [like] a landscaped installation, a garden or park installation, a cemetery, an avenue or other element of a garden or landscaping design, whose preservation would be in the public interest [...]"
(DSchG Berlin: §2 para. 2)

[2] https://www.allmende-kontor.de/der-garten/

the former airplane field, just around the corner from St Thomas Friedhof. Nevertheless, you do not always have to call a commons, or *Allmende*, by its name in order for it to fill those functions. As historian Peter Linebaugh (2008: 79) has argued, the commons may also be approached as a verb, a commoning, where focus is on how practices rather than material entities form the backbone in a constant creation and re-creation of communally held space. Seen from this perspective the commons, in fact, are always in the making, no matter the official status or denomination of the area in question.

A commons by informal doing

This relational approach to a commons always in flux resonated strongly with the situation that I encountered at the St Thomas Friedhof wasteland – it was a commons by informal doing rather than by formal design and designation. By the time I visited the area, multiple holes had been made in the metal fence made to keep people out, making it easy, even inviting, for most to access the area. There were indications of the space being used both in recreational and educational manners; fold-up chairs, informal barbecues and campfires, makeshift playgrounds and a treehouse, intermingled with signs made by a nearby school that explained the species affiliation of trees in the green space. Depending on the time of day, season, and weather, people used the area to walk their dogs (here they could let them off the leach, as is otherwise forbidden on public grounds in Berlin), as a short cut between the former airport field and the high street, or to simply hang out alone or with friends. In the more secluded parts of the wasteland, during the warmer months of the year, tents would also pop up – providing shelter for those with nowhere else to go.

The value and variety of such multifarious, informal commoning were both highlighted and put into question when the former cemetery was finally scheduled for redevelopment into a public park in the mid-2010s. In short, the municipality argued that the area, in its wasteland form, was "unsafe" (encouraging drug use and dealing, homeless encampments, and so on) and that making it into a park would allow the "whole" neighbourhood access to it, not just those who had chosen to appropriate it of their own accord (Facetten-Magazin-Redaktion 2015). However, the

primary factor for ultimately redeveloping the area had little to do with the public's right to urban space. Rather, due to the expansion of Berlin's motorway system, it came down to the fact that the Senate of Berlin needed to create a new green space, a so-called *Ausgleichsfläche*, to compensate for the assumed biodiversity loss of a similar green space elsewhere in the city (Berlin Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz; QM Schillerpromenade). As St Thomas Friedhof, in its lush but informal state, did not hold any official status as a green space, by turning it into a formal park the Senate swiftly solved this compensatory issue without having to "lose" other precious land strips in Berlin. It was consequently not the desire to "make public" the space – to establish a formal solidification of the commons – but a cunning, bureaucratic use of the rules and regulations around urban biodiversity and green space that ultimately decided the fate of the area.

In between commons and commoning

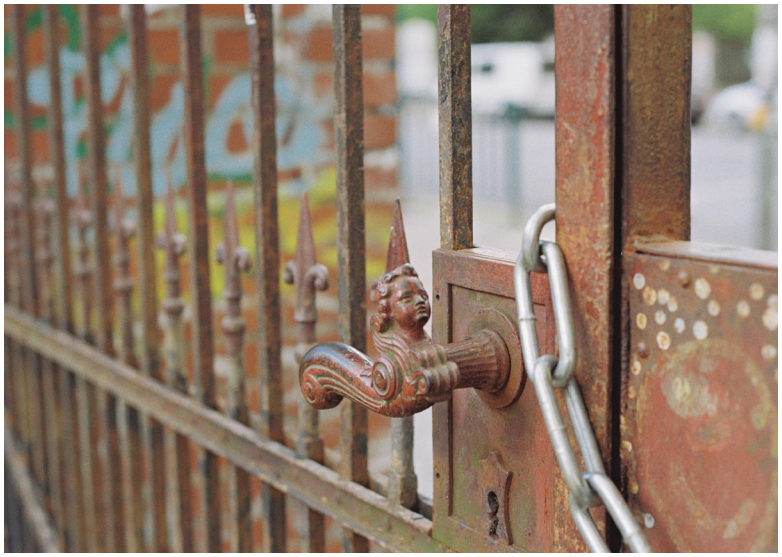
Yet, back in April 2017, when the work to transition the wasteland into public park had started in earnest – when shrubs and weeds had been cleared, the old water cisterns and most litter had been removed, and tractors were levelling the ground by getting rid of the last of the gravestones – both kinds of commons could be sensed in the fresh spring air. It was a transient moment in time and space where the informal functions of the area overlapped with the formal functions yet to come: In a nod to their official *Denkmalschutz* status, the avenue of plane trees had been wrapped in protective layers of wooden planks and plastic foam. New playgrounds and seating areas, though still fenced off from the public, were being built. The tractors were carving out new-old paths in the ground, following the landscape architects' instructions to re-trace the old cemetery pathways. Yet, people still made use of the area as a wasteland – walking their dogs off the leach, lingering in secluded wooded spots surrounded by newly sprung, light green leaves, and even sitting in the new seating areas, completely ignoring the fences around them.

As it turned out, some informal commoning practices were actually playing a part in shaping the official landscaping of the park that was now emerging. As the landscape architects responsible for the redevelopment would tell me at a later

date, the Anita-Berber-Park, also after its official opening, would allow for plenty of space for dogs to roam free – a compromise that had come about after the dog owners who frequented the wasteland had formed a citizen group to campaign for the rights of their canine friends. What is more, many of the new seating areas had been placed where the informal ones once stood and the makeshift wooden steps that someone had made to enable access between the former cemetery and the residential area, were soon to be replaced by a permanent structure of steps with an adjoining ramp for wheelchair users.

To a certain extent, then, past and present commoning practices were allowed to lead the way for the definition and shaping of a more fixed, settled commons – the future public park. In this, St Thomas Friedhof/Anita-Berber-Park is not alone, Berlin can showcase plenty of examples of former wastelands that have been turned into public parks partly thanks to the informal appropriation practices of locals. Nevertheless, in the transition from informal green space to public park all of them run the risk of losing the attributes that encouraged the act of commoning in the first place. Parks have either become too static in their design, no longer leaving any room for experimentation or novel ways of appropriation. Such is the case with, for instance, Natur-Park Südgelände[3] where time and space seem to have been frozen in a specific early-2000s constellation of biodiversity management and designated pathways for humans. Or the parks may become too attractive for their own good, leading to an uptick of profit-making initiatives creating and taking over activities in and around the parks, increasingly excluding the poorer local demographics in favour of tourism and those who can afford to pay the higher prices. A prime example of this is the popular Park am Gleisdreieck[4].

Where Anita-Berber-Park will settle on this scale is still difficult to tell. In an ideal future, perhaps somewhere in between the two extremes is to be preferred? For locals and visitors alike to be able to enjoy the settled, entrenched right to public space, while still allowing for some wiggle room in terms of how the space may be used and evolve at present and in the future – the best of the commons and commoning combined.



[3] https://gruen-berlin.de/en/projects/parks/natur-park-suedgelaende/about-the-park

[4] https://www.parkamgleisdreieck.de/

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