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# Counterproposals in Zurich: Constructive Criticism of Destructive Practices by ZAS, ZAS*, and their Accomplices

*Milena Buchwalder, Ella Eßlinger, Sonja Flury, Jens Knöpfel, Blanka Major, Meghan Rolvien as part of ZAS**

**Abstract:** In 1959, a group of architects in Zurich began to organize themselves into an association called ZAS (Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe für Städtebau [Zurich Working Group for Urban Planning]). The group, which stayed active until the late 1980s consisted of figures such as Fritz Schwarz, Beate Schnitter, Manuel Pauli and Eduard Neuenschwander. ZAS always acted with a clear political stance – never just by opposing, but by making constructive counterproposals. In 2021, ZAS* was formed as a reactivation of ZAS. In the last four years, ZAS* developed different strategies to enter the processes of political decision-making on urban transformation, e.g. through counterproposals. The counterproposals from ZAS, ZAS* and their accomplices presented in this article show that when architects combine their professional and civic agency, they can directly shape the material and political conditions of democratic practice in the built environment. In the Swiss context of direct democracy, such interventions have the potential to transform both spatial planning and urban life. Through collaborative design, speculative practice, and civic engagement, we aim to reposition architectural work as a means of resistance and transformation. In times of ecological urgency and social fragmentation, the counterproposal is not merely an act of opposition; it is an essential instrument for reimagining and reclaiming the future of our cities.

**Keywords:** Civic Engagement; Collective Knowledge; Complicity; Counterproposal; Demolition; Democratization of Planning Procedures; Re-use; Speculative Practice.

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As members of ZAS*, we seek to understand how architects might move beyond applying their expertise in design, construction, and architectural history solely in response to competition briefs or commissions. This leads us to question how, as active citizens, architects might proactively put to use their professional knowledge, so that they may advocate for communal interests, explore alternative visions for preserving a city's unique qualities, and contribute to a more democratic and ecologically responsible approach to urban development.

In 2021, the City of Zurich experienced an unprecedented wave of housing demolition. Approximately 1770 flats were torn down that year alone – (Stadt Zürich 2022). Most of the apartments lost were »low-rent units in good condition, which [were] then substituted by larger dwellings unaffordable to the previous tenants« (Malterre-Barthes 2025: 42). These drastic actions, typical of Zurich's current approach to spatial development, must be understood in the context of a 2014 revision to the *Raumplanungsgesetz* [Swiss Spatial Planning Act] (Bundesamt für Raumentwicklung, ARE). This updated piece of legislation requires that urban growth direct itself inwards. Instead of expanding into undeveloped land, cities must increase density within their existing built-up areas. In cities like Zurich, where available land is already scarce, this policy of densification has significantly increased pressure on the existing building stock (DeVylder et al. 2024: 37f). To achieve densification, cities too often turn to *Ersatzneubau* [replacement construction], or in other words, tearing down old buildings and replacing them with new structures. In fact, Zurich's Municipal Structure Plan[1] explicitly endorses *Ersatzneubau* as both »desired« and »necessary.« (Kommunaler Richtplan, Zürich 2021). However, in practice, replacement construction does little to achieve its goal of easing the existing housing shortage.[2] The demolition affects not only residential buildings; the prevailing *tabula rasa* approach by real estate developers has brought sweeping changes to the general urban fabric, with significant political, economic, and social implications (DeVylder et al. 2024: 35).

While the current trend of demolition in Zurich is rightfully concerning, the city's contentious erasure of urban fabric is not a new phenomenon.

1 The municipal structure plan [Kommunaler Richtplan] is a strategic planning instrument that defines and coordinates the long-term spatial development of a municipality.

2 According to the Federal Office for Housing [Bundesamt für Wohnungswesen BWO], a housing shortage is said to exist when the vacancy rate falls below 1 percent. In Zurich, the current vacancy rate is just 0.7%.

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Attempts by the city to remove buildings and neighborhoods that foster social diversity and affordability have historically provoked resistance, not only from tenants but also from political actors. Local protest movements such as »Globuskrawall«[3] in the late 1960s and the »Opernhauskrawalle«[4] in the 1980s were pivotal moments. They gave the younger generation a voice, as well as bringing about broader institutional awareness of civic participation in urban planning processes. Such events spawned a range of alternative forms of citizen engagement with urban planning, including a specific form of practice of particular interest to us: the counterproposal.

Counterproposals, typically emerging from activist and grassroots networks, not only challenge demolition practices but also proactively propose alternative spatial practices. They generate interventions which envision different urban futures, such as adaptive reuse instead of demolition in the face of planning, housing, and equity crises. Unlike official proposals put forward by institutions, political bodies, or private developers, counterproposals arise from informal, often ad hoc collectives operating without official authority. To gain a greater influence, these groups often include those directly affected by redevelopment, as well as individuals with deep local knowledge or professional expertise. (fig. 1)

With case studies from the 1960s, the 1970s, and the present, respectively, this article examines three significant examples of counterproposal movements in Zurich. Despite differences in scope and context, they share methods, actors, and forms of engagement with planning authorities. Moving gradually from the city center to the outskirts, all three cases unfold within Switzerland's system of direct democracy, which allows citizens to propose constitutional changes or challenge legislation through popular

3 On the night of June 29, 1968, young demonstrators and police clashed for hours in the streets of Zurich. The trigger for the confrontation was a demand to establish an autonomous youth center in the temporary structure of the former department store of *Globus*. (Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, 2018)

4 In May 1980, young people protested the allocation of 60 million CHF for the renovation of the Zurich Opera House, while demands for an autonomous youth center remained unmet. This marked the beginning of a wave of protests that would continue for the next two years.

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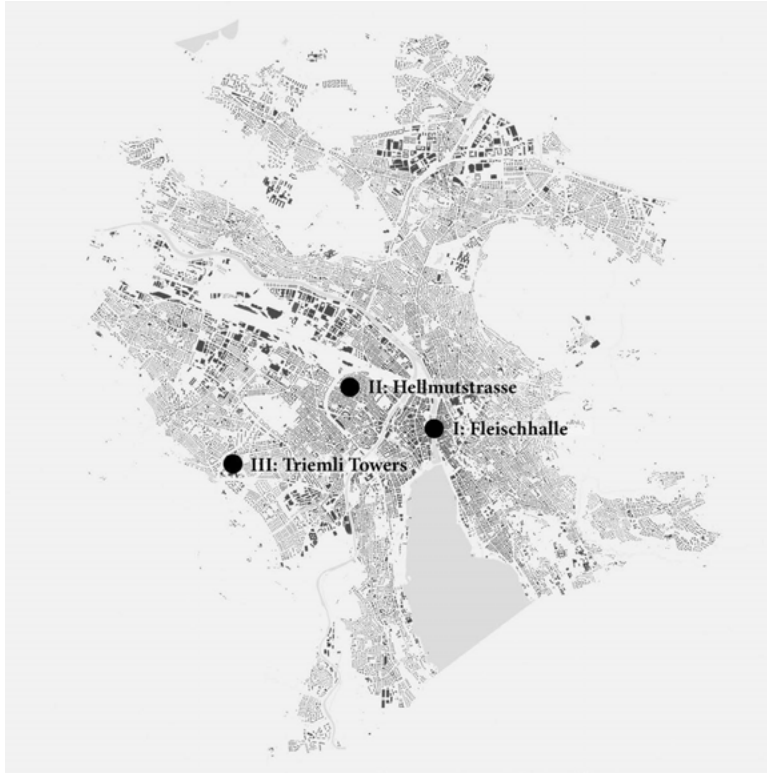


*1.*
*Map of Zurich with three Case Studies, ZAS*.*

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initiatives[5] and referenda[6] (Die Bundesversammlung – Das Schweizer Parlament: Parlamentsporträt n.d.). These policy instruments are deeply embedded in Swiss civic culture. In fact, Swiss constitutional law includes the *Gegenentwurf* [counterproposal] as an official instrument of parliament for putting forward alternatives to popular initiatives submitted by citizens (Die Bundesversammlung – Das Schweizer Parlament: Parlamentswörterbuch n.d.). Importantly, while the Swiss political system allows citizens to vote on proposals for major public development, it currently offers no such mechanism for contesting demolition. When a new development is proposed, the existing building on the site and its demolition are usually omitted from the proposal description or presented as a necessary, non-negotiable step to meet the brief. In this context, a principled vote for more housing can become an inadvertent mandate for demolition. Architects' political engagement with urban development is generally limited to either their role as commissioned designers of projects (where their influence is limited), or their civic right to vote. Proposing an actual alternative to demolition requires inserting one's agenda much earlier in the decision-making process. The three examples examined below demonstrate how architects, alongside their fellow citizens, have used counterproposals to put forward ideas at an early stage to avert unnecessary demolition.

In the section titled »Reprogramming,« we explore how the Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe für Städtebau (ZAS) [Zurich Working Group for Urban Planning], an association of recently graduated architects active between 1959-1989, occupied the city's historic butchers' market building, the *Fleischhalle*, in the 1960s to protest its planned demolition and spark public dialogue. »Anticipating« looks at the 1970s struggle over a collection of historic residential and commercial buildings at *Hellmutstrasse* (»Hellmi«), where inhabitants, activists, and architects collaborated to halt the buildings' destruction. Their work shows how strategic, long-term action can reshape a building or neighborhood's fate, and contribute to conserving resources. Finally, in the section »Speculating,« we reflect on our own recent actions as architects and citizens to challenge the planned demolition of Zurich's

5 In Switzerland, citizens can propose changes to the Federal Constitution through a Federal Popular Initiative.

6 In Switzerland, referendums allow the public to approve or reject decisions made by parliament. Citizens vote directly on a proposed law or policy.

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Triemli Towers[7], where we initiated a »speculative idea competition« to gather multiple counterproposals to the towers' destruction.

Each counterproposal case study is examined through the following questions:

- What were the urgencies in city planning of the time?
- What was the official planning strategy?
- What were the reasons to oppose the initial planning strategy?
- What did the counterproposal suggest?
- What media and methods were used to develop and present the counter-proposal?
- And, lastly, what results were achieved through these counter-strategies, and what were their effects?

Our interest in the three counterproposals presented – from a spontaneous reuse project to a political initiative – did not begin as an academic pursuit. Instead, we encountered these projects through our own activist engagement – discovering them in archives, through media reports, or by word-of-mouth among peers. Researching them proved challenging: Sorting mechanisms of architectural archives often omit the political documents needed to understand the broader planning context, while political records lack visual or spatial material. In some cases, such as the »Hellmi« project, direct conversations with those involved were crucial to reconstructing their narratives. By analyzing the organizational strategies, media, and outcomes of these counterproposal movements, we aim to better understand and document their political and architectural significance and speculate on how such initiatives might continue to shape urban futures today.

7 Three concrete high-rise buildings constructed by the city in 1971 as accommodation for the Triemli Hospital, with a total of 750 rooms.

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## Reprogramming

### Case I Limmat-Galerie: Toward Public Space instead of Traffic Infrastructure (fig. 2)

In 1962, the number of Zurich's inhabitants reached an all-time peak that has only been surpassed recently in 2023 (Stadt Zürich/Bevölkerungsentwicklung 2025). At this time, much like other major European cities built around medieval centers, Zurich was struggling to deal with its rapidly growing population. The resulting densification and expansion of the urban fabric led in turn to increased traffic congestion and air pollution. The widespread belief was that Zurich needed to be modernised, and that this was best achieved by expanding and segregating automobile infrastructure (Schwyn 1960: 827). However, the historical center of Zurich, with its narrow streets and its many protected historic buildings, posed a big challenge to this aim.

In October 1958, the political party *Landesrings der Unabhängigen* handed in the *Motion »Freie Limmat«*[8] demanding that Zurich's disused historic butchers' market building, the *Fleischhalle*, that stood on the river Limmat right next to the *Ratshaus*[9], *Hauptwache*[10] and the spacious *Rathausbrücke*[11], should be demolished to unblock the view to the Alps from the historical city center. The *Fleischhalle*, built in the Byzantine style in 1866 by the then-city architect Ludwig Hanhart, was not considered worthy of heritage protection by the standards of the time and was only used by a small number of vendors by the 1950s[12]. The *Motion »Freie Limmat«* included a second demand, which was to use the newly won space to widen the street, thereby connecting two

8 »Freie Limmat« translates to »Free Limmat.« The Limmat is the main river flowing out of Lake Zurich and through the historical city center.

9 Zurich's city hall, where the municipal and cantonal council meet to this day.

10 Zurich's historical main guardhouse.

11 Rathausbrücke »city hall bridge« is a wide, square-like bridge at the narrowest part of the river Limmat, that connects both parts of the historical old town. It hosts markets to this day and is also called *Gemüsebrücke* colloquially. Furthermore, it is also an important site for protests such as the recent »Wohndemo« – the demonstration for the right to affordable living space on the April 5, 2025. https://wohndemo.ch/, accessed October 8, 2025.

12 Since the late Middle Ages, meat was only allowed to be sold in the city's butchery. In the same year the Fleischhalle was completed; however, the right to sell meat was liberalized, and the number of vendors using the space fell rapidly. By the 1950s, only six of the former forty stalls remained (Marquard 2010).

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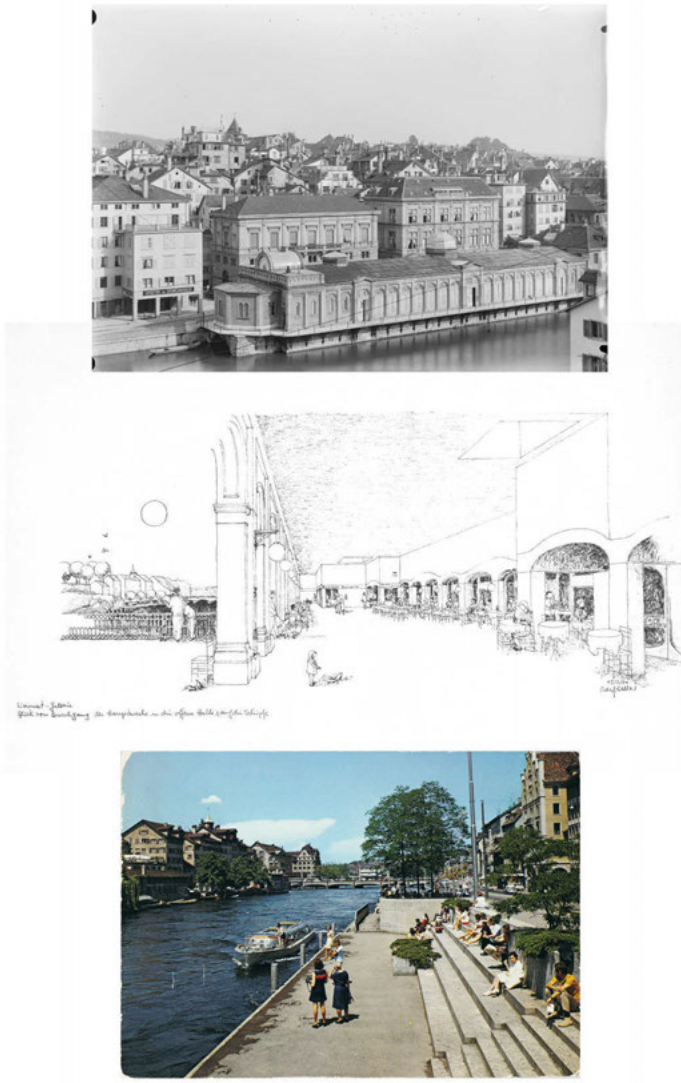

2.
*(top) The old Fleischhalle before demolition, 1895. Photograph: Hana Gebrüder Gerrit Anton & Willem Elias, Baugeschichtliches Archiv der Stadt Zürich (center) Limmat-Galerie: a counterproposal by ZAS, 1960. Drawing by: Rolf Keller, gta Archiv / ETH Zurich (Lorenz Moser). (bottom) After the demolition: Postcard showing the newly built staircases leading to the river Limmat, 1968. Photograph: Photoglob, Baugeschichtliches Archiv der Stadt Zürich.*

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congested traffic nodes: *Central* to the south of the historical center, and *Bellevue* to the north.

The proposed demolition of the *Fleischhalle* sparked a movement of resistance by artists and architects alike, that – as a side effect – led to the founding of the working group ZAS, Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe für Städtebau, in 1959. ZAS's reasons for protest were manifold: They criticized that official city planning and the initiators of the Motion »Freie Limmat« were one-sidedly focused on providing short-term solutions for traffic infrastructure and were all too ready to forsake a »characteristic situation in which even buildings that are insignificant in themselves can play an indispensable role« (Peter Meyer 1959). They were worried that the old town of Zurich would become faceless and devoid of liveliness, and therefore unattractive for residents and visitors, especially from the perspective of a pedestrian. In the words of Rolf Keller, founding member of ZAS, the river Limmat was to be understood as the most distinctive element of Zurich and the *Fleischhalle* was situated at its »navel« (Rolf Keller 1960: 692, authors' translation). ZAS also argued that the city's inhabitants would lose the resource of 1000 square metre of public, city-owned land at the heart of Zurich; that the river Limmat would be degraded into an »industrial channel« (ZAS 1959; Aktionskomitee zur Erhaltung des historischen Limmatraumes 196, authors' translation); and that the cost of demolition not only exceeded that of refurbishment, but also took much longer to implement (ibid.). Finally, they also believed demolishing the *Fleischhalle* would set a dangerous precedent: If it was demolished by public vote, which other characteristic spaces might be threatened as well? (ibid.)

Importantly, the members of ZAS and their fellow campaigners did not base their reasons for opposing the demolition of the *Fleischhalle* on ecological considerations, the quality of the *Fleischhalle's* architecture, or its historical importance. Rather, their opposition was founded on the building's contribution to the »character of uniqueness and unmistakability« of Zurich (Peter Meyer 1959); that it was simply existing public space; and its potential to transform into a more contemporary public space. Rolf Keller writes:

> »But back to the example of the dilapidated and unsightly *Fleischhalle* […]: Here, as in every unique situation: do not demolish, do not end something, but renew, transform – let the ugly duckling in the Limmat be transformed into a proud, white swan!« (Rolf Keller 1960: 702, authors' translation).

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Rolf Keller and Lorenz Moser, politically supported by Adrian Willi, opposed the demolition of the *Fleischhalle* with a self-initiated, alternative architectural vision. The counterproposal, titled *Limmat-Galerie*, saw the *Fleischhalle* refurbished into a »hall for flaneurs with a café« that redirected pedestrians through an »open, sunny gallery in direct relation to the flowing water and the riverbank of the *Schipfe* on the other side of the river« (Rolf Keller 1960: 689, authors' translation). This proposal eliminated the need for a pavement along the street, and even provided enough space to widen the street to meet the demands of traffic as well. The designers also believed that every intervention at the riverside must be set within the context of the Limmat area; therefore, the plans and visualizations of the *Limmat-Galerie* were supplemented with a second, wider-ranging study for the waterfront area downstream. Both studies were handed into the city authorities, published in architectural magazines, and presented in self-initiated press conferences (Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe für Städtebau 1959: 9f). In order to persuade the public of their proposal, ZAS members also wrote newspaper articles, organised demonstrations, and handed out leaflets. A unique aspect of the counterproposal was the reprogramming of the *Fleischhalle* into a café and theatre during the time of its vacancy, a concept that would today be called a »pop-up« or *Zwischennutzung*[13].

In November 1960, the proposal for the demolition of the *Fleischhalle*, along with the counterproposal by the *Aktionskomitee zur Erhaltung des historischen Limmatraumes* was submitted to be voted upon by the citizens of Zurich. In 1962, the *Fleischhalle* was ultimately demolished. However, seven years later, another vote proved how short-lived the decision in terms of city planning was: The people voted for a reversal of the Open Limmat Decision, stating that a new building should be built where the old *Fleischhalle* used to stand (Bauen + Wohnen 1979: 324–325). The *Fleischhalle* became a kind of emblematic battlefield representing a larger dispute between supporters of the existing, layered urban fabric and the *tabula rasa* demands of the car-friendly city.

13 »Zwischennutzung« can be translated as »interim use« and means the rental and use of a space for a contractually settled, limited amount of time. They have become a recurring side-effect of the wide-spread demolitions in Zurich and now Zwischennutzungen are even embedded in the municipality's innovation strategy (Toepfer 2025). https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/artikel/de/stadt-der-zukunft/zwischen-den-nutzungen-entsteht-raum-fuer-neues-.html, accessed October 5, 2025.

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As architects, members of ZAS used their skills (including designing, drawing and planning; communicating with multiple actors; and understanding urban planning procedures) to intervene in political processes affecting Zurich's cityscape. Their intervention resulted in convincing both city officials as well as the public to transform the *Fleischhalle* instead of tearing it down. They sought an architectural solution that could meet the demands of traffic, but also retain the unique character of the *Fleischhalle* and even develop it further to contribute to a vision of Zurich's old town as a lively place to stroll and live (Rolf Keller 1962). Along the way, the ZAS members also stepped into roles not usually occupied by architects, such as running a pop-up café, writing articles, or organizing demonstrations. Finally, the expansion of the occupational profile of the architect that resulted from these forms of activism was a contribution to the architectural field that we, as ZAS*, value greatly.

## Anticipating

### Case II Hellmutstrasse: Toward the Democratization of Housing Development (fig. 3)

About a decade later, in the early 1970s, the Swiss Post, Telephone and Telegraph Company (PTT) launched a project to construct a telecommunications center in the Aussersihl district located west of Zurich's historical center. Back in 1963, a plot of land comprising some of the neighborhood's oldest houses from the late 19th century, were acquired by the Zurich entrepreneur Sven Hotz, who intended to undertake a large-scale redevelopment. It was at this point that the residential buildings on Hellmutstrasse were designated for demolition. A few years later, Hotz sold the site to PTT, which planned to realize the telecommunications center in collaboration with Hotz's older brother – the renowned architect Theo Hotz. The project entailed the demolition of approximately 200 flats and several workshop buildings (Lindenmeyer 2021: 92).

Upon learning about the project, the tenants of the residential buildings on Hellmutstrasse began organizing demonstrations and holding public meetings to protest the planned demolition, arguing that the massive telecommunications center did not require such a centrally located site. Ultimately, the project failed due to strong tenant resistance, which local

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*3.*
*(top) Houses along Hellmutstrasse surrounded by building profiles, indicating ongoing planning activities, 1972. Photograph: Baugeschichtliches Archiv der Stadt Zürich. (center left) A counterproposal for the refurbishment and extension of the existing residential buildings, 1983. Model by: Bryan Thurston, Peter Gygax and Christian Frey, gta Archiv / ETH Zurich (Bryan Cyril Thurston). (center right) Project for a new telecommunications center by the Swiss Post, Telephone and Telegraph Company (PTT), 1972. Model by: Theo Hotz, gta Archiv / ETH Zurich (Theo Hotz). (bottom) Hellmi-neu, the new housing development forms an ensemble with the older buildings, 1991. A.D.P. Walter Ramseier.*

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politicians, including town councilor Bruno Kammerer supported. In 1972, the national newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* published an interview with Kammerer in which he stated: »The giant building planned by the PTT […] was therefore nonsense not only given the rampant housing shortage but also for urban planning reasons« (Tages-Anzeiger 1972, authors' translation). That same year, the Federal Council compelled the City of Zurich to negotiate a land exchange with the property owner. The telecommunication center was eventually built by Theo Hotz on the city's periphery, in Zurich Herdern, thereby preserving the residential buildings on Hellmutstrasse – marking a first success for the tenants.

After the municipality's initial reluctant agreement to the land swap the decision was made by the new owner, the municipality, to demolish the buildings seven years later. Fearing illegal occupation, the municipality temporarily rented out the flats, and later made them unusable for squatters by dismantling or smashing the toilets and cookers with sledgehammers. Since squatting was illegal and could not last more than two days, a group of young people within Zurich's leftist squatting scene considered alternative strategies to secure the old buildings as living spaces for the city's residents.

In 1979, after more than ten apartments had become uninhabitable, the non-residents did not »occupy« the apartments, but rather »took control« of them. They did not allow anyone to spend the night there, but they changed the look of the doors, and anyone interested was welcome to view the empty apartments (Lindenmeyer, 2018: 113, authors' translation). They set up a »control office« (ibid.) in one of the empty flats to monitor any occurrences within the vicinity and opened the doors to the media during the day to document the abuses. In the evenings, they guarded the houses »to prevent further destruction by city officials« (ibid.). This attracted the attention of the media and other activists, including ZAS, and raised critical questions about the municipality's destruction of flats within the context of a housing crisis. The engagement of the press and activists pressured the municipality into introducing the practice of the »Gebrauchsleihvertrag« – loan-for-use-agreements[14], which originated in Geneva and was used in the case of Hellmutstrasse for the first time in Zurich, effectively legalizing and temporarily tolerating the occupation (Lindenmeyer 2021: 105–114). The municipal administration understood this situation as a provisional arrangement,

14 An agreement whereby one party lends an item to another for use, free of charge.

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limited to the duration of the loan-for-use agreement. The Hellmut buildings remained designated for demolition.

After serving as a central meeting place for the youth movement in the early 1980s, the future of the site became uncertain following the termination of the loan-for-use agreement. For the residents, after years of caretaking the buildings, both social rehabilitation and structural renovation had become persistent topics of concern. They actively sought engagement with the municipal administration, urging it to undertake necessary renovations of the existing structures. With political support from Municipal Council Rudolf Steiger, a motion in 1981 prompted the authorities to commission a design strategy for Hellmutstrasse. The subsequent study, conducted by the municipal building department, concluded that the buildings had been in a state of disrepair for some time and that a final inspection by the city's building commission would be necessary to confirm the decision to proceed with demolition.

Aware that this would be their last chance to save the buildings on Hellmutstrasse, the activist residents sought the help of prominent professionals in the architectural field. In 1983, a reception was held for members of the city council to present the counterproposal for the site: an architectural project for the renovation and extension of the residential buildings, drawn up by architect Bryan Thurston with colleagues Peter Gygax and Christian Frey. Following negotiations with the council, the self-organized project of the collective to redevelop the site was able to move forward, with the council agreeing to make the site available with planning permission in the future (Lindenmeyer 2018: 153–164). The land was to be granted under a *Baurechtsvertrag*[15] [a building rights agreement] to the newly founded *cooperative Wogeno*, allowing the residents to jointly develop the site in collaboration with the cooperative.

Hannes Lindenmeyer, who was a participant in the activist movement at the time and still lives on Hellmutstrasse, describes the process that followed[16]: Over the following four years, the evolving group of residents collectively outlined various principles for the architectural project in

15 A building rights agreement (*Baurechtsvertrag*) is a legal contract in which the owner of a piece of land grants another party the right to construct and use buildings on that land for a specified period of time – usually several decades – without transferring ownership of the land itself. This type of agreement is common in Switzerland, and often used by public authorities to retain control over land while enabling private or cooperative development.

16 During a conversation with one of the authors on November 19, 2024.

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extensive discussions with roughly 10 teams of architects. This included the provision of a public outdoor space, semi-public external staircases, and a semi-public internal corridor for the apartments. The central principles of the project were the diversity of the residents and the flexibility of the flats, which could be changed at a later date. As Lindenmeyer explained, this collaboration culminated in a public jury process including interested residents (some of whom were ZAS members), the city architect, and the *Wogeno* cooperative, which was to develop the site as the owner of the building rights. The jury finally met outside among the dilapidated old buildings, where all the teams' plans were displayed, and decided to select the project developed by A.D.P architects.

By anticipating the actions and motives of the respective owners of the site, the group of activists (including residents, politically motivated youth movements, and allied architects) succeeded in writing a significant chapter in Zurich's urban history, ultimately preventing the demolition of an entire neighborhood. This case illustrates how counterproposals, such as the one by the architects Bryan Thurston and his colleagues, can emerge not only as planned reactions to political decisions but also as a form of alliance, driven by grassroots momentum. Even though the direct negotiation with the city council by the activist group representing Hellmutstrasse drew criticism from the more radical factions of the left, it could be counted as a big success for the right-to-housing: A squat was legalized using a utility loan agreement for the first time, and subsequently collectivized into the cooperative *Wogeno*, whose aim was to provide affordable housing. This model for a socially sustainable development of a neighborhood provided a replicable framework and was adapted in other areas of Zurich throughout the 1990s. The process galvanized spatial and social aspiration towards more democratic planning processes by demonstrating how activism could shape the built environment, rather than merely respond to it. Here, political engagement was not just reactive but generative, giving rise to architectural forms rooted in communal values and self-determination.

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4.
*(top) Construction site of the three towers at Triemli, 1963. Photography: Koehli Ernst, Baugeschichtliches Archiv der Stadt Zürich. (center left to right) Stadthotel Triemli - Wie weiter?, An exhibition organized by ZAS* showing all contributions to the open idea competition, ZAZ Bellerive, 2022. Poster: ZAS*; Proposal to convert the brutalist towers into collective housing, competition entry, 2022. Drawing by: OAEU Laura Stock, Johannes Walterbusch; Strategies to maintain and transform the buildings in relation to different time horizons, competition entry, 2022. Rendering by: KOSMOS Architects. (bottom) Today the Triemli towers are still standing and will be used mainly for asylum accommodation at least until 2040. Photograph by Anne Morgenstern, 2023.*

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## Speculating

### Case III Triemli Towers: Toward the Collective Reimagination of Built Resources (fig. 4)

In 2021, ZAS* was formed by reactivating the activist collective ZAS, which had been active until the late 1980s. Its new members discussed current architectural practices and working modes, and introduced new forms of work and time sharing. As Fritz Schwarz, founding member of ZAS shared with ZAS*: One of their guiding principles was that each expert should devote five percent of their working hours voluntarily to the service of society (ZAS* 2023: 37). While this may be more of a reference point for the roughly twenty members ZAS*, it led them to understand themselves not only as architects but also as citizens, and critically reflect on current urban planning processes; and, to propose productive opposition to official proposals. Around the end of 2021, ZAS* learned about the upcoming destruction of three concrete towers in the Triemli district at the western edge of the city that were formerly used as staff housing for the Triemli City Hospital. Scheduled for 2023, the demolition had completely bypassed the public discourse, as the decision for the development of the city's hospital had already been made years prior. But since the Ukrainian-Russian war had started in 2022, and subsequently the arrival of refugees in Zurich, the towers suddenly provided temporary housing, proving their potential in times of crisis.

The hospital towers originated in the 1950s when there was a severe shortage of hospital beds and hospital staff in Zurich. The project for the Triemli City Hospital envisioned a central hospital tower with low-rise buildings, along with three 15-story towers offering 750 rooms for nurses and nursing students. Although the project was publicly criticized for its brutalist architectural appearance and height, the city's population approved the construction of the new hospital in a vote in 1960 (Stadtspital Zürich 2024). Designed by a team of architects comprising Ernst Schindler, Rudolf Joss, Helmut Rauber, Roland Rohn, Rolf Hässig, and Erwin Müller, the project was finally built between 1963 and 1969 (Schindler et al. 1974). Already in the 1990s, 25 years after the hospital had opened, the three towers originally built to house nursing staff no longer met contemporary living requirements and gradually became vacant. In 2003, as part of its reworked long-term strategy paper, the city decided to demolish the three towers once the ongoing hospital renovation was complete and establish a park in their stead, as

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there was no foreseeable future use for them (Weisung 203, GR Nr. 1996/370; Baumann/Frey 1994). At the time, the city argued that renovating the towers at »80 percent of the cost of new construction would not be worthwhile« (Weisung 203, GR Nr. 1996/370, authors' translation; cf. Stadt Zürich/Amt für Hochbauten 2017). Due to their pending destruction, minimal maintenance was provided in the following years. Rooms were converted into offices or rented out to students, and in 2012, a temporary retirement home was set up on the top floors of Tower C (Stadt Zürich/Amt für Hochbauten 2005).

When ZAS* started to investigate the case, they realized how vague the arguments surrounding the imminent demolition were. They directed public attention to the three Triemli towers by publishing the article »Die Betonreserven am Triemli« (ZAS* 2021) on the online news platform *Tsüri*[17], framing the structures as »concrete reserves in the form of buildings that could offer a potential for sustainable urban development due to their massive structures and accordingly their very long service life« (ZAS* 2021). Demolishing such material-intensive structures in favor of a park appeared questionable in light of the climate crisis and housing shortage. By then, concrete elements from the three towers had already been reserved for reuse in the Recyclingzentrum Juchhof project after the planned demolition. For this project, a resource assessment report, including a catalog of building parts, had already been prepared by the office *Zirkular*[18] and the Polytechnic University EPFL (Devènes/Bastien-Masse/Küpfer/Fivet 2022). The report found that 96 percent of all structural components of the building were in good or acceptable condition and formed the basis for further investigation by ZAS* (Devènes/Bastien-Masse/Küpfer/Fivet 2022: 29–68). ZAS*'s follow-up study, »Triemli Papers,« examined the towers' structural adaptability, habitability, fire protection and high-rise shadow regulation[19] – directly challenging the rationale for demolition.

To oppose the discreet demolition, ZAS* decided to organize a speculative ideas competition (*Spekulativer Ideenwettbewerb Stadthotel Triemli*) for

17 *Tsüri* is a phonetic play on »Züri,« which is Swiss German for Zurich. It is an online news portal that was founded in 2015 with the aim of promoting independent journalism focusing on the city of Zurich.

18 *Zirkluar* is a specialist planning office for circular material use in construction based in Basel.

19 Building regulations in Zurich stipulating that high-rise buildings must not significantly affect their neighborhood by casting shadows. For example, inhabited buildings must not be shaded for more than three hours on average winter days.

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architects to propose architectural projects demonstrating how the existing built structures of the Triemli towers could continue to be used in the future (ZAS* 2022). Rather than proposing a singular alternative vision for the future, ZAS* chose to draw on the collective knowledge of the architectural community to oppose the municipal plans for demolition with a multitude of counterproposals. As the buildings had already served as a kind of surplus living space, taking up everyone from Ukrainian refugees to the elderly, the competition proposed the program of the *Stadthotel* for Zurich's inhabitants (city hotel), stemming from the Latin *hospitalis*, a place where people can stay for short or long periods of time. Launched in September 2022, the open competition[20] attracted 45 submissions, each exploring alternatives to demolition. Five projects were awarded by the jury, which comprised architects such as Elli Mosayebi and Jolene Lee, as well as the ETH professor of heritage protection Silke Langenberg, researcher on urban politics and processes Philipp Koch, and expert for sustainable urban development Sarah Schalles. The spatial proposals of each contribution were reframed as arguments for transformation and adaptation and collected in a document, named *Argumentarium*, put together by ZAS* that advocates for the towers' future potential.

The group's ambition was to reintroduce the Triemli towers into the public and architectural discourse and create awareness of demolition practices. The initial article on *Tsüri* was taken up by other media outlets such as the national newspaper *NZZ*, which prompted a back-and-forth between newspapers, the city administration, the architecture community, parliament and government, Zurich's citizens, and ZAS* (Kälin 2021: 15). ZAS* introduced the concept of the speculative ideas competition, to propose an alternative vision as citizens of Zurich – and therefore to a certain extent as owners of the towers.

The counterproposal strategy of ZAS* is to appropriate and repurpose existing formats and tools of city planning and, in doing so, shift their own professional role. The competition was based on established formats, such as the rules for architectural and engineering competitions set by The Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA) and was published on official competition websites (Konkurado 2022). To enable a wider public discourse, the jury of the competition was held publicly at *Zentrum Architektur Zürich*

20 The open call for the competition can be found here: https://www.zas.life/triemli/wettbewerbsprogramm_triemli.pdf, accessed October 8, 2025.

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*Bellerive*[21] in December 2022. The discussion of the five-member jury was well attended and simultaneously streamed live on YouTube. To allow for even greater accessibility, the results of the competition were exhibited for a week, and workshops with the architects that contributed to the competition, politicians, and the city administration were held to discuss the topics addressed in the contributions.

In response to the counterproposal competition, the feasibility of the competition entry projects was further investigated in a study by the members of ZAS*. The study compared projects with different depths of intervention and calculated after which prolonged lifespan they would become ecologically and economically feasible (Oswald 2023: 80f). It was followed by an urgent written request to the municipal council, *Dringende Schriftliche Anfrage* (a tool used by politicians), on the issue of extending the interim use of the towers (Beschluss des Stadtrats 2023). In response, the municipality carried out its own feasibility study, which came to similar conclusions as the study carried out by ZAS*: none of the projects were economically or ecologically feasible if one extended the lifetime of the Triemli towers for less than 10 years, but from 20 years onwards projects of all depths of intervention were ecologically feasible, and after 30 years even large investments would become economically feasible (Stadt Zürich/Amt für Hochbauten 2023; GR Nr. 2022/105). As a result of the wider public discourse, the current interim use of the towers as living quarters for refugees and the elderly will now be extended until 2040 (Stadt Zürich/Gesundheits- und Umweltdepartement 2024). In November 2024, it was confirmed that two of the three towers will be renovated by the municipality. The city council has allocated approximately 80 million francs for the refurbishment of two of the towers. The remaining one – excluded from the renovations due to its anticipated reuse by the city hospital – will temporarily continue to accommodate refugees, while pending an extended operating license (Turin 2024). Importantly, the decision to refurbish rather than demolish the towers reflects a growing awareness of the climate crisis, emphasizing the urgency of resource conservation and the environmental benefits of reusing existing structures.

The high public interest of Zurich's citizens in the continuing use of the Triemli Towers showed that the time had come to question outdated plans and propose alternative approaches. For the architects involved, as well as

21 The ZAZ Bellerive is an exhibition space with a focus on architecture and planning that exists since 2018.

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the inhabitants, the actions taken to preserve the towers demonstrated a practical blueprint for channeling democratic opposition against top-down decision-making. Since then, the methods and formats developed during the speculative idea competition have been adopted by other groups with similar goals, such as the group *Abbrechen Abbrechen*[22] in Munich. Whether a building in Zurich is demolished or not is still largely determined by its owners and hardly ever by its inhabitants, since they are usually only informed when the decision has already been made.[23] We see the formulation of a design brief, even where none exists, as a strategy for architects and citizens to gain more influence on the built environment by intervening earlier in the decision-making process.

## Conclusion

The series of case studies presented in this article demonstrate that the harmful ecological and social impact of demolition in Zurich is not just a contemporary issue, but rather a persistent challenge faced by the city since the post-war period. While differing in historical context, scale and strategy, the actors behind the Fleischhalle, Hellmutstrasse, and Triemli Towers movements all employed a common method, the counterproposal, to challenge the demolition of important features of Zurich's urban fabric. Rooted in civic engagement and architectural expertise, these counterproposal initiatives critically responded to top-down planning, preserved affordable and socially diverse spaces, and introduced spatial, organizational, and programmatic alternatives.

Instead of waiting for official commissions, architects and their fellow campaigners asserted their civil rights through proactive design. By intervening early in the planning process, they were able to pre-emptively shape urban development, rather than belatedly react to a closed brief. Their counterproposals aimed not only to contest dominant narratives, but also to promote more democratic, ecologically mindful, and socially inclusive

22 An initiative to preserve the Munich Justice Centre, which is threatened by demolition. https://abbrechenabbrechen.de, accessed October 5, 2025.

23 In Switzerland, construction projects that are waiting for approval from the building permit office must mark the planned outlines of their project on site for the public using rods that delineate the corners of the volume. Neighbours or established national ecological associations have the right to object to the project during a certain period of time.

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visions of the city. They questioned what makes urban life vibrant and resilient, and how spatial development can reflect collective rather than purely economic interests.

While not all projects prevented demolition, each left a lasting impact on the cityscape, architectural practice, and public discourse. Hellmutstrasse became a model for self-organized cooperative housing. The Triemli Towers signified a growing institutional commitment to reuse over demolition and provided a blueprint for building the case for the adaptive reuse of existing structures. And, while initially approved by public vote, the reversal of the decision to demolish the *Fleischhalle* just a few years later showed the impact the counterproposal had left on public opinion.

Each example emerged from a particular moment of spatial urgency, be it car-centric redevelopment in the 1960s, corporate urban renewal in the 1970s, or unsustainable demolition practices amid today's climate crisis. In all instances, demolition was presented as inevitable, yet was met with resistance that evolved into proactive and at times realized alternatives: ZAS's *Limmat-Galerie* emphasized pedestrian urbanism and adaptive reuse; *Hellmutstrasse* activists prevented demolition through direct action and collaborative planning; and ZAS* reintroduced the idea of long-term reuse through its speculative competition for the Triemli Towers.

The trajectory from protest, to proposal, to tangible influence illustrates a methodological continuum which brings architects together with civic actors. It signals a shift toward a mode of practice rooted not in market-driven logic, but in community-based, socially engaged, and ecologically conscious values. The counterproposals discussed were not merely reactive: They articulated alternative futures towards resource-consciousness, collective ownership, and care for the built environment.

The reformation of the group ZAS* in 2021 enabled us to highlight and engage with pressing urban topics across both professional and civic spheres. Writing this article is part of that effort. It is a vehicle for us to deepen our archival research as well as a means of activating discourse, sharing methods, and expanding the reach of the counterproposal as a critical design practice. By contributing to the democratization of the planning process, the reformation of ZAS* marks the emergence of a new working mode that is open, process-based, and collaborative, and which creates alliances between architects, residents, activists, researchers, and municipal administrators. Our approach values situated knowledge and long-term engagement over

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quick solutions, and creates space for imagination, experimentation, and structural transformation.

The counterproposals presented in this article show that when architects combine their professional and civic agency, they can directly shape the material and political conditions of democratic practice in the built environment. In the Swiss context of direct democracy, such interventions have the potential to transform both spatial planning and urban life. Through collaborative design, speculative practice, and civic engagement, we aim to reposition architectural work as a means of resistance and transformation. In times of ecological urgency and social fragmentation, the counterproposal is not merely an act of opposition; it is an essential instrument for reimagining and reclaiming the future of our cities.

## ZAS[24] , ZAS*[25], and their Accomplices[26]

24 ZAS: Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe für Städtebau [Zurich Working Group for Urban Planning], a collective active between 1959–1980s.

25 ZAS* is the reactivation of ZAS, a collective active since 2021.

26 In this context, »accomplices« refers to collaborators, and co-practitioners who act alongside ZAS and ZAS* – not merely in support, but in shared authorship and complicity.

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