

Teufelsberg: More-than-mountain

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As an experiment on how to explore unruly sites of more-than human entanglements, we made our way up to the Teufelsberg in the southwestern part of Berlin. The literal translation of Teufelsberg is devils mountain, named after the Teufelssee, the nearby devil's lake. At 120 meters above sea level, Teufelsberg is the second highest point of Berlin (after the Arkenbergen) and offers a spectacular view over the Grunewald and Berlin. The origin of the mountain is less spectacular than the view it offers: after huge parts of Berlin were bombed during World War II and the city needed to be cleaned up, the remnants of buildings were piled here, eventually constructing this elevated place in the location that is today known as the Teufelsberg.

To arrive at the mountain, one first crosses the surrounding forest, the Grundewald. Teufelsberg is a rewilding experiment, painstakingly growing over a burial mound from the ruinous leftovers of war. In addition to its reputation as one of the largest landscape conservation areas -- it is one of the biggest local recreation areas in Berlin, for which it received an award in 2015 -- the forest is also historically a success story for its reforestation of trees after World War 2¹. When we started our walk toward the mountain, meandering through the forest, on a sunny May day, the trees have just formed their fresh green leaves and the ground is covered with leeks and caterpillars spin their cocoons in the flowering bushes. On the way to the summit, the various human and non-human interactions seemed to be making an intriguing entanglement. Since the full topography is not visible while ascending, one's eye traverses the mixed forest lining the trail, and the Schrebergärten, allotment gardens -- fashioned from cropped lawns and bountiful flower beds, garden sheds, foregrounded by Monobloc chairs. Born out by Berliners meticulous work, these carefully crafted plots at the base of Teufelsberg provide a refuge away from the crowded city, but lie in contrast to the unkept tangle of vines up the slope.



Sightseer snaps a photo as they make their way up Teufelsberg through the densely vegetated Schrebergärten (Image by César Giraldo).

¹ <https://www.berlin.de/ba-charlottenburg-wilmersdorf/ueber-den-bezirk/freiflaechen/artikel.230857.php>

As the footpath rises, there are markings painted on the ground that point the way to the mountain, or to its counterpart, the Teufelssee. Teufelsberg is the only notable elevation in several kilometres, and offers a towering vantage over the city of Berlin. The foundation of the mountain is the building shell of the so-called Wehrtechnische Fakultät, the Technical Military Faculty, a major project as part of Nazi Germany's centering of Berlin as a global imperial capital. After the war, the building shell was blown up, and during the 1950s the area was buried in rubble. It is estimated that the debris of approximately 15,000 buildings were brought there, layer after layer. For just over two decades, lorries arrived every day, letting the Teufelsberg grow into the largest rubble deposition facility in Berlin. An important feature of its elevation, The US National Security Agency used the peak as a point in its Cold War era listening network from the 1960s.



Panorama of Berlin partially viewed through the disintegrating radomes atop abandoned NSA surveillance station (Image by Katherine Sammler).

The abandoned buildings and antenna radomes of this monitoring station, now characterized by decay, still sit atop the many layers of debris that make the mountain. In spite of its official toponym, some call this place Trümmerberg, meaning debris mountain or mountain of rubble. There have been many visions of what to do on the mountain, as well as a multitude of actual uses. From burying grievous pasts, accommodating urban rubble, and positioning surveillance infrastructures, to installing ski lifts, cultivating vineyards, and hosting a graffiti gallery, the mound demonstrates what could be called unintentional design (Tsing 2015). Yet, it simultaneously presents us with the limitations of the notion. The mound does not just lack a unifying purposeful design, but attests to withstanding post-human intentionalities constituting more-than-human agencies.

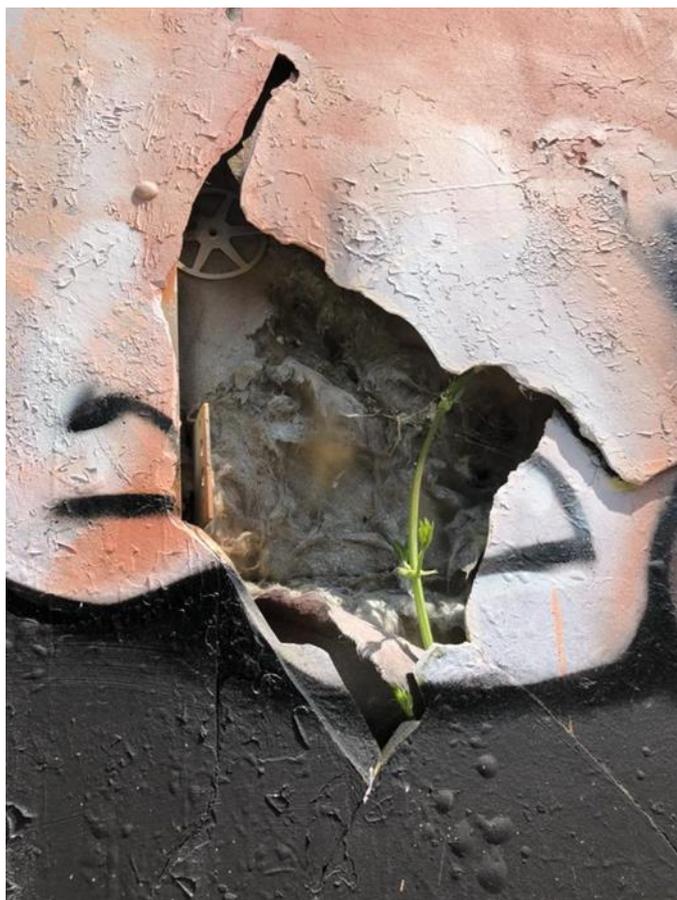


A large, sanctioned, mural is accompanied by a request not to tag the walls (Image by Yvonne Kunz).

A successful ascent of Teufelsberg is impeded by a fence. The entire plateau is enclosed, kettling visitors to a gate for collecting entrance fees. Looking through the mesh fence already gives a glimpse of what is going on inside: The half-ruined buildings are covered, both with graffiti, and wild vines. All around are clusters of vehicles, lamps, televisions and miscellaneous junk, displaced urban artifacts that have found a new dwelling here. The unwieldy layers of deterioration and decomposition that both sit atop, and undergird the mountain's form, have most recently appealed to artists. The buildings have been painted and repurposed by various creative endeavors. The steep grey walls of the former espionage facility are transformed by human and non-human agents into colourful and textured motifs. As a recreational area, it has become a destination for many sightseers visiting Berlin. Now promoted as one of the biggest 'street art' galleries in the world, it has its own website², a fire protection plan, and signs informing visitors on where spraying is not allowed.

The untrammled foliage and flagrant graffiti give this place the appearance of a post-apocalyptic suburbia, an abandoned wasteland, jumbled concrete ruins languishing amidst a floral coup. Yet, visitors are subject to assorted rules and prohibitions. Increasingly, dilapidated parts of buildings need to be secured leaving many stairwells off-limits. Creative expression is controlled, in contrast to the historically illicit roots of graffiti, tagging, and other 'street art.' With its fenced-in peak and reforested slopes, safety-proofed ruins, and tariffed and heavily curated graffiti art, Teufelsberg stands as the diametric contrary to the notion of the feral (Barua 2022).

² teufelsberg-berlin.de



Viney weeds grow through cracks in the graffitied facade (Image by Desirée Hetzel).

This area manifests both creative and destructive undertakings of different temporalities, the result of various interacting human and non-human actors. In August 2022, Teufelsberg made headlines as the forest around it caught fire after a munitions explosion - a fire that took days to get under control³. It is a reminder of the scale of the destruction wars can reach, but also of the obstinacy of refuse, of how destroyed things resist recycling and re-articulation into the world (Venkatesan 2020). How things haunt us by persisting in being what they became through someone's work, determined by their aims even though they no longer perform the function they were meant to. Here are bricks that do not build, walls that do not protect, pillars that do not sustain, bridges that do not bridge, and doors that go nowhere. The weeds raze the concrete structures, as the hearing towers go deaf, and the street art turns commercial.

References

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More information on the history of the Teufelsberg:

<https://www.spiegel.de/reise/deutschland/wintersport-in-berlin-wilmersdorf-statt-watzmann-a->

³ <https://www.berlin.de/aktuelles/7672047-958090-feuer-grunewald-explosion-verkehrseinsch.html>

[671314.html](#)

<https://www.berlin.de/ba-charlottenburg-wilmersdorf/ueber-den-bezirk/freiflaechen/berge/artikel.177406.php>