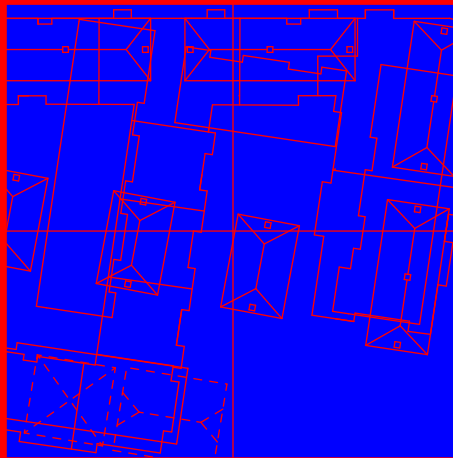


Erased by Design

Resisting Zurich's Logic
of Replacement
and Displacement



Felix Balling

Erased by Design

Resisting Zurich's Logic of Replacement and Displacement

2025, Felix Balling

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Theoretical Statement RIOT EPFL 2024-2025

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Living in Zurich, albeit briefly, working in architecture and strolling the city with curiosity, has inevitably confronted me with urban densification, replacement-construction, and the many dedicated voices addressing these issues through research, exhibitions, protests, and projects. With this Theoretical Statement—written as I near the end of my architectural studies and reflect on the kind of practice I wish to engage in—I’d like to contribute to a discussion that touches on so many important aspects, socio-environmental concerns, how we live together, Rights to Housing, to just mention a few, to help shift narratives and perceptions. In the immense web of entanglements that are to be found when working with a specific case, reaching from historical, temporal, spatial, to directive, political, economic and social layers, this Theoretical Statement reserves the right to stay selective and only take up those things that concern the case study at the core, when considering policies, histories or corporate decisions. It is a personal and subjective work that deals with a very sensitive topic from the privileged position of a white cisgender man studying at a technical university.

I would like to warmly thank everyone - those concerned, residents, citizens, committed individuals, activists, architects and other actors involved, who trusted me to talk with them and share their time, impressions and insights, in particular Mieten-Marta. I would also like to point out those that provided me with inspiration, namely 8000.agency, Countdown2030, ZAS*, the movie Brunaupark and Newrope: Studio Altstetten.

Finally my heartfelt thanks go to Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, Summer Islam and the entire team of the Riot Chair for their thoughtful and caring supervision, invaluable insights as well as critical questioning, under whose guidance this work not only felt enriching and meaningful but was also despite difficult and unsettling matters a pleasure to work on. I would also like to thank friends and colleagues for the supportive, encouraging and stimulating environment and the conversations we have had. Thanks also to my family for their constant and ongoing support.

I look forward to continuing this work under the supervision of Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, Jo Taillieu and Summer Islam.



View along Baslerstrasse, demolition imminent

Introduction

- 1 When the text talks about the houses or homes along Baslerstrasse, it always refers to the entire housing estate between *Baslerstrasse*, *Freihofstrasse* and *Grundstrasse* in 8048 Zürich.
- 2 Mieten-Marta, “Offener Brief an Halter: Ihre soziale Verantwortung an der Baslerstrasse,” *Mieten-Marta* (blog), February 15, 2024, <https://mieten-marta.ch/2024/offener-brief-an-halter-ihre-soziale-verantwortung-an-der-baslerstrasse/>.
- 3 Isabel Brun, “Neubauprojekt «Letzigarten»: 735 Mietenden Blüht Die Verdrängung,” *Tsüri.Ch*, March 8, 2024, <https://tsri.ch/a/neubauprojekt-letzigarten-altstetten-735-mietenden-blueht-die-verdraengung-halter>.
- 4 Elena Lutz, Fiona Kauer, and David Kaufmann, “Mehr Wohnraum für Alle?: Zonenplanänderungen, Bauaktivität, und Mietpreise im Kanton Zürich von 1996-2020,” application/pdf (ETH Zurich, March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000603242>.
- 5 Mieten-Marta, “Dringende Ausstellung Für Das Recht Auf Wohnen. Dokumentation.,” *Ausstellungsdokumentation*, March 16, 2023.

On March 15, 2024, The Research Collective for Affordable Housing *Mieten-Marta* sent an open letter to the owners and developers of a housing-estate along *Baslerstrasse*¹ - located in the *Altstetten* district in the West of Zurich - namely to members of the Halter-family, to remind them of their social responsibility regarding their planned demolition and replacement of the apartments.² Concerned are flats from the 70s and 80s, that are about to be demolished to make way for urban renewal, with 735 tenants confronted with eviction, one half having to move out by 2025, the other by 2027.³

The case finds itself in a long row of similar incidents, that are a part of an active densification strategy, that the city of Zurich is pursuing in regards to the question of housing and that crystalizes and is immensely dominated by the practice of *Ersatzneubauten*, replacement-constructions; signifying the demolition of existing (housing) stock, to replace it with a supposedly newer, better, denser one. This practice has been destroying affordable housing, displacing vulnerable groups and replacing them with rich tenants and bigger apartments for years.⁴ In addition it generates tons of waste, disregards embodied energy and often comes with the strategic neglect of the properties by the owners in order to present demolition as the only solution.⁵ It’s therefore often the materialization of planned obsolescence, throwaway-architecture and housing as a commodity.

This theoretical statement puts the homes along Baslerstrasse at the center of the work, untwining and intertwining the narrations around them, to demonstrate, that a demolition-and-replacement-construction is not the kind of perfect solution that it is presented as, but instead derives from a systemic logic that perpetuates the commodification of housing, social displacement, and environmental degradation. In that it seeks to contribute to the call for the needed change in Zurich’s densification-strategy and arguments for resistance against the demolition and putting a stop to continuously disposing architecture.

As facts and figures regarding the consequences of *Ersatzneubauten* are well known and documented, the statement also tries “focusing not only on objects with names, shapes, and outlines, but also on the matrix or medium of activities and latent potentials that



View into the inner green space, demolition imminent

6 Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London New York: Verso, 2021), x.

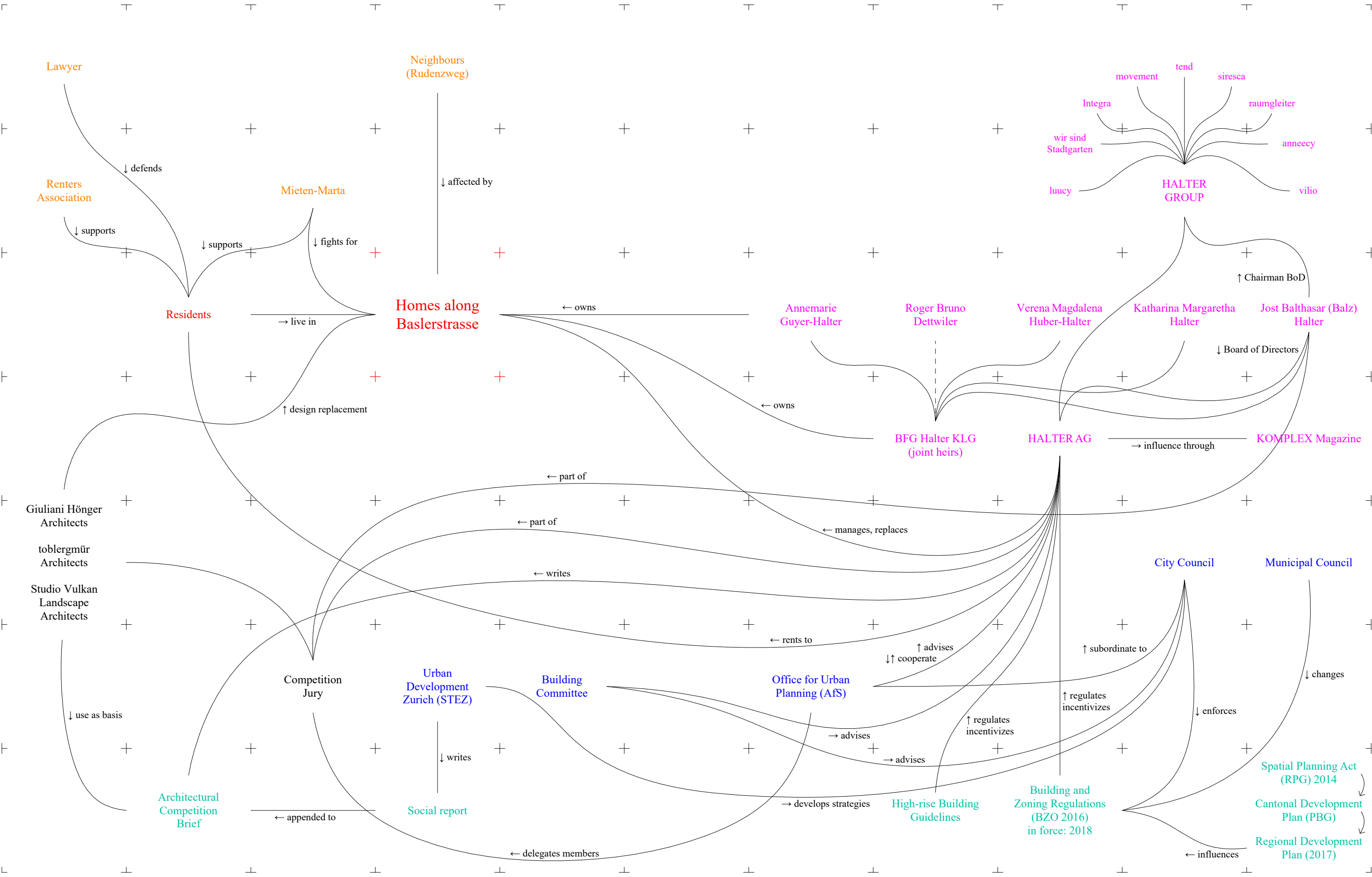
those objects generate. [...] beyond nominative expressions to infinitive expressions of activity and interplay. [...] beyond declared ideologies to undeclared dispositions.”⁶

The work starts with a display and introduction of the relevant actors and forces involved, establishing an overview over the web of links, dependencies and powers at play. *The City of Zurich, Zoning for Profit?* dives into the city's involvement in the case, their interplay with private developers, their mandate on housing and what is being encouraged through their policies. *Halter, a Monopoly on Authority?* unravels the power that Halter as a private developer possesses and follows their line of decision-making, decision-enforcing and setting the course regarding the future of the housing estate. It looks at their public presentation, and hints towards the stories being told justifying the demolition and washing it green and socially just, unraveling what can be read between, and what stands really behind the lines, locating them in the web of actors, private profit and urban policies at play. An Interlude displays the reality of housing as a commodity, making clear with a radical severity of what an importance a plot of land at this location is for a private owner if he has a free hand on what to do with it and how that infringes rights to housing. The Interlude continues with depicting the stark contrast of housing as a home, trying to trace disregarded and elusive connections and relationships from whose interactions living and housing crystallizes, to put a magnifying glass on what is at play. Finally, *Obsolescence, Deciding what's Worth?* makes visible a supposedly planned obsolescence of the housing stock, reveals a recurring pattern of demolition and replacement, documents and gives a voice to the kitchens, balconies, courtyards, loggias, staircases, searching for the inherent potential of their continued existence and emphasizes the importance of the struggle for it.

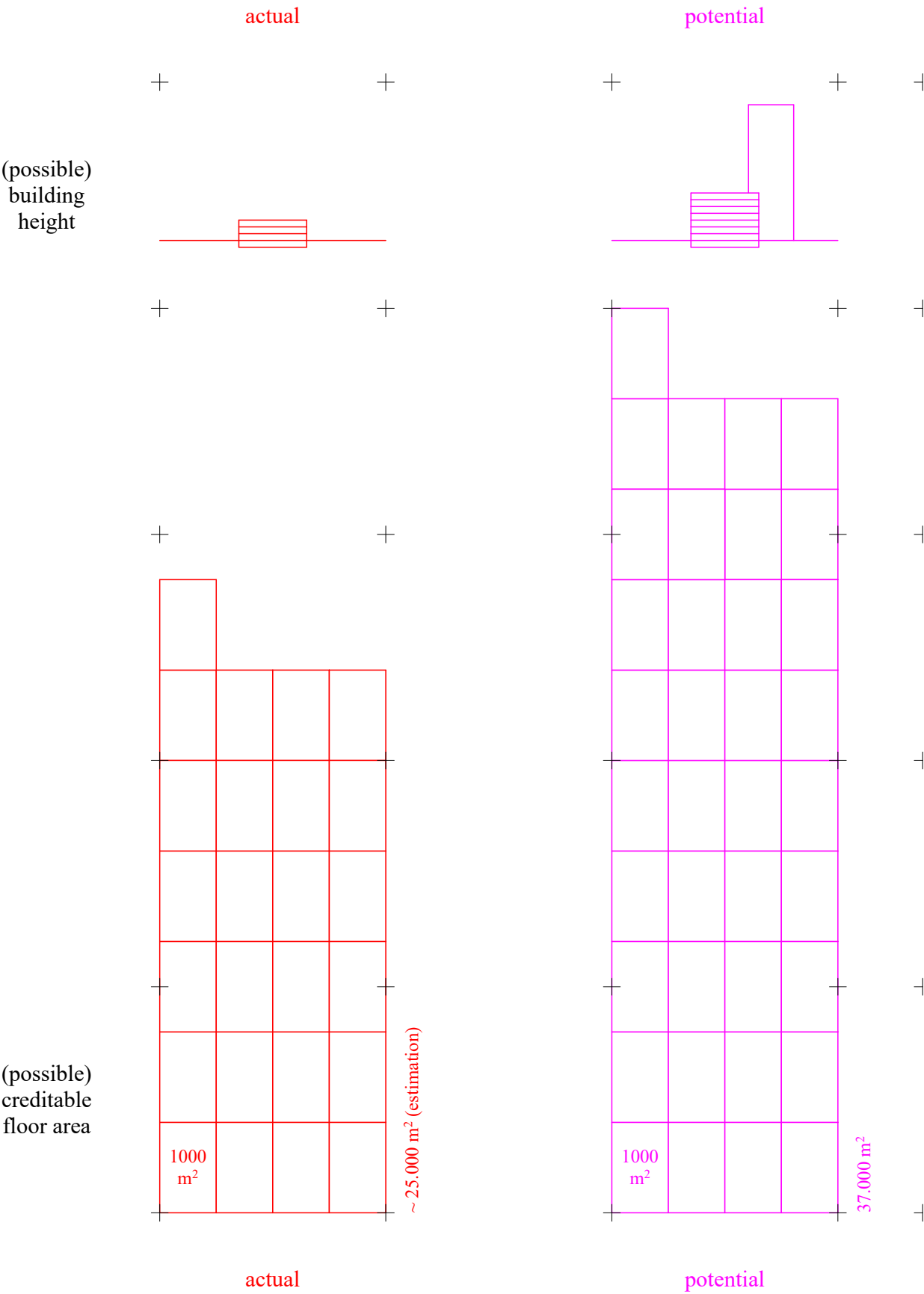
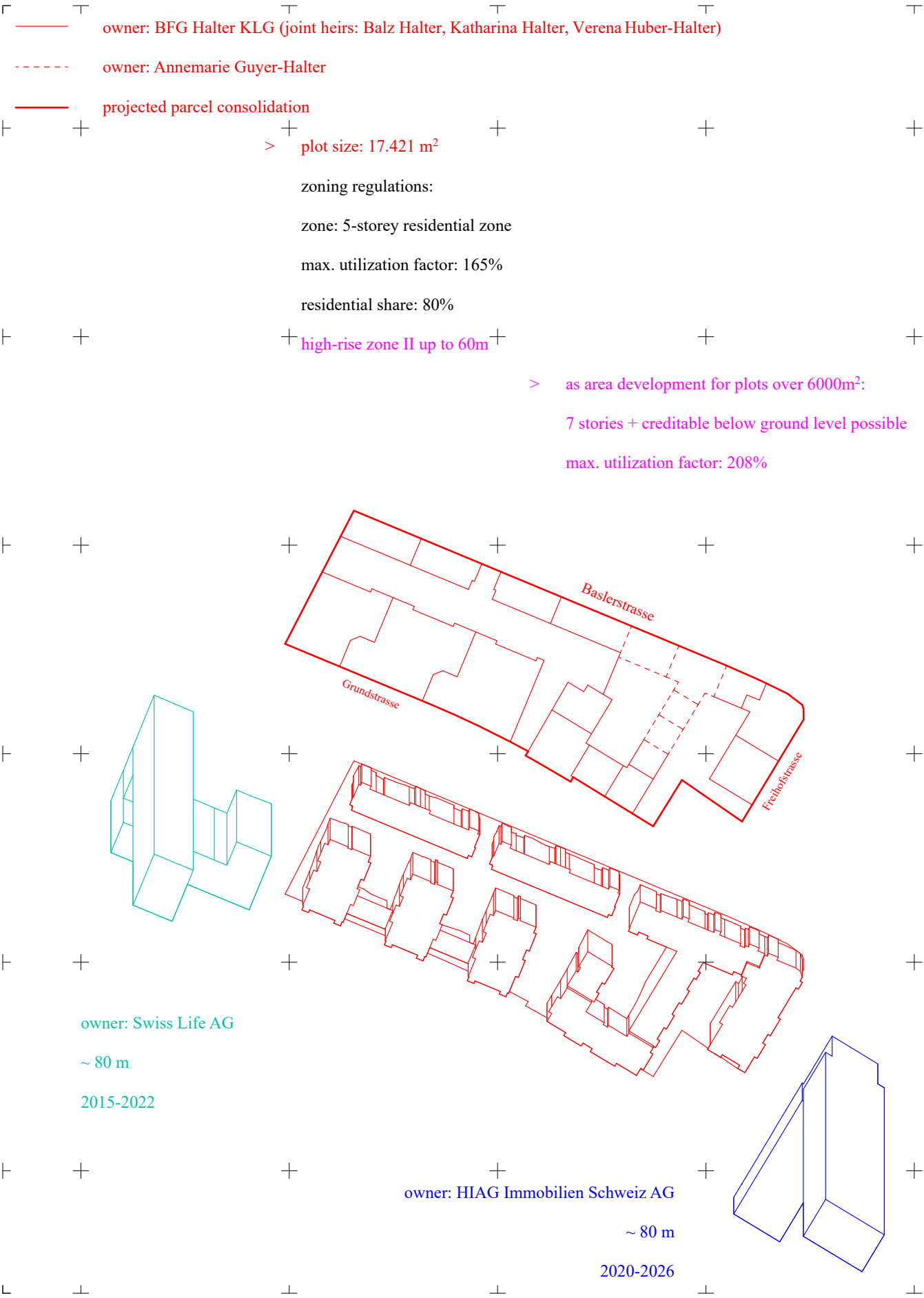
The statement concludes with a summary of the situation today, what is at stake and what needs to happen to draw another future, to resist demolition and defend housing as a home, while still being able to provide sufficiently of it. Throughout, the work tries to present itself as an approachable and engaging conglomeration that stands as an argument against the planned demolition.

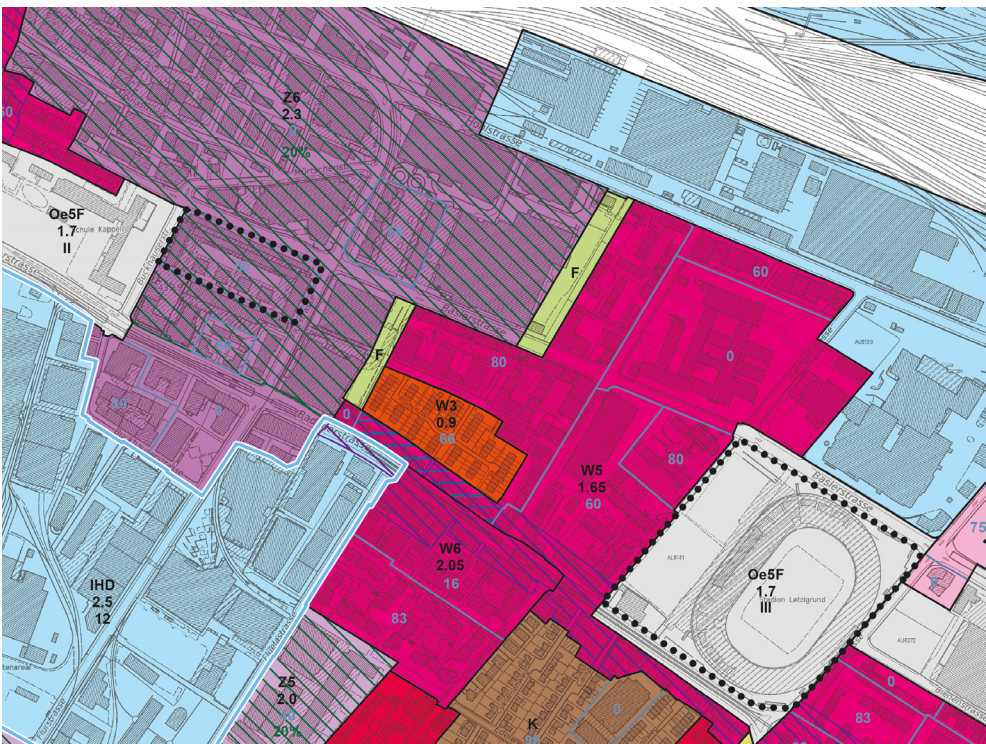
1

Actors and Forces



2 The City of Zurich, Zoning for Profit?





Excerpt from the zoning plan, plot in the center in pink

Inner Densification, Masterplan and Zoning Law

The City of Zurich plays a pivotal role in the planned demolition of the housing complex along Baslerstrasse as an active player that significantly shapes the trajectory of urban development and its impact on the residents. On the one hand it has committed itself to preserve and increase the number of affordable housing with the aim that one third of all housing should be non-profit by 2050.⁷ At the same time Zurich as a big financial hub and economic center is anticipating an immense population growth over the coming years. To accommodate this growth, the city of Zurich is pursuing an active strategy of densifying existing urban areas.⁸ The fact that construction activity should be limited to already built-up and sealed areas to avoid urban sprawl in natural areas is not to be disputed here. To provide the legal basis and incentive for densification, the City of Zurich employs building and zoning regulations.⁹

The latest revision (*BZO 2016*) came into force in 2018 and dictates the owners how they can use their plots. In the areas to be densified, it provides for an increase in the possible number of storeys and an increase in the proportion of buildable floor area in relation to the plot size, called utilization factor (*Ausnutzungsziffer*). For the property in question, this ratio was increased from 130% to 165% with the new *BZO*. In addition, for plots of land over 6000m2 , it allows a building project to be carried out as an area development (*Arealüberbauung*). As a result, the consolidation of the 22 plots along Baslerstrasse owned by the joint heirs of Halter makes it possible to build 7 storeys and a creditable below-ground-level instead of the zoning requirement of 5 storeys, as well as make use of an area bonus increasing the utilization factor to 208%.¹⁰ Furthermore, the new supplementary plan for high-rise areas places the site in a zone that allows buildings of up to 60 meters.¹¹

These zoning decisions therefore automatically render the plots incredibly profitable and directly enable private developers like Halter to pursue a lucrative redevelopment, endorse the destruction of the existing (affordable) housing and undermine the formulated goals and obligations for affordable and sustainable housing.

The combination of increased allowable utilization and additional floors is crucial for a profit-generating development, as

7 Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Umsetzung Wohnpolitischer Grundsatzartikel, Bericht 2016–2019: STRB Nr. 828/2020,” Grundsatzartikel (Zürich, 2020), 7.

8 Stadt Zürich, Hochbaudepartement, and Amt für Städtebau, “Kommunaler Richtplan Siedlung, Landschaft, Öffentliche Bauten Und Anlagen: Richtplanteil,” Richtplan (Zürich, April 2021), 6–17.

9 Stadt Zürich, “Bauordnung Der Stadt Zürich Bau- Und Zonenordnung (BZO 2016),” Bau- und Zonenordnung (Zürich, May 29, 2024).

10 Stadt Zürich; Stadt Zürich, “Bauordnung Der Stadt Zürich Bau- Und Zonenordnung (BZO 1999),” Bau- und Zonenordnung (Zürich, November 16, 2011).

11 Stadt Zürich, “Ergänzungsplan Hochhausgebiete,” n.d.

12 Gabriela Debrunner and David Kaufmann, “Land Valuation in Densifying Cities: The Negotiation Process between Institutional Landowners and Municipal Planning Authorities,” *Land Use Policy* 132 (September 2023): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2023.106813>.

Bauordnung der Stadt Zürich
Bau- und Zonenordnung (BZO 2016)

700.100

² In den 2-, 3-, und 4-geschossigen Wohnzonen darf das Attikageschoss hangseitig fassadenbündig angeordnet werden, wenn auf dieser Seite unter Einbezug des Attikageschosses die zulässige Gebäudehöhe eingehalten wird und seine Fläche nicht grösser wird als die eines Attikageschosses gemäss Abs. 1.

³ Brüstungen von Dachterrassen sind von den Breitenbeschränkungen für Dachaufbauten ausgenommen, sofern sie die zulässige Gebäudehöhe nicht überschreiten.

⁴ Der First für die Bestimmung des Dachprofils von Gebäuden mit Flachdach ist in der Richtung der Gebäudelängsseite zu wählen. Bei zusammengebauten Gebäuden ist in der Regel die Längsseite des Gebäudekomplexes massgebend. Bis zu einem Verhältnis der Gebäudelängs- zur Gebäudeschmalseite von 4 : 3 kann die Firstrichtung frei gewählt werden.

Art. 8³⁰ ¹ Arealüberbauungen sind in allen Wohnzonen, ausgenommen W2b, sowie in allen Zentrumszonen und Zonen für öffentliche Bauten zulässig.

² Die Arealfläche muss mindestens 6000 m² betragen.

³ Für die Arealüberbauung müssen ausreichend Gemeinschaftsräume geschaffen werden. Von den für leichte Zweiräder zu erstellenden Abstellplätzen ist ein angemessener Anteil zu überdecken.

⁴ Innerhalb der Arealüberbauung gelten für die Grenz- und Gebäudeabstände die kantonalen Abstandsvorschriften. Gegenüber Grundstücken und Gebäuden ausserhalb der Arealüberbauung sind die zonengemässen Abstände einzuhalten.

⁵ Die zonengemässe Vollgeschosszahl darf in der Wohnzone W2 auf drei, in der Wohnzone W3 auf vier, in der Wohnzone W4b auf fünf Vollgeschosse und in den übrigen Zonen auf sieben Vollgeschosse erhöht werden. Die maximale Gebäudehöhe beträgt in den Wohnzonen W2 und W3 12,5 m, in der Wohnzone W4b 15,5 m und in den übrigen Zonen 25 m.

⁶ Die Ausnützungsziffer darf in den Wohn- und Zentrumszonen sowie in den Zonen für öffentliche Bauten Oe2 bis Oe5 um den nach folgender Formel berechneten Wert heraufgesetzt werden: Ausnützungsziffer geteilt durch die gemäss Regelbauweise zulässige Vollgeschosszahl zuzüglich 10 Prozentpunkte abzüglich in anrechenbaren Dachgeschossen realisierte Ausnützungsziffer. Ist ein Wohnanteil vorgeschrieben, muss die der realisierten Mehrausnutzung entsprechende Fläche vollumfänglich dem Wohnen dienen.

³⁰ Fassung gem. GRB vom 30. November 2016; Inkraftsetzung 1. November 2018 (STRB Nr. 686/2018).

11

Excerpt from the zoning regulations, permissibility of an area development (*Arealüberbauung*) with a higher number of storeys and increased utilization factor (*Ausnützungsziffer*)

13 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 2005), 62–68.

14 Stadt Zürich, “Neubautätigkeit weiterhin auf hohem Niveau,” accessed November 18, 2024, https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/prd/de/index/statistik/publikationen-angebote/publikationen/webartikel/2023-02-15_Neubautaetigkeit-weiterhin-auf-hohem-Niveau.html.

15 David Kaufmann et al., “Erkenntnisse zum aktuellen Wohnungsnotstand: Bautätigkeit, Verdrängung und Akzeptanz,” application/pdf (ETH Zurich, March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000603229>.

16 Gabriela Debrunner, Andreas Hengstermann, and Jean-David Gerber, “The Business of Densification: Distribution of Power, Wealth and Inequality in Swiss Policy Making,” *Town Planning Review* 91, no. 3 (May 2020): 271–72, <https://doi.org/10.3828/tp.2020.15>.

17 Debrunner, Hengstermann, and Gerber, 259–81.

18 Mieten-Marta, “Nr. 8 «Mit dem Drittelsziel wird alles gut» – Mythen zur Wohnkrise,” accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.wohnrise.ch/8-mit-dem-drittelsziel-wird-alles-gut/>.

19 Stadt Zürich, Hochbaudepartement, and Amt für Städtebau, “Kommunaler Richtplan Siedlung, Landschaft, Öffentliche Bauten Und Anlagen: Richtplantext.”

only a significantly greater number of rentable square meters generates higher revenues (in contrast the density of occupants is not regulated).¹²

It can also be considered in light of Smith’s rent-gap-theory, where when the gap between the actual capitalized ground rent under current land use and the potential ground rent to be capitalized under a different use (so the possible higher amount) is big enough that a redevelopment leaves a sufficient economic benefit, the developer begins to develop, starting off a process of gentrification.¹³ This process is reflected in Zurich in a rapid rise in land prices and a redistribution of land ownership to private corporations;¹⁴ as well as a predominant “densification” through demolition and replacement, which comes along with the displacement of vulnerable and low-income groups to the very edge or even outside the city and a replacement by wealthier groups, thus facilitating a general social segregation.¹⁵ Since legal regulations limit rent increases in existing buildings, demolition and new construction offer property owners the only means to achieve substantial rent hikes.¹⁶

Debrunner, Hengstermann, and Gerber argue that while Swiss policies on gentrification strengthen (the already very strong) private property rights, economic incentives for developers and energy requirements, they neglect socially sustainable requirements. This neglect stems partly from weak tenant representation in policy making, concerns about deterring international investment as well as the construction of new housing, and a state reliant on private developers, due to their large share of land ownership. As a result, densification has become a secure, low-risk, and highly profitable market, which the authors hence title “business of densification.”¹⁷

Current social compensation measures, such as an obligation to provide a proportionate amount of affordable housing when using the site bonus, are incredibly marginal and do not prevent a much larger proportion of existing and affordable housing from being demolished.¹⁸

Going even further, Zurich’s master plan which came into place in 2021 describes zones in which densification is to become very high and should go beyond what is possible with the existing BZO. These are located mainly in the north as well as the west of the city, including the Altstetten district. The houses along Baslerstrasse are located in this area. This master plan is a guideline plan for the authorities to guide their decisions on for example special permits and future adjustments to zoning regulations. For the area in question, it envisages a “very high density” with a utilization rate of over 250%.¹⁹

Municipal Oversight and Public-Private Collaboration

The separation of powers and federal organization in Swiss democracy provides for a municipal council (*Gemeinderat*), which is the parliament responsible for legislative tasks and the control of their fulfilment, and a city council (*Stadtrat*), which is responsible for executive tasks, manages the municipal administration, decides on transactions and whose members each head a department, such as this of building construction. Both bodies are elected every 4 years.²⁰

At the 87th meeting of the municipal council on March 6, 2024, Tanja Maag Sturzenegger and Karen Hug (both from the *Alternative Liste Zürich, AL*) and 37 co-signatories submitted a request to the city council following the published planning application. Core of this request were questions regarding the extent to which the new construction project utilizes the space, how city authorities were involved in the project and how and if they fulfilled their responsibility regarding a socially just development, the nature and course of the planning process, how the neighborhood was involved and how the City of Zurich will accompany Halter's projects in the future.²¹

The report of the city council from April 17, 2024, shows the following: Since 2020, the Office for Urban Planning (*Amt für Städtebau, AfS*) has been involved in the planning process, advising on the type of planning procedure to be chosen (competition with 6 participating teams) as well as the structure of the competition. Ultimately a representative of the *AfS* participated with voting rights in the jury decision. Furthermore, the Building Committee (*Baukollegium*) was also involved, ensuring the quality of urban development and being responsible for approving a high-rise request. As was the Urban Development Department (*Stadtentwicklung*) with recommendations for a socially responsible development. The city’s report also notes that: “[...] at the request of the Office for Urban Planning, a two-stage procedure was put out to tender, in which the handling of the existing building and the preservation/partial preservation of the existing building formed part of the brief.” [translation by author]²² as well as that the competition had an independent assessment jury.²³

Even if this is correct in substance, the wording in the competition program makes it clear that complete demolition was preferred and that a preservation of the existing buildings was merely not ruled out

20 “Behörden und Organe | Stadt Zürich,” accessed January 7, 2025, <https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/politik-und-verwaltung/behoerden-und-organe.html>.

21 Gemeinderat Stadt Zürich, “Protokoll 87. Sitzung Des Gemeinderats von Zürich,” Protokoll (Zürich, March 6, 2024).

22 Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Beschluss Des Stadtrats Vom 17. April 2024 Nr. 1175/2024,” Beschluss (Zürich, April 17, 2024), 2. “[...] wurde auf Antrag des Amts für Städtebau ein zweistufiges Verfahren ausgeschrieben, indem der Umgang mit dem Bestand, der Erhalt/Teilerhalt des Bestands Teil der Aufgabenstellung bildete.”

23 Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Beschluss Des Stadtrats Vom 17. April 2024 Nr. 1175/2024.”

24 Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Programm” (Unpublished internal Document) (Schlieren, August 26, 2022); Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Nutzungskonzept Und Planungsvorgaben” (Unpublished internal Document) (Schlieren, 26.08.02022).

25 Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Beschluss Des Stadtrats Vom 17. April 2024 Nr. 1175/2024.”

26 Ana Perić, Sophie Hauller, and David Kaufmann, “Cooperative Planning under Pro-Development Urban Agenda? A Collage of Densification Practices in Zurich, Switzerland,” *Habitat International* 140 (October 1, 2023): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2023.102922>.

27 Gabriela Debrunner, Arend Jonkman, and Jean-David Gerber, “Planning for Social Sustainability: Mechanisms of Social Exclusion in Densification through Large-Scale Redevelopment Projects in Swiss Cities,” *Housing Studies* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 151–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2022.2033174>.

(if profitability is proven). Furthermore, the jury members with voting rights consisted of 4 external architects (including the representative of the *AfS*) in equal number, the other 4 members with voting rights were plot-owners or representatives of Halter AG.²⁴

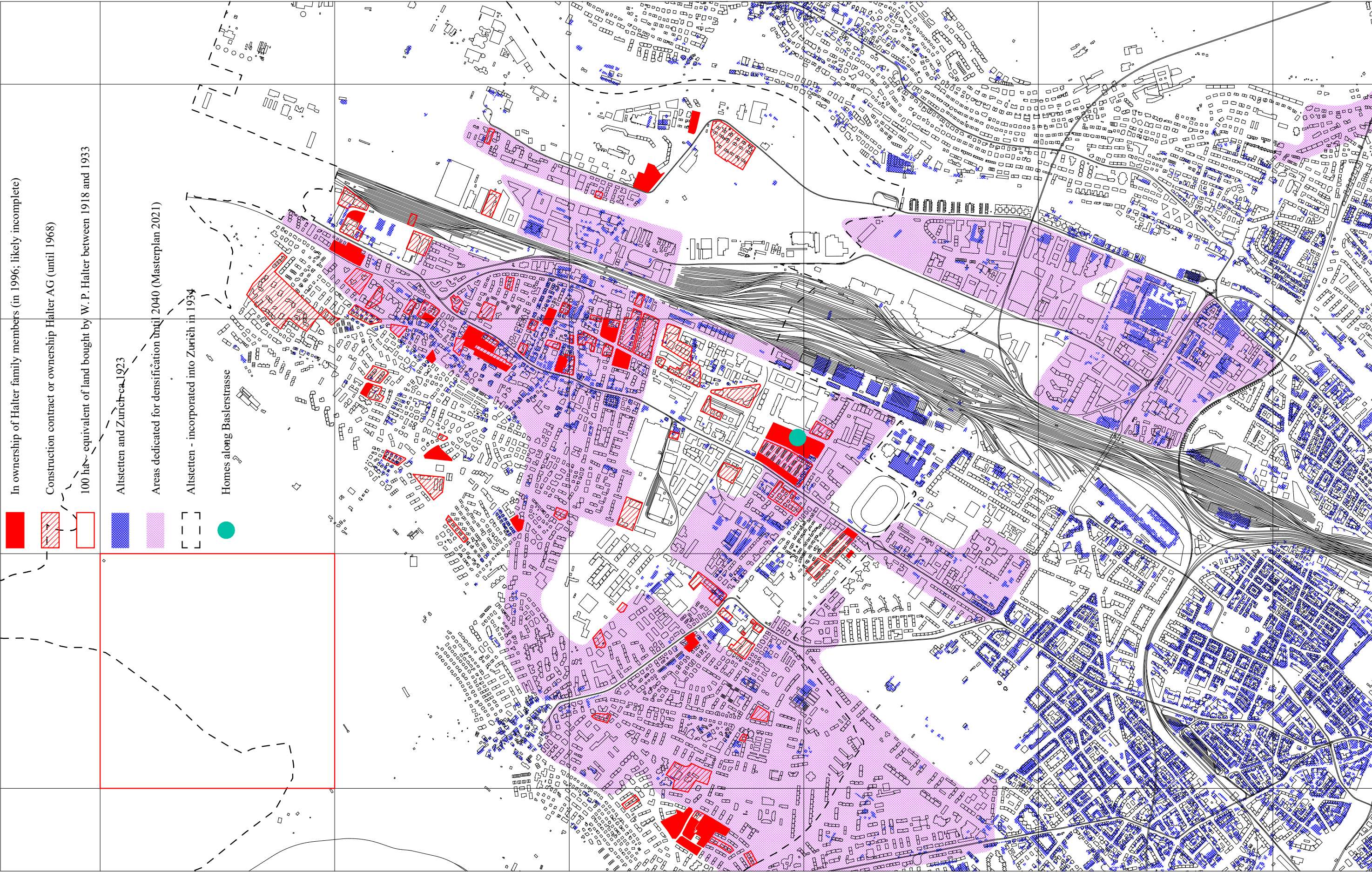
Overall, the report from the city council describes how the city of Zurich is involved and accompanies Halter in the whole process, but only through non-binding recommendations. As a result, no discussions have been held on rent levels, and the city cannot make any statements as to whether and if Halter supports the current tenants with pricing, staging construction, arrangement of replacement apartments and communication. Beyond this project, the report says that the city generally is involved in Halter's projects at an early stage, but has no basis for demanding insight into Halter's strategies.²⁵

While it could seem considerate of Halter as a private developer to include the city in their planning, it is also a way in which Halter makes sure their developments are approved by the building authorities and not interfered with while retaining largely free decision-making authority, not having to follow any of the recommendations that go beyond the zoning and building regulations.

Although not on a comparably large scale like other global examples, Perić, Hauller and Kaufmann describe how the “Contemporary urban development in Zurich exercises the principles of a globally dominating profit-oriented urban development paradigm. This entails an elite-driven cooperation (i.e., cooperation among public authorities, landowners, investors, and developers) that resembles a kind of growth-machine.”, accompanied by minor integration of and negative consequences for less powerful actors (like residents).²⁶ Derived from other examples of densification it can also be argued that the city’s active control of spatial planning under a strong collaboration between municipality and private landowners in the sense of capitalist urbanization, further fuels the commodification of housing, while social exclusion is reinforced.²⁷

3

Halter, a Monopoly on Authority?



An Infrastructure of Power

By looking at the history and structure of the Halter family, the developer *Halter AG* and the *Halter Group*, one can start to grasp the concentration of power and authority they possess, enabling them to enforce decisions for their benefit without having to take others into consideration.

In 1918, Wilhelm Pius Halter bought a bricklaying business in what was then the village of Altstetten, including the transfer of customer contacts and professional network. Together with his wife Anna Sabina Ming, he built up the company with a privately owned management and ownership structure. Acting like a general contractor brought high profits and by 1923 Wilhelm Halter was already one of the richest inhabitants of Altstetten with private assets of CHF 89,000. The manual labor required for a construction company was made possible by guest workers. By 1933 W. Halter bought almost 100 ha of farm- and wasteland in a suburb whose incorporation into Zurich was already foreseeable. In 1934, the very same led to a considerable increase in the value of land and properties there. By 1937 his private assets had risen to over one million CHF. After his death, his wife took control of the new partnership business, continuing to buy land reserves.²⁸

In addition to the strategy of accumulating land ownership and developing plots for the company's own real estate portfolio, recently acquired land was also sold on to municipalities and cities to develop infrastructure projects such as schools.²⁹ This could be reminiscent of the practice of other monopoly landowners in Zurich, such as *E. Göhner AG* and *Dr. A. Schellenberg*, whose accumulation of land enabled them to control market prices, buy land cheaply from small landowners and either sell it on to the municipality at an increased value as well as use their power and influence to make the municipality carry out value-enhancing zoning.³⁰

In 1968 the bequest was divided among the heirs and Jost Halter took over the construction company and most of the land reserves and transformed the firm into a general contractor. The purchase of the scaffolding company *Schärer Blitzgerüst AG* in 1978 and the merging of their plot with the existing plot between Basler- Freihof- and Grundstrasse made the first demolition and replacement with the

28 Monika Burri et al., *Halter: 1918-2018* (Zürich: Halter AG, 2018), 13–43.

29 Burri et al., 37, 53.

30 Autorenkollektiv an der Architekturabteilung der ETH Zürich, “Göhnerswil” *Wohnungsbau Im Kapitalismus: Eine Untersuchung Über Die Bedingungen Und Auswirkungen Der Privatwirtschaftlichen Wohnungsproduktion Am Beispiel Der Vorstadtsiedlung “Sunnebüel” in Volketswil Bei Zürich Und Der Generalunternehmung Ernst Göhner AG* (Zürich: Verlagsgenossenschaft, 1972), 90–100, 197–98.

31 Burri et al., *Halter: 1918-2018*, 57–65.

32 Burri et al., 79–95.

33 Burri et al., 103–15.

34 “Halter Gruppe - Organisation,” accessed November 16, 2024, <https://www.halter-gruppe.ch/de/unternehmen>.

35 “Balz Halter I HIAG Immobilien Schweiz AG,” accessed November 16, 2024, <https://www.hiag.com/de/investoren/corporate-governance/verwaltungsrat/balz-halter/>.

36 Lara Blatter, “Eine Tellerwäscher-Geschichte made in 8048: Die Halter AG,” May 16, 2024, <https://tsri.ch/a/balz-halter-und-die-halter-gruppe-vom-tellerwaescher-zum-agglo-pionier-altstetten-schlieren-letzigarten>.

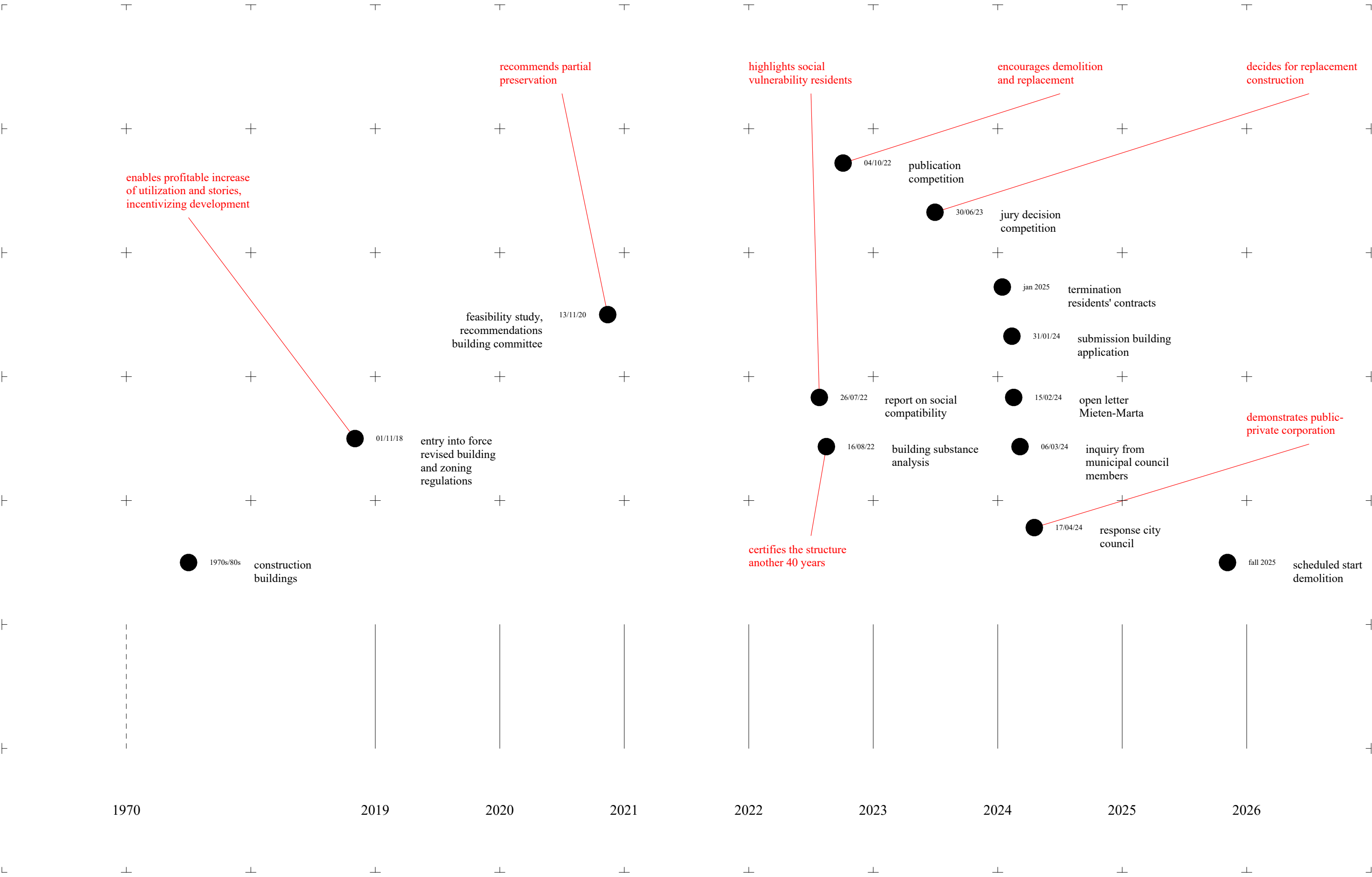
37 Fulcrum and Neil Brenner, “Neoliberalisation,” in *Real Estates: Life without Debt*, ed. Jack Self and Bose Shumi (London: Bedford Press, 2014), 20–21.

second half of the case study considered in this theoretical statement possible.³¹

After the takeover in 1987 by Jost Balthasar Halter, known as Balz Halter, the company was transformed into a Joint-stock company, which increasingly focused on the development of properties and neighborhoods as well as real estate marketing and expanded its sphere of influence to the agglomeration areas of Zurich and the whole of Switzerland. In 2008 the corporate branch of the construction company and scaffolding were sold because they were no longer profitable enough, reflecting on the general shift from production to financialization.³²

Today, Halter has the power to develop design plans for the agglomerations of Switzerland’s big cities, which get enforced by city and municipality and which are then in turn developed by Halter. In addition, Zurich's densification strategy makes it possible to recapitalize the properties still owned. Looking to the future, the Halter Group is also working towards a position of power and monopoly in the digital market of the construction industry.³³ Today, Balz Halter is Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Halter Group and a member of the Board of Directors of Halter AG, one of 10 companies in the group, all dealing with real estate and urban development.³⁴ He is furthermore a member or Chairman of the Board of Directors of other companies like the *HIAG Immobilien Schweiz AG*.³⁵ The Halter AG currently employs around 400 people with an annual turnover of CHF 800 million and heirs of the Halter family owned just under 130 properties in Altstetten in 1996 (last public overview of ownership).³⁶ Many will still be in their possession today.

Given the power that Halter AG wields over urban development processes, siphoning capital, influence and workforce, it is not too far-fetched to describe them as part of and profiting from neoliberal strategies that put accumulation at their center, drive the commodification of housing and foster a “[...] redistributive project, in which public resources and public institutions are harnessed in ways that systematically channel resources from society as a whole towards those that have ownership and discretionary control over investment decisions.” with negative consequences for social reproduction and planetary commons.³⁷



Replacing Baslerstrasse, Line of Decisions

The residential buildings between Basler- Grund- and Freihofstrasse were constructed by Halter in 1977/78 (western part) and 1986 (eastern part).³⁸ Except for one roof there does not appear to have been any major renovation work in the roughly 40 to 50 years of the buildings’ existence.³⁹

In 2001 the new high-rise plan placed the property in the zone with the possibility to build up to 80m (later reduced to 60m).⁴⁰ As explained earlier, the revised building and zoning regulations came into effect in November 2018, increasing the maximum possible utilization of the plot.⁴¹ Together with low interest rates (until 2022/23), rising land and rent prices and a rent increase by a multiple if the tenants are completely replaced, circumstances provided incentives to totally replace buildings.⁴²

Between 2015 and 2022, a high-rise building of the insurance company *Swiss Life* was built on the western neighboring plot,⁴³ in 2020 the competition for a high-rise building on the eastern neighboring plot of the previously mentioned real estate developer HIAG (with Balz Halter on the Board of Directors) was decided.⁴⁴

In the same year, Halter, together with *Stücheli Architekten* and in consultation with HIAG, drew up a feasibility study to test the potential of the site and to have the possibility of a high-rise building certified by the Building Committee of the City of Zurich.⁴⁵ In the minutes, the committee writes that it does not rule out a high-rise building on the site, but warns against demolishing the entire existing buildings and recommends developing a strategy that includes them.⁴⁶ Halter then had the Office for Urban Development confirm that this was sufficient approval for planning a high-rise building and that a further request at the Building Committee would not be necessary in the subsequent planning process.⁴⁷

From 2021 onwards, Halter started to formulate the competition in consultation with the Office for Urban Planning, deciding on a competition with 6 invited planning teams.⁴⁸

In July 2022 the Urban Development Department formulated a report as an appendix to the competition program in which they on the one hand describe how generally the residents in Altstetten have over the last years been replaced by higher-earning persons as well as

38 “Zürich 4D,” accessed December 6, 2024, https://3d.stzh.ch/appl/3d/zuerich_4d_extern/; Burri et al., *Halter: 1918-2018*, 65–75.

39 Righetti Partner Group AG, “IST-Bewertung Betriebsgebäude,” (Unpublished internal document) (Zürich, Bern, August 25, 2022).

40 Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Beschluss Des Stadtrats Vom 17. April 2024 Nr. 1175/2024,” 5.

41 Stadt Zürich, “Bauordnung Der Stadt Zürich Bau- Und Zonenordnung (BZO 2016).”

42 Jan de Vylder et al., eds., *Towards Transformation: The 33.3 % Attitude. Zurich* (Zürich: Triest, 2024), 38.

43 “Hochhaus Baslerstrasse - Galli Rudolf,” accessed December 7, 2024, <https://galli-rudolf.ch/de/projects/Hochhaus-Baslerstrasse>.

44 pool Architekten Zürich, “Wohnhochhaus Freihofstrasse,” accessed December 7, 2024, <https://www.poolarch.ch/projekte/2020/0428-freihofstrasse/>.

45 Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, Stücheli Architekten AG, and Studio Vulkan Landschaftsarchitektur AG, “Machbarkeitsstudie Entwicklung BFG-Areal Zürich, Altstetten,” (Unpublished internal document), November 13, 2020; Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Programm.”

46 Stadt Zürich, Amt für Städtebau, “Protokoll 19. Sitzung Baukollegium 2018 - 2022,” Protokoll (Unpublished internal document) (Zürich, November 13, 2020).

47 Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Nutzungskonzept Und Planungsvorgaben,” 7.

48 Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Beschluss Des Stadtrats Vom 17. April 2024 Nr. 1175/2024.”

49 Stadtentwicklung Zürich, “Sozialverträgliche Räumliche Entwicklung: Mitbericht Zum Studienauftrag Zum Areal Basler-, Freihof- Und Grundstrasse, Zürich-Altstetten” (Zürich, July 26, 2022), 2. “[...] dass doch weite Teile der Bevölkerung im Perimeter des BFG-Areals zu sehr vulnerablen Gruppen zählen und mit verschiedenen Hürden und Hindernissen auf dem Stadtzürcher Wohnungsmarkt konfrontiert sind.”

50 Stadtentwicklung Zürich, “Sozialverträgliche Räumliche Entwicklung: Mitbericht Zum Studienauftrag Zum Areal Basler-, Freihof- Und Grundstrasse, Zürich-Altstetten.”

51 Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “BFG-Areal: Kurzbericht: Bestandsanalyse Tragwerk,” (Unpublished internal document) (Schlieren, August 16, 2022); Righetti Partner Group AG, “Kurbewertung Substanzanalyse IST-Bewertung,” (Unpublished internal document) (Zürich, Bern, August 16, 2022); Righetti Partner Group AG, “IST-Bewertung Betriebsgebäude.”

how on this specific plot the residents have a lower socio-economic status and to a greater extent come from outside the EU and therefore have problems finding a new home in Zurich. Their analysis states “[...] that large sections of the population in the perimeter of the BFG-site belong to very vulnerable groups and are confronted with various hurdles and obstacles in the city of Zurich's housing market.” [translation by author].⁴⁹ The report therefore strongly recommends that a new construction project should be carried out in stages and with affordable apartments in order to keep residents on the property, but at the same time states that even with measures this will not be financially possible for most of the current residents and that they should be supported individually and offered replacement apartments. The report places the responsibility for this in the hands of the developer. It does not argue against demolition.⁵⁰

Building substance analysis from August 2022 show that although certain parts like the electrical system, radiators, ventilation and fittings in kitchens and bathrooms should be replaced, the structure of the building itself is in a good state, and a continued existence is well possible with repairs and renovations.⁵¹



At the beginning of October, Halter handed out the competition brief as well as the working documents to the planning teams. The introduction begins with the sentence: “In order to ensure, in addition to the political acceptance, the planning permission and marketability of the project [...] this document contains various special usage and planning requirements.” [translation by author].⁵² The Brief continues highly recommending a demolition of the existing buildings and makes it clear that a staging of construction is optional but not actually desired by the owners. In addition to a focus on architectural and quality design, particular emphasis is placed on the economic viability of the desired project.⁵³

In the jury decision in June 2023, the decision was made against the contribution by *Boltshauser Architekten* with landscape architects *Maurus Schifferli*, who partially preserved and added storeys to the existing buildings, due to fears of approval difficulties regarding room height and noise limits, as well as the lack of a large green space, and opted for the demolition-and-replacement concept by *Giuliani Hönger Architekten* and *Studio Vulkan Landschaftsarchitekten*. Together with the architectural firm *toblergmür*, they were awarded the contract for further work.⁵⁴

In January 2024 the residents’ contracts were terminated, with the first part of them having to move out by fall 2025, the second by fall 2027.⁵⁵ The planning application was handed in in the same month. The new buildings are to have 365 instead of the currently 312 apartments (plus eleven highly technologized micro-apartments by MOVEment, a sub firm in the Halter group), which comes to an increase by 64 apartments in comparison to a significantly higher increase in area.⁵⁶ To put the number of apartments in comparison, the feasibility study assumed a possible increase in the number by up to 100 additional apartments⁵⁷ and if one were to increase the existing buildings by one floor with the same apartment types, it would mean an increase of approx. 80 apartments.⁵⁸

Demolition is scheduled to begin in fall 2025 and construction should continue until 2030.⁵⁹

52 Halter AG
Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Nutzungskonzept Und Planungsvorgaben,” 3.
“Um nebst der politischen Akzeptanz die Bewilligungs- sowie Marktfähigkeit des Projekts [...] sicherzustellen [...] enthält dieses Dokument verschiedene besondere Nutzungs- und Planungsvorgaben.”

53 Halter AG
Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Programm”; Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “Zürich, BFG-Areal Digitaler Studienauftrag Auf Einladung: Nutzungskonzept Und Planungsvorgaben.”

54 Daniela Meyer, “Hoffigur, Zeile, Turm,” *KOMPLEX – Das Magazin der Halter Gruppe*, August 26, 2024, <https://www.komplex-magazin.ch/de/artikel/hoffigur-zeile-turm>.

55 Brun, “Neubauprojekt «Letzigarten»: 735 Mietenden Blüht Die Verdrängung”; Stadtrat Stadt Zürich, “Beschluss Des Stadtrats Vom 17. April 2024 Nr. 1175/2024.” In a personal conversation, one resident says that the earlier move-out date has been postponed to fall 2026. This information could not be verified.

56 Halter AG
Gesamtleistungen, Giuliani Hönger Architekten, and Toblergmür Architekten, “Baugesuch Letzigarten Zürich,” Baugesuch (Schlieren, Zürich, January 31, 2024); Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, Giuliani Hönger Architekten, and Toblergmür Architekten, “Nachweis Wohnungsspiegel Letzigarten, Zürich,” (Unpublished internal document) (Schlieren, Zürich, January 26, 2024); “MOVEment,” accessed December 8, 2024, <https://move-ment.ch/>; Halter AG and Architekturbüro Hans Koella AG, “Building Plan Set BG/BFG,” PDF-Scan, (Unpublished internal document), 1975-1984.

57 Halter AG
Gesamtleistungen, Stücheli Architekten AG, and Studio Vulkan Landschaftsarchitektur AG, “Machbarkeitsstudie Entwicklung BFG-Areal Zürich, Altstetten.”

58 Halter AG and Architekturbüro Hans Koella AG, “Building Plan Set BG/BFG.”

59 Halter AG
Gesamtleistungen, Giuliani Hönger Architekten, and Toblergmür Architekten, “Baugesuch Letzigarten Zürich.”

Interlude

Housing as a Commodity versus Housing as a Home

Commodification is the name for the general process by which the economic value of a thing comes to dominate its other uses.⁶⁰

Housing as a commodity is inherently bound to the capitalist system, being enabled firstly through the privatization of commons and later a separation of production and housing, that transformed it into an economic asset on the open market. In the globalized and digitalized market of today all aspects of housing (material and legal) serve as commodities in a condition of hyper-commodification and a system that is one of the most profitable areas of economy while magnifying and intensifying inequalities. Today’s mechanism that allow that are for one part a policy of “deregulation”, which does not mean that the state regulates less, but regulates in such a way that commodification becomes easier, and the process of “financialization”, profit accumulation through speculation, which on a side note also reinforces an alienation from owner to asset, the house. Dealing with the fact that people live in this asset is no longer necessary.⁶¹

Calls for a continued “deregulation” neglect, that housing can never be a fully liquid, exchangeable commodity because its value is rooted not only in a market that is established and enforced by the state and therefore never can be self-regulatory, but also deeply tied in physical space, social relationships, and essential human needs, which cannot be entirely abstracted for profit without causing displacement, inequality, and harm to human and societal well-being. This crisis of housing is therefore inherent to the structural logic of the system.⁶²

In contrast to the “exchange value” housing possesses, its “use value” plays a fundamental role for the people inhabiting it. Housing is essential to participating in social, political and economic life, shaping relationships with communities, determining treatment by the state and participation in social interactions and movements.⁶³ In the following stories, I will try to convey something of the intangible relationships that surround the estate, that are based on my personal observations and impressions gained from walks through the neighborhood and conversations with people:

60 David J. Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, Second edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2024), 14.

61 Madden and Marcuse, 13–22.

62 Madden and Marcuse, 26–30.

63 Madden and Marcuse, 12.



It’s a sunny October day as the tramway nr. 2 brings me from the center of Zurich along Badenerstrasse past Lochergut and Letzigrund stadium to the Freihofstrasse stop in just under 15 minutes. I get off and walk a few steps down the street of the same name with a view of the Käferberg at its end before turning left and starting my stroll through the housing estate.



Below linden and pine trees and next to a fountain, with the house façade in their back, 2 elderly people sit on a park bench chatting.



Facades and sun blinds have not been cleaned for a long time, but on the balconies there are flowers, pennants, birdhouses or a dartboard, clothes are being dried, there are shopping bags, a barbecue, balcony furniture or plant shelves, pictures hang on one back wall, a lantern on another and yet another is painted with a starry sky. Music or snatches of conversation in German, Italian, Czech or Portuguese can be heard through the open balcony doors.



A few meters lower down inside the estate, there are various types of green spaces, shielded from the surrounding streets, from introverted courtyards densely planted with trees to a long open space with lawns and individual large pines, beeches and bushes and bordered by the small gardens of the apartments at ground level, which are sometimes enclosed by small fences, sometimes by taller groups of bushes and individually appropriated by the residents. A man passes by with his dog, taking his route through the middle of the complex telling me how much he appreciates this public green space, which he otherwise finds is very rare in his neighborhood.



Office employees and workers sit on the benches eating the lunch they bought in the neighboring shopping center, while others carry their shopping bags home across the street.



A television team interviews a resident at her garden fence and a few people have gathered to watch. Among them is Elira (name changed) who tells us about her situation. She has been living in her small apartment for a few years now, with a garden that opens onto the green space. As a single mother, she was super happy when she got this apartment for such an affordable price. Her apartment is in a good state and it's a nice place to live, only the common washing machines have been neglected in recent times and the two little playgrounds have been removed, she says and talks about how her son always plays outside in the garden and on the lawn and has a place at the kindergarten right opposite.



She gets on really well with her neighbors, one helps each other out and looks after each other's kids, sometimes there's a picnic. In broken Italian, which she has taught herself, she talks to another neighbor and takes over his stroller, while he goes to make a phone call. It makes her sad to have to move out of an apartment where life is good, but in cases like this, with big developers, that happen all over the neighborhood, nothing can be done anyway she thinks. Halter has offered her support, but with the budget she has it has not led to anything, and she has not felt particularly comfortable in the endlessly long office corridors with consultation room after consultation room. She doesn't yet know where she will move but is quite certain she won't find anything comparable in the area.



She says goodbye and I also leave the interior of the estate and head for the busier Baslerstrasse. I slowly make my way back, walking along the street-front of the houses. Two grannies are chatting on a balcony and observe the street, and the view of the Ütliberg opens again and again between the houses.

Attempts to hold further in-depth conversations with residents that went beyond brief exchanges were unsuccessful, partly due to lack of time, partly due to language barriers, partly due to other reasons that can only be speculated about and might be a justified lack of capacity to devote energy to this, having to deal with other more significant problems, lack of trust, a feeling of powerlessness. Attempts to make contact via leaflets remained unanswered. Talks with the kindergartens did not materialize.

4

Obsolescence, Deciding what's Worth?



Letzi Area (section)
Homes along Baslerstrasse in the center, Letzipark to the north, Rudenzweg-estate to the south,
Swiss Life high-rise building to the left

Valuing the Existing

This chapter documents what is already existent on the plot, revalorizing what is currently being devalorized. The houses along Baslerstrasse are located in the *Letzi* area, which is characterized by a heterogeneous mix of industrial, commercial, sports, office and residential buildings from various eras. To the north, on the other side of Baslerstrasse, the apartments face the large *Letzigrund* shopping center. To the east and west are the aforementioned neighboring high-rise projects. To the south, the houses border the *Rudenzweg* terraced housing estate, a three-storey development from the late 1930s with the character of a garden city, which is shielded from Badenerstrasse, one of Zurich's main thoroughfares, by a row of four-storey buildings from the same time, both developed by Halter.⁶⁴

With 3 storeys facing the street and 4 storeys facing the inner green space, the housing estate in question is relatively low in view of its urban position. The appearance of the development is characterized by horizontal window formats with three casements, plastered façades, expressive exposed aggregate concrete balconies and orange or striped awnings.

The western part from the 1970s consists of light yellow plastered and geometrically clearly defined volumes. One part is made up of two row buildings, whose largely continuous façade facing Baslerstrasse is broken up at the corners and in the middle by bay windows and the characteristic balconies. Steps between the rows lead down to the lower green space. Towards this side, the apartments have a balcony layer along their entire length, while the ground-floor apartments have small gardens. The western part is completed by three compact building volumes deeper into the plot, which are connected by single-storey strips towards Grundstrasse. This part of the complex contains two kindergartens and a few other small businesses.

The eastern part from the 1980s is plastered in orange tones and is with its meandering shape less clear in its urban form. Towards Baslerstrasse, the façade is strongly modulated with bay windows, while all other sides are accentuated with individual balconies, except for one façade in the interior that remains smooth and quite monotonous without balconies. The shape of the building ends the long passageway inside the complex with a semi-open inner courtyard

64 Burri et al., *Halter: 1918-2018*, 37, 60; “Zürich 4D.”

and encloses another very intimate garden courtyard, which is richly overgrown with trees.

The apartments in the estate range from 1 to 4.5 rooms, 65% of which are 2 - 2.5 and 25% 3.5 room apartments. There is a wide variety of apartment types: those that open onto one side only, those that extend from one façade to the other, those that are on the mezzanine floor facing the street, those that open into the garden at a lower level, with different accesses such as 2, 3 or multiple apartments per stairwell or via internal corridor. In general, the apartments have a large living and dining area with an open or sometimes separate kitchen and other separate rooms of around 15 m2. Some rooms are somewhat small at 10-11 m2. The buildings do not have elevators.⁶⁵

An underground car park made of reinforced concrete lies partly beneath the site. The houses stand partly on the beams of this garage, partly on the natural ground and partly on a cavity that is accessible through the garage. The actual floor slab of the buildings is constructed as a so-called *Prenorm* slab (concrete-beam plus hollow brick slab) and the load-bearing walls on the upper floors are made of brick.⁶⁶ The flooring in the stairwells is PVC with the flight of stairs made of artificial stone slabs, in the entrance area and kitchen flooring is also PVC, in the rest of the apartments it’s parquet (partly replaced by laminate in recent years). The walls are plastered and painted.⁶⁷

A large number of plants, bushes and large shrubs grow in the park, as well as around 13 different tree species which, according to the tree survey, have a high potential in terms of stress resistance due to their young age.⁶⁸

65 Halter AG and Architekturbüro Hans Koella AG, “Building Plan Set BG/BFG.”

66 Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “BFG-Areal: Kurzbericht: Bestandsanalyse Tragwerk.”

67 Righetti Partner Group AG, “IST-Bewertung Betriebsgebäude”; Halter AG and Architekturbüro Hans Koella AG, “Building Plan Set BG/BFG.”

68 Wick Baumschnitt Baumpflege, “Baumaufnahme” (Effretikon, August 12, 2022).

69 Daniel M. Abramson, *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*, Paperback edition (Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

70 Abramson, 8–15.

71 Patrice Siegrist, “Neue Wohnungen in Zürich: Das dritte Hochhaus innerhalb von 500 Metern,” *Tages-Anzeiger*, February 4, 2024, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/neue-wohnungen-in-zuerich-jetzt-kommt-das-dritte-hochhaus-innerhalb-von-500-metern-524275942766>.

72 Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, “BFG-Areal: Kurzbericht: Bestandsanalyse Tragwerk.”

The Story of Neglect

In a case of demolition and replacement like this, obsolescence plays a strategic role. It can be understood as “[...] a process of devaluation imposed upon architecture [...]” and weaponized by developers.⁶⁹ Daniel M. Abramson argues that while historically durability defined the built environment for a long time, only in the 20th century did obsolescence become the norm. During the rise of capitalism, depreciation and obsolescence emerged as concepts to manage financial risk. While depreciation more or less describes the actual wear and tear of an item, obsolescence is solely concerned with a projected loss of value resulting from the possibility to replace the item with a more worth-bringing one. It is therefore also mostly rhetorical and not based on the real lifespans of the building and its components.⁷⁰

Halter states that the decision to demolish and newly build was based on the fact that the fabric of the building is in considerable need of renovation with a refurbishment being disproportionately expensive and resource-intensive.⁷¹ In the following the results that the analyses of the building substance have produced will be summarized.

The analysis carried out by Halter AG is based on a visual inspection as well as the engineer’s plan set and is focused mainly on the supporting structure of the underground car park and the basement levels which they desired to preserve. It describes a solid, high-quality, sustainable reinforced concrete construction, worth preserving, without visible damage and only the need for cosmetic work. Only the 1.5 cm covering of the reinforcement is less than the current 2 cm required for fire protection reasons, but it is very likely that the components are still sufficiently resistant and can be qualified by measurement. To continue, mathematical verifications and measurements would have to be carried out by taking soundings.⁷²

The analysis by Righetti Partner Group AG confirms that the floor slab, walls, columns, ceilings and roof will last another 40 years and only require minor refurbishment. The façade would have to be renovated and the windows and doors no longer meet today's building physics standards. The roof skin of one building has already been renovated, the others still have a useful life of 5 years and would need to be completely renovated. Parts of the interior fit-out need



Graffiti on the façade

to be repaired, floors cleaned, walls painted and individual kitchen appliances replaced. It should be aimed towards a replacement of the electrical system, radiators, as well as ventilation and fittings in kitchens and bathrooms.⁷³

This shows that although the usual maintenance measures to be carried out on a building were neglected, a continued existence of the building substance, renovated and repaired, is very well possible, even absolutely necessary when resource consumption and emissions come into play. A large proportion of emissions and energy consumption is attributable to the extraction of materials and the construction of a building. The construction of an average new building can therefore generate more greenhouse gases than its operation over its entire service life.⁷⁴ Persistent demolitions also contributes to the fact that 84% of waste in Switzerland comes from the construction industry, with over 500 kg of construction waste per second.⁷⁵

Abramson argues that the concept of obsolescence took hold in the built environment from the 1900s on, because it serves as a key tool in capitalism's endless growth spiral, managing devaluation in order to replace and reinvest. Its depiction and propagation as bringing the progressive new and better, helps to cope with the loss that comes along.⁷⁶ Another twisted aspect that comes with obsolescence is that it's hard to measure intangible, social, emotional, cultural qualities of a neighborhood or residential house and their inhabitants in comparison to "how many broken windows [can] be counted."⁷⁷ Neil Smith asserts that vandalism and strategic neglect of a property can be used by owners as a strategy to decrease the value and lay the economic foundation to make redevelopment and gentrification profitable, see the aforementioned rent gap.⁷⁸

An article in the Halter's own magazine paints a picture of a housing complex that is getting on in years, has lost its luster, is dominated by concrete and asphalt and no longer invites one to spend time there.⁷⁹ Façade and sun blinds have not been cleaned or replaced since forever, graffiti is being left on clearly visible, lights in the entrance are partly not working and a resident tells me that nobody takes care of the broken washing machines.

73 Righetti Partner Group AG, "Kurzbewertung Substanzanalyse IST-Bewertung"; Righetti Partner Group AG, "IST-Bewertung Betriebsgebäude."

74 Peter Näf et al., "Klimapositives Bauen Ein Beitrag Zum Pariser Absenkpfad" (Basel, November 2021).

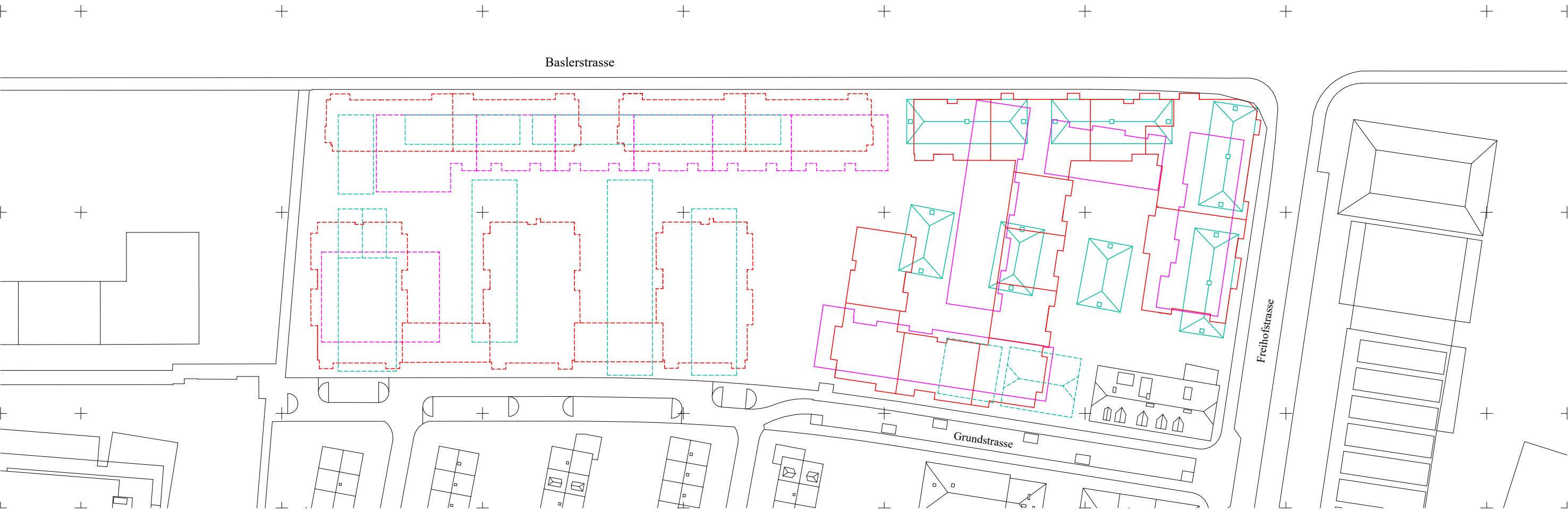
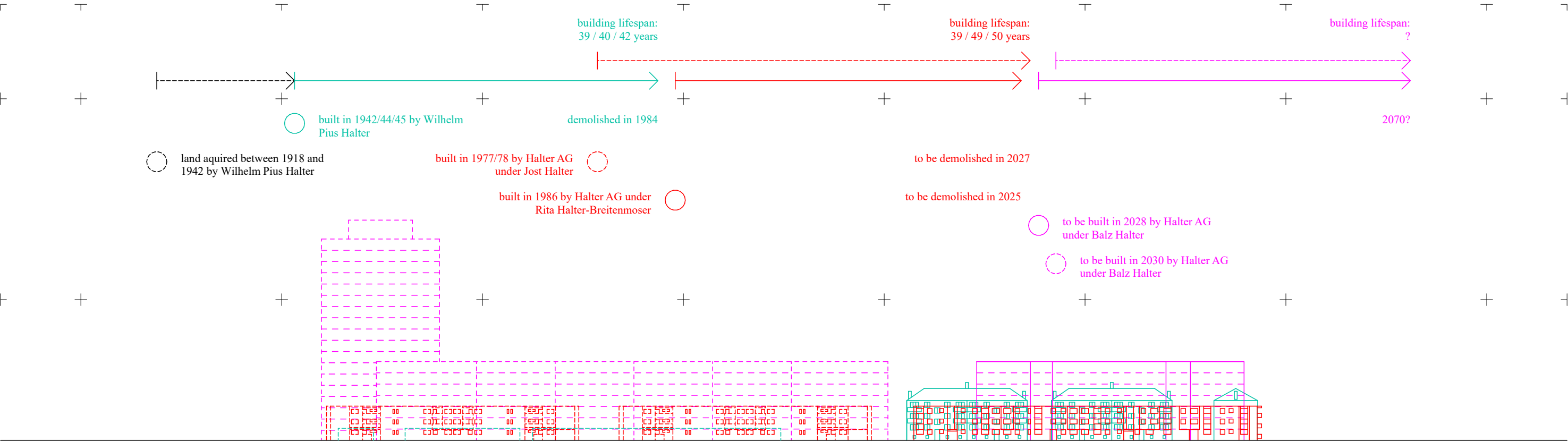
75 Countdown2030, "Die Schweiz: Ein Abriss in 3D," accessed January 10, 2025, <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=McyRAtrVdyQ>.

76 Abramson, *Obsolescence*, 35–36.

77 Abramson, 56.

78 Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 60–65.

79 Meyer, "Hoffigur, Zeile, Turm."





Road junction Basler- Freihofstrasse, ca. 1983, buildings demolished in 1984

An Infinite Cycle of Replacement

This declared obsolescence culminates in a cycle of recurring demolition and replacement and thus a recapitalization of one and the same plot. Several historical Photographs (and their metadata) from the building history archive Zurich⁸⁰ and an observation of historical aerial photos⁸¹ reveal 7 three to four residential buildings in the eastern part of the plot with hip roofs, spacious balconies, high stories and a small shop facing the road junction Basler- Freihofstrasse, that were built between 1942 and 45 by Wilhelm Pius Halter.

Around 40 years later in 1984 (long before a building reaches the end of its life cycle) they were demolished to be replaced by the eastern half of the apartment complex still standing today. At this time the new buildings were advertised as modern living next to the newly opened shopping center *Letzipark*,⁸² which was part of a new form of consumption typical of that time, with the emergence of shopping malls that went hand in hand with “modernization” and new construction activity in the areas surrounding them.⁸³

Fast forward another 40-50 years to today and again (long before the buildings have reached the end of their lifecycle) they are rendered obsolete, to be replaced with supposedly more dense, more ecological buildings. In parallel, the Letzipark-center is undergoing a complete renovation and modernization, with new stores, new restaurants and new, more attractive recreational areas to come⁸⁴ for a new clientele.

The recurring pattern of demolition and replacement raises concerns about guarantees of durability and pressing questions if the new buildings will face a similar fate of obsolescence by 2070.

80 Vienny Alfons, *Freihofstrasse*, photography, Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich (BAZ), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://baz.e-pics.ethz.ch/#>; unknown, *Freihofstrasse*, photography, ca 1983, Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich (BAZ), <https://baz.e-pics.ethz.ch/#>; Welti Gebrüder, *Freihofstrasse, Unterer Teil*, photography, ca 1949, Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich (BAZ), <https://baz.e-pics.ethz.ch/#>; unknown, *Baslerstrasse*, photography, ca 1983, Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich (BAZ), <https://baz.e-pics.ethz.ch/#>.

81 Bundesamt für Landestopografie swisstopo, “Zeitreise - Luftbilder,” accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.swisstopo.admin.ch/de/zeitreise-luftbilder>.

82 Meyer, “Hoffigur, Zeile, Turm.”

83 Zur Geschichte der Schweizer Shoppingcenter: 1500 Parkplätze – und jeden Tag Abendverkauf, interview by Daniela Janser and Fabian Furter, February 26, 2020, <https://www.woz.ch/!5Q2X25MNSXC1>.

84 “Umbau - Letzipark,” accessed January 12, 2025, <https://letzipark.ch/de/aktuelles/umbau-197>.



Planned replacement building

The Supposedly Newer, Better, Denser

The replacement project submitted by Halter together with Giuliani Hönger and Toblergmür architects and Studio Vulkan landscape architects envisages a 7-storey meander building instead of the current meander building, a long 7-storey plus residential basement row building instead of the current two row buildings and a 17-storey high-rise building instead of one of the three compact buildings. A large green open space is to be created in place of the other two compact buildings. Their argument is based on a significantly improved urban design, thanks to the set-back rows on Baslerstrasse, with more potential for a green street space, an improved public square at the intersection of Baslerstrasse and Freihofstrasse, which is to be given a significant role in public life, and the enlarged green space with an impact on the climate.⁸⁵

Halter states that they take responsibility for people and the environment.⁸⁶ In this case they say that they assume their social responsibility by providing 20% more flats.⁸⁷ They are also changing the apartment index to include fewer of the existing 2 to 2.5-room apartments, which currently make up 65% of the apartments and, according to Halter, offer too little space for “today's demands”. In future, the 2.5-room type is to be reduced to 25% and more 3.5 and 4.5-room apartments (30% each) as well as a few 1.5-, 5.5- and 6.5-room apartments will be offered. On the one hand, according to them this would be a qualitative densification because people nowadays would need more space to live in, which is why they will only offer 20% more apartments but 50% more living area, and on the other hand, a greater mix in types would lead to a greater social mixing. Still, they would not actively manage occupancy per apartment type, as is common in cooperatives.⁸⁸

However, new replacement buildings tend to displace current residents and predominantly low-income foreign residents, those with temporary residence permits and single parents, replacing them with higher-earning groups.⁸⁹ It is therefore highly doubtful that the provision of various types of apartments alone would lead to a social mixing. The sharp rise in residential space consumption between 1980 and today (generally, but also in Zurich)⁹⁰ also brings with it issues of social inequality, with richer people taking up more living space and

85 Meyer, “Hoffigur, Zeile, Turm.”

86 “Halter AG - Der Entwickler,” accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.halter.ch/>.

87 Brun, “Neubauprojekt «Letzigarten»: 735 Mietenden Blüht Die Verdrängung.”

88 Project Manager, Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, in conversation with the author, December 9, 2024; Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, Giuliani Hönger Architekten, and Toblergmür Architekten, “Nachweis Wohnungsspiegel Letzigarten, Zürich.”

89 Kaufmann et al., “Erkenntnisse zum aktuellen Wohnungsnotstand.”

90 Stadt Zürich, “Belegung und Wohnflächenkonsum,” accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/politik-und-verwaltung/statistik-und-daten/daten/bauen-und-wohnen/wohnungen/belegung-und-wohnflaechenkonsum.html>.

thus, from an ecological perspective also consume more resources while poorer people are being forced to use less and less space. Additionally in terms of environmental justice, richer people, with their resource consumption contributing more to the environmental crisis, are then also the ones that are able to protect themselves better from it.⁹¹ Or in this case even benefit from the newly to be created green space and its improved urban climate.

With regard to ecology, Halter states that they have carefully examined the demolition and loss of the embodied energy caused by the demolition, but have come to the conclusion, after weighing up hard and soft factors, that the advantages of the new urban design and the enlarged open space would outweigh the negative consequences of the demolition. According to them, this added value would not have been possible if the existing building had been retained, in addition to the technical approval risks regarding minimum room height and noise emissions. They will also keep a large part of the parking garage and try to reuse existing ceiling slabs in the new building. It also plays a role, they say that the majority of the proposals submitted by the architectural teams came to the conclusion that the existing building was not worth preserving.⁹² Here it is worth recalling the competition brief, which clearly recommended demolition.

Of course, the new green space can make an important ecological contribution, but it will also destroy a currently existing ecosystem with plants, animals and trees for the duration of the construction site and the time that the new plants need to grow and develop. In view of the short lifespan of real estate projects, the energy consumption that a construction of a new building consumes and an uncertain future, such an undertaking should be viewed critically.

Confronted with the repeated demolition of the property, Halter assures that the contemporary construction of the new building in terms of building services, statics, system separation and flexible floor plans will facilitate future renovations and thus ensure a more durable and resilient building.⁹³ With the previously described decision-making, interpretation and public presentation sovereignty that a large real estate developer has, this argument does not seem to offer any particular security, especially with regard to the described further densification goals of the city of Zurich.

A discussion with the architects did not materialize.

91 Anton Brokow-Loga and Miriam Neßler, “Eine Frage Der Flächengerechtigkeit!: Kommentar Zu Lisa Vollmer Und Boris Michel „Wohnen in Der Klimakrise. Die Wohnungsfrage Als Ökologische Frage“,” *Sub|urban. Zeitschrift Für Kritische Stadtforschung* 8, no. 1/2 (April 24, 2020): 183–92, <https://doi.org/10.36900/suburban.v8i1/2.572>.

92 Project Manager, Halter AG Gesamtleistungen, in conversation with the author.

93 Project Manager, Halter AG Gesamtleistungen.

94 Burri et al., *Halter: 1918-2018*, 60.

95 “Tiefgarage in Zürich mieten | Flatfox,” accessed December 9, 2024, <https://flatfox.ch/de/wohnung/garage-kelchweg-1-3-8048-zurich/1031089/>.

96 “GIS-Browser Zürich, Eigentumsauskunft,” accessed January 10, 2025, <https://maps.zh.ch/>

97 Erwin Küenzi, *Kelchweg* 3, photography, ca 1983, Baugeschichtliches Archiv Zürich (BAZ), <https://baz.e-pics.ethz.ch/#>.

98 See also: Herrligstrasse 20-22, Badenerstrasse 807-13, Badenerstrasse 825-31.

99 Serge Fayet, in conversation with the author, December 2, 2024.

Other Ways

At *Kelchweg* 1-3 stands an apartment building that was built in 1979 by Halter⁹⁴ and is presumably still managed⁹⁵ although no longer owned by them according to the land register⁹⁶ and whose archive photographs⁹⁷ with the characteristic exposed aggregate concrete balconies, yellow plastered façades, three-light windows and other visual features suggest that it was very probably built in the very same construction method as the houses along Baslerstrasse. It is one of a series of buildings on properties in Altstetten that can be associated with Halter and that were built in the same style in the 1970s and 80s.⁹⁸

The building in Kelchweg was renovated in 2014 by *Hemmi Fayet Architekten*, apartments were modernized and refurbished, building services were renewed, the façade was insulated and an attic floor with terraces and higher rental value was added. The renovation was a balancing act between how much should be done and which components should not be touched so that they could continue to benefit from the protection of existing buildings (*Bestandesschutz*), which exempts them from current standards. This protection would also apply to ceilings, for example, if they were lower than the 2.4 m prescribed for residential buildings. While there are always questions about comfort in buildings from this period, e.g. regarding the low sound insulation between the floors due to the thin concrete ceilings, or problems with harmful substances in adhesives or insulation, the renovation was very possible. Furthermore, renovation and extension work was carried out in stages and the tenants were able to rotate flats and stay within the building. This also slowed down a rent increase that could have been significantly higher if the tenants had been replaced by new ones.⁹⁹

This is one, but because of the consistency of the building fabric in comparison with the estate in question, a very striking example of how a renovation, which should be self-evident, of these buildings from the 1970s and 80s is very well possible, preserves the embodied energy of the existing building and is more socially just.

However, *other ways* does not only involve whether refurbishment of the existing building is possible. Rather, it is strongly linked to all actors who are engaged in the civil struggle for affordable housing and who are resisting housing as a commodity. It is as well a question of

who can afford to fight, who is visible and who is not.

Stahel conveys in great detail the long history and broad civil-political struggle for housing on which Zurich looks back and that left a lasting influence on its urban development, with its variety of forms like squatting, citizens' initiatives, alternative forms of housing, activism and demonstrations, neighborhood work as well as parliamentary opposition; all resisting against the negative consequences of economically prioritized planning. Even if concrete struggles were merely won or projects remained insular in character, the author argues that it is precisely the long-term effect of diverse forms of civil action in ongoing urban and housing policy movements that has led to important changes towards decommodification, tenant protection and democratization in Zurich's urban planning, highlighting the importance of its consistent continuation.¹⁰⁰

It should also be mentioned, however, that in the case of the numerous and ongoing *Leerkündigungen*¹⁰¹ in Zurich with major and fierce resistance from tenants, political reactions often failed to materialize and it was only the notice of termination of the *Sugus*-houses, shortly before Christmas, centrally located, by a well-known architect, with affected tenants who earn well and are well connected, that led to the city taking a public stand and now even considering buying the affected houses.¹⁰²

In Switzerland, due to systemic power imbalances, the strong protection of private property and its titleholders and a limited financial and legal standing of tenants, civic struggle to resist displacement faces major barriers.¹⁰³

100 Thomas Stahel, “Wo-Wo-Wonige! : Stadt-Und Wohnpolitische Bewegungen in Zürich Nach 1968” (University of Zurich, 2006), 233–41, <https://doi.org/10.5167/UZH-163425>. For examples see the entire work; For current successes of tenant movements see: Mieten-Marta, “Zürcher Mieter*innenbewegung: Widerstand lohnt sich!,” *Mieten-Marta* (blog), May 22, 2024, <https://mieten-marta.ch/2024/zuercher-mieterinnenbewegung-widerstand-lohnt-sich/>.

101 Termination in which the entire tenancy of one or more houses is terminated.

102 Isabel Brun, “Leerkündigungen bei den Sugus-Häusern – und plötzlich passiert etwas,” December 11, 2024, <https://tsri.ch/a/leerkuendigungen-in-zuerich-die-sugus-haeuser-sind-kein-einzelfall-kreis-4>; Beat Metzler and Patrice Siegrist, “Analyse zur Wohnungsnot: Warum die Sugus-Häuser zum Symbol der Wohnungskrise werden,” *Tages-Anzeiger*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/warum-die-sugus-haeuser-zum-symbol-der-wohnungskrise-werden-248404004482>; Patrice Siegrist, “Wohnungsnot in Zürich: Der neue Aktivismus der Stadtpräsidentin,” *Tages-Anzeiger*, December 24, 2024, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/sugus-haeuser-zuerich-der-neue-aktivismus-von-corine-mauch-466034493804>.

103 Gabriela Debrunner, *The Business of Densification: Governing Land for Social Sustainability in Housing* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2024), 251–53.



Mieten-Marta, excerpt from open letter to Halter, Instagram post

Conclusion: Resisting Demolition, Towards Another Future

The contemporary world already possesses the technical capacity and material resources to solve the housing problem. The question is whether all who are badly served by the status quo can unite to create a truly humane system, where housing is not real estate but is, instead, home.¹⁰⁴

The imminent demolition of the homes along Baslerstrasse finds itself at the heart of a system that is designed to erase and replace, perpetuating cycles of extraction and displacement. Densification, as currently enacted - in an interplay of policies and private-public collaboration and framed as progress and necessity for achieving housing, climate, and urban planning goals - considers the displacement of communities and the destruction of embodied energy as necessary and accepted, even if driving social and environmental harm.

The city's role in facilitating these replacement projects despite its stated commitment to providing affordable housing reflects a broader trend that prioritizes economic growth over social sustainability. Gentrification becomes a seemingly accepted part of public policies, causing serious socio-economic consequences and an urban development that is (socially) not sustainable, calling for a fundamental shift in urban governance and policy making.¹⁰⁵

In housing, the role of institutions becomes crucial for explaining exclusion and unjust societal structures. Moreover, it demonstrates that the redefinition and redistribution of the rights of private property and the profit rate derivative entails a revolution in political-economic practices. Political struggles towards decommodification, and even of freedom itself, move center-stage in the search for alternatives.¹⁰⁶

Reimagining the densification of urban space requires the confrontation with housing both as a commodity as well as a fundamental human right. Thereby, the right to housing, “[...] its lived, universally

104 Madden and Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing*, 139.

105 Debrunner, *The Business of Densification*, 247–246.

106 Debrunner, 264.

107 Madden and Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing*, 12, 126–39.

necessary, social dimension, and its identity as home [...]” needs persistent and continuous defending, through actions directed towards decommodification, privileging inhabitants, democratizing housing management, allying struggles and resistance and experimenting with alternative forms of housing, tenure and construction.¹⁰⁷

Moreover, this theoretical statement shows that the homes along Baslerstrasse are by no means inherently obsolete and instead embody and constitute fabrics, values and potentials that have grown and constituted themselves over the last half century, be they social, ecological or resource-related. Their continued existence is not merely feasible but essential to fostering equitable, sustainable urban futures that reject the continued cycle of extraction and erasure. Their continuation could offer a counter-narrative to the logic of the planned obsolescence that currently underpins the practice.

Nonetheless, working with the existing will require a discussion about comfort and space consumption as well as critically questioning standards and requirements. Caring for the environment for example should not only mean complying with energy guidelines but also considering a place over its whole life cycle of construction, operation and demolition. It demands seeing buildings not only as an isolated project, but as nodes within broader ecological and social cycles. Buildings that by nature extract and consume resources on a finite planet become intrinsically more ecological the longer these resources remain bound in the building.

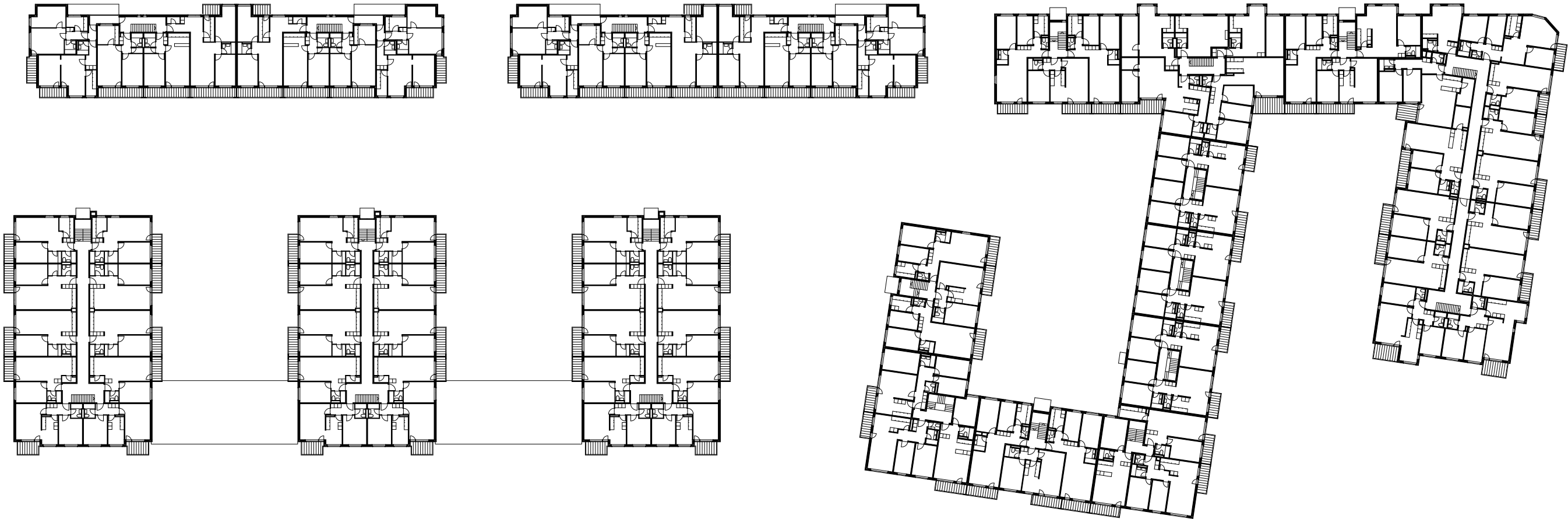
This statement also shows which living space is more likely to be fought for, and that demolition is more likely to be accepted if the building in question is considered banal, outdated and seemingly unsightly. However, it argues that it is *precisely* these places that need to be defended. Addressing, keeping and working with what is existing must become the starting point and standard in shifting towards repair, adaption and care.

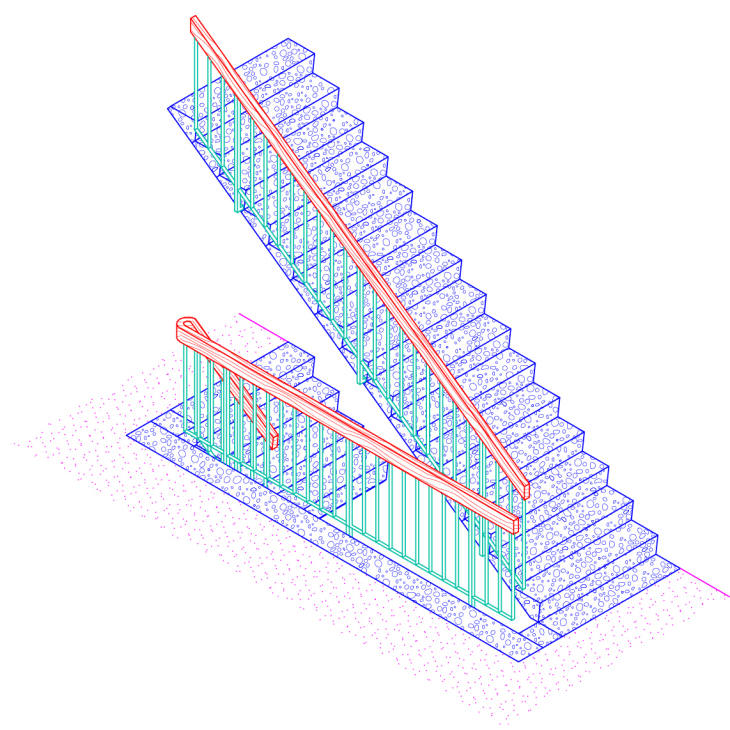
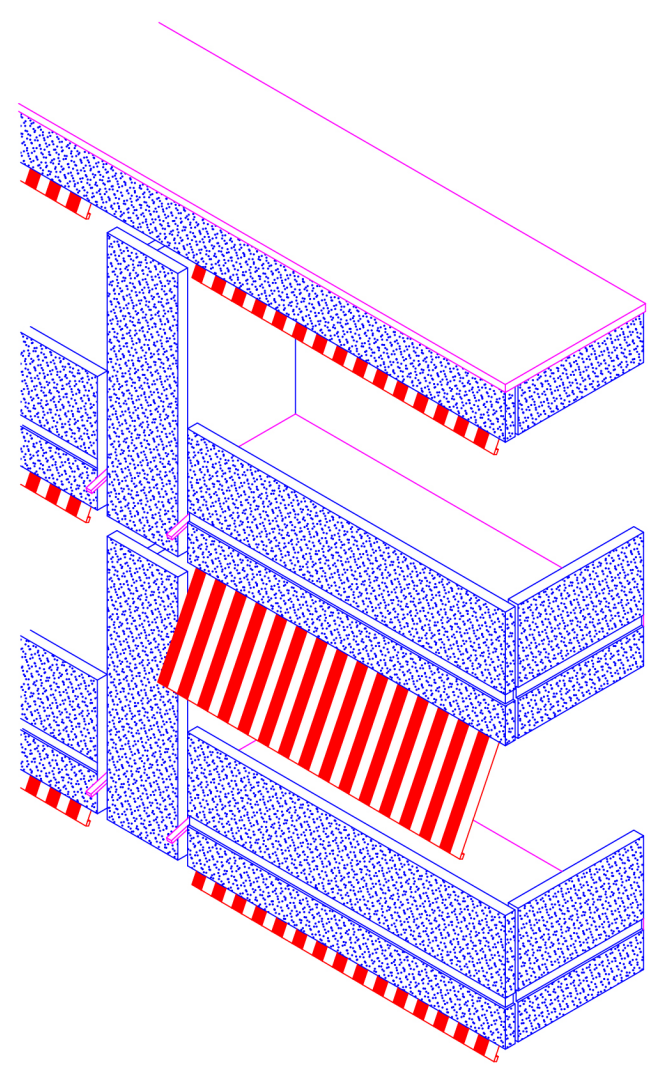
Ultimately it means that demolition must be resisted. Struggling against the erasure of the homes along Baslerstrasse was never just about preserving buildings.

Appendix



























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