11. Future-making in a mode of standby

Everyday planning and the precarious futures of the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt

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Introduction

The future's inherent opacity and contingency find their way into the present through practices of anticipation, preparation, precaution, and preservation (Anderson, 2010; Samimian-Darash, 2013, 2023; Bryant and Knight, 2019). Cities, as dynamic sites of socio-political and economic convergence, are central arenas where the uncertainties coming with global transformations are both confronted and navigated. This chapter explores how the built environment and, more specifically, vacant buildings, serve as key spaces for engaging with possible futures. In particular, it examines the everyday practices of future-making among urban planners, exploring how they navigate the complexities of shaping possible futures within the constraints of the present (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013; Abram, 2014).

To ground this exploration, the chapter investigates the specific case of the high-rise ensemble 'Hochhausscheiben A–E', located in the centre of Halle-Neustadt, a district of the eastern German city of Halle (Saale). Halle-Neustadt, with around 47,000 inhabitants in 2022, was built as the socialist model city Halle-West, an independent city mainly for the workers of the local chemical industries. After German reunification in 1990, Halle-Neustadt was incorporated into the city of Halle and is today the city's largest district.

Once emblematic of socialist urban planning and marking the centre of Halle-Neustadt, the Hochhausscheiben fell into disuse in the late 1990s and have since existed in a 'standby' mode. Standby: The term is most commonly associated with technical devices, but emergency services, delivery drivers, and other professional groups are also familiar with these moments when their full

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function is not utilized, when they are not immediately needed but ready for reactivation. Building on a proposal from Laura Kemmer, Annika Kühn, Birke Otto, and Vanessa Weber (2021), the concept of standby serves as a theoretical lens to understand how the Hochhausscheiben occupy a state of in/activity in an enduring present in which the making of possible futures is in tension with their non-realization.

Figure 1: Hochhausscheiben A–E, 1974.

Source: Dorenkamp, Geschichtswerkstatt Halle-Neustadt.

I will briefly trace how these buildings came to be 'on standby': The high-rise buildings, simply named A, B, C, D, and E, form an ensemble of five towers built in the early 1970s (Figure 1). They were originally designed as dormitories for workers and students and became a symbol of the socialist model city constructed to the west of the existing city of Halle (Saale). The upheavals two decades after the Hochhausscheiben were built had a profound effect on their purpose and use. Following the *Wende* – the GDR's collapse and Germany's reunification – the post-socialist transformation of Halle-Neustadt was accompanied by a reorganization of ownership, maintenance,

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and planning. Under socialism, housing was controlled by the state, but after 1990, Halle-Neustadt's housing stock was gradually marketized (Bernt et al., 2017: 560). The Hochhausscheiben changed ownership and were auctioned off several times and lost their original use by 2000. Building D, however, was an exception: Renovated in the 1990s by a private investor, it continued to serve as an office tower – a function it had already fulfilled during the GDR era. Building C was sold to a private owner in 2015 after being owned by the state of Saxony-Anhalt. The post-reunification years left the high-rises 'in-between', caught between demolition and preservation, forcing planners to rethink their role amid economic and demographic upheaval. Reflecting on the start of this ongoing process, one planner I spoke with recalled the optimism that prevailed despite the challenges: 'It will be okay ... yes, it's difficult now, but it will be okay' (interview, 25 October 2018).[1] However, scholars in the 1990s warned of the area's uncertain future, highlighting the complexity of urban, social, and political issues (Projektgesellschaft mbH Dessau, 1993). This period of privatization, regulatory liberalization (Bernt et al., 2017: 560), and processes and events beyond their control overwhelmed planners, who lost control over the future of the buildings that had become sites of loss, devaluation, speculation, neglect, and unrealized potential. The buildings became symbols of the collapse of socialist urbanism and the challenges of shaping urban futures under neoliberal pressures.

Ever since the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt began to fall vacant in the 1990s, they have sparked debates about their future – debates that intensified around 2000, when the buildings stood entirely vacant. This chapter explores how planners have engaged with these buildings, investigating how the future is made, negotiated, and imagined in a mode of standby. Standby is not mere inactivity, but a readiness to act when conditions are right, requiring a constant investment of energy and attention despite uncertain outcomes. This mode of being – both on and off, suspended and yet prepared – embodies a paradoxical state where uncertainty forces action and negotiation. It is a future-oriented mode in that it 'refers to that which comes next' (Kemmer et al., 2021: 15), yet one in which the future remains elusive and potentially unattainable due to the precariousness of the present, disrupting linear notions of time, and requiring something akin to what Michael G. Flaherty (2003) describes as 'time work': ongoing efforts of future-making and a constant negotiation of

1 Interviews were conducted in German; interviews and non-English quotations have been translated by the author.

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temporal horizons while remaining ready for multiple possible futures. Scholars such as Felix Ringel (2018) highlight how uncertainty and indeterminacy often provoke, rather than inhibit, agency. Building on these insights, this chapter frames standby as mode of preparedness that actively keeps futures open.

Based on ethnographic research conducted in 2018 and 2022 involving archival work, observation, day-to-day conversations with urban planners in Halle, and interviews with key actors, this chapter explores how planners navigate uncertainty and maintain the potential to reactivate vacant buildings. It argues that 'standby' captures the ongoing, precarious efforts to preserve potentiality while awaiting investment or opportunity, and that the recurrent un/making of possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben contributes to the openness of the future within the constraints of the present. The Hochhausscheiben exist in a liminal state, where futures are continuously made and unmade, reflecting the precarious interplay between stasis and change. Planners expressed unease during discussions, highlighting the cyclical nature of unresolved debates and the frustration of revisiting the same issues for decades (group discussion, 6 February 2020).

The first analytical section analyses scenario-building as a key future-oriented practice, exploring the uncertain and unknowable future and its role in envisioning possibilities for the Hochhausscheiben. Then, the chapter explores how planners navigate between distant futures and long-term goals on the one hand, and short-term measures on the other, as they translate visions for the centre of Halle-Neustadt into tangible actions. Ultimately, the chapter shows how the present moment is both rendered indeterminate and laden with potential. By examining the practices that keep the Hochhausscheiben 'in play', this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between aspiration and pragmatism in post-industrial and post-socialist settings.

Planning and the (unforeseeable) future

To explore how the future is made in standby, I draw on insights from planning theory, science and technology studies, geography, and anthropology. Time – and the future in particular – has received renewed attention in the last few years across disciplines. This growing interest stems, on the one hand, from the fact that the study of the social has long neglected time and temporalities and, on the other hand, from a pervasive sense of uncertainty that has deepened recently, in line with the precarious, crisis-ridden, and rapidly changing

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present. Contemporary research explores 'how we know and, more specifically, how to gauge and act on unknown futures' (Alexander and Sanchez, 2018: 4). New attention is being paid to ways of relating to the future and (re)acting to it in the present, as well as to practices of crafting, enabling, and reclaiming time and the future (Ringel, 2014: 68).

Ben Anderson argues that the future is increasingly seen as indeterminate, uncertain, and unknowable (2010: 793). He highlights how the fact that the future will 'exceed present knowledge' (ibid.: 780) has become integral to practices of anticipation and preparedness. The unknowability of the future – and, as I will explore, its *unplannability* – does not reduce its significance. On the contrary, high levels of uncertainty and contingency encourage rather than suppress 'temporal agency' (Ringel, 2018: 71). However, these practices appear to diverge from modernist approaches to the future, which were based on the belief that, even if the future did not unfold as expected, it could still be planned. As Abram (2017: 79) argues, understanding how people imagine, plan for, and act on the future offers valuable insights into life today, highlighting the need to study how relations to the future shape present practices.

Anthropological perspectives on time and action are particularly valuable for understanding future-making in standby, as they have long focused on the interplay between time, action, and space (Gell, 1992; Munn, 1992; Rabinow, 2008; Abram, 2014, 2017). Nancy Munn, for example, expands upon Johannes Fabian's concept of 'temporalization' to explore how 'we make, through our acts, the time we are in' (Munn, 1992: 94). This perspective emphasizes how people inhabit a socio-cultural time composed of interwoven dimensions, experienced through the ongoing creation of meaningful connections between people, objects, and spaces in daily life (ibid.: 116).

Recent work on future-making highlights the active, skilful production of time and the future, illustrating how temporal dimensions are continually shaped and reshaped through human practice (see Thiel and Grubbauer in this volume). Calling attention to agency, some researchers argue that representation itself is an act of creation (Simpson, 2008: 810), actively shaping particular pasts, presents, and futures through, for example, 'techniques of time' (Bear, 2016: 489). Ringel introduces the concept of 'temporal agency' to analyse how individuals and groups act upon time and the future. He examines practices that – through specific imagined futures – have transformative effects on time itself, such as accelerating or decelerating processes. 'Future-tricking', as Ringel calls it, includes activities such as 'predicting, forecasting [...] projecting or envisioning [...] designing, budgeting, aligning, organizing or coordinating'

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(Ringel, 2016: 26), all of which aim to direct the flow of time towards desired outcomes. Similarly, Jeroen Oomen, Jesse Hoffman, and Maarten A. Hajer introduce the notion of 'techniques of futuring', which bridges '*imaginative work and practices*' (Oomen et al., 2022: 254; emphasis in original). They define 'futuring' as 'the identification, creation and dissemination of images of the future shaping the possibility space for action, thus enacting relationships between past, present and future' (ibid.: 253–54). Studying the role the future plays out in the present, Anderson (2010) explores how 'action upon a future that may never happen' (Anderson, 2010: 777) – pre-emption, precaution, and preparedness – shapes and is shaped by governance and social practices.

When it comes to planning, future orientation and acting on the future are inherent (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013). Planners are often required to 'foresee future scenarios, and to try to pursue the best among the options' and '[think] about ways and strategies to avoid unwanted, undesirable outcomes' (Pizzo, 2015: 137). To this end, 'planning entails a broad set of tactics, technologies and institutions to try to control the passage into the future, including practices and ideas' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013: 2), 'ascertaining predictabilities and attempting to secure them by design' (Abram, 2017: 66). Planning thus involves techniques of temporal agency, where planners engage in practices to influence the progression of time, whether by accelerating, decelerating, or otherwise reordering temporal processes (Ringel, 2016).

This theoretical framework will guide my analysis of scenario-building, navigation, and the production of indeterminacy among urban planners in Halle. These practices reflect how planners engage with uncertainty and contingency, leveraging them to keep the future open while seeking to shape it in line with their broader goals of preservation and revitalization.

Scenario-building: Bringing the future into the present, keeping it open

Within the planning unit, my interlocutors engage in different forms of future-making, of which scenario-building stands out as a key practice. In planning scenarios for the vacant high-rise buildings, urban planners assemble different possible futures, considering material form, ownership, cost, architectural value, and so on. Over two decades of vacancy, the high-rises in Halle-Neustadt have been the subject of multiple, albeit finite, scenarios.

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In 2013, for example, Halle's planning unit worked with Saxony-Anhalt's Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment (Kompetenzzentrum Stadtumbau) on a brief for an external architecture firm to explore possible building futures. A first draft proposed either 'preservation' or 'demolition', with subdivisions under preservation such as 'securing', 'interim uses', and 'new uses', while demolition included 'reorganization'. The aim was to assess both the feasibility and potential demand for each scenario.

Scenario-building, as described above, enables planners to bring the future into the present (Adams et al., 2009: 249; Anderson, 2010: 784–85), playing a crucial role in un/making possible futures for buildings. Rather than predictive tools, scenarios are plausible narratives and tools for exploring possible, probable, and preferred futures and what might happen under different conditions, enabling planners to ask 'what if' questions that are grounded in current realities yet open to contingency (Adam and Groves, 2007; Yaneva, 2009: 164; Samimian-Darash, 2023). Scenarios rest on current conditions while anticipating future changes shaped by shared knowledge and assumptions about key drivers such as technological change or pricing trends (Adam and Groves, 2007: 202). In planning, this often includes the evaluation of specific buildings in relation to other buildings and places (Macmillen and Pinch, 2018: 306) but also to supply-and-demand logics. This sensitivity to context and surroundings can be seen as a form of embodied knowledge – developed not only through formal training but through repeated, situated encounters with urban space. Furthermore, standard components of scenario-building include SWOT analyses and tripartite structures typical of bureaucratic planning.

Planning theory views anticipatory inquiry as activating potentiality – an experimental form of 'thinking otherwise' that focuses on possible outcomes not for the purpose of, but to remain vigilant to unknown possibilities (Gilles Deleuze, quoted in Hillier, 2011: 32). Through these 'what if' stories, the unknowability of the future is met with multiple possible futures. As Louis Albrechts puts it, 'The scenario derives from the observation that, given the impossibility of knowing precisely how the future will play out, a good decision or strategy to adopt is one that plays out well across several possible futures' (Albrechts, 2005: 255). This opening up of the present to a range of possible outcomes – the belief that new possibilities emerge from this openness – is today embraced not only by planning theorists and post-structuralists, but also by practitioners in the field. It is often seen as linked to optimization (Adams et al., 2009: 258), neoliberal regimes, and the unknowability of the future (Anderson, 2010). As Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele E. Clarke (2009:

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258) argue, anticipation predicts opportunities for what once seemed impossible, leveraging 'new spaces of opportunity' and reconfiguring 'our sense of "the possible"' (ibid.: 258).

In the case of the Hochhausscheiben, too, scenario-building is about exploring new spaces of possibility in a situation where possibilities are limited. The future of the high-rises will depend on new possibilities because, for example, only new uses and demand may be feasible in making revitalization a real option, considering the oversupply in the housing market in Halle-Neustadt. Or it may be that only new financing options can attract investors.

Working on the scenarios in 2013, tensions arose between the city and the state of Saxony-Anhalt over how to link present and future. The state revised the city's draft, replacing 'fundamental options' with 'realizable options' and eliminating what were deemed economically unfeasible scenarios. While the city aimed to let the future guide present actions, the state insisted on grounding future visions in current constraints, revealing contrasting approaches to time and the future. Indeed, scenario-planning as a collaborative act appears here less as an 'open debate about future ideals' and more as 'a battle over the here and now, and between different continuities' (Abram, 2017: 74) or discontinuities. The city of Halle wanted to open up the present with the future, while the state, which owned one of the high-rises and wasn't willing to invest in the site, saw the future closed off by the present. Drawing on this situation, we might suggest that within scenario-building, coexisting futures 'are similarly scaled and contested, filled with competing notions of idealism and pragmatism' (ibid.: 66, 77). The city's aim in anticipating multiple futures was to open up the present to (new) possible 'courses of action in the face of ongoing contingency and ambiguity' (Adams et al., 2009: 255).

In the following years, commissioned architectural studies explored possible ways to wrap and rehabilitate the buildings. One of these studies was by the architecture firm Lacaton & Vassal (with Fischer), which theoretically demonstrated that revitalization could be an economically reasonable option. Subsequently, in 2015, the urban planning department again drew up possible futures, again covering the spectrum from demolition to conservation. The scenarios were then redefined as 'possible solutions' by the city administration's planning unit and incorporated into efforts to create a comprehensive concept. Each of them was assessed in terms of opportunities, risks, and costs, as well as urban design parameters, architectural feasibility, and the need for coordinated action between all property owners.

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An internal document from January 2015 then outlined three scenarios. The first, the 'zero variant', required no additional administrative effort, though planners saw little chance of private redevelopment and anticipated ongoing costs of securing or possibly demolishing the buildings. The second, 'demolition and reorganization', estimated €13 million to demolish buildings A–C and E, with land sales expected to yield only €100,000 to €200,000 per plot and low prospects for subsequent use. The third, 'preservation and development', gave projected costs of €12 to €18 million per building, not including surrounding areas. The document also detailed municipal tools and measures to facilitate each scenario, including development plans, regulatory enforcement under Saxony-Anhalt law, or the use of an estate liquidator for building A (internal document, 14 January 2015).

These scenarios served to guide political decision-making, and while the city appeared to be exploring multiple possible futures, the process suggested an intention to steer towards preservation. Based on criteria such as opportunities, risks, costs, urban design and architecture, coordination between owners, and the estimated expense per building, the 'status quo' was seen as the least favourable, while 'preservation and development' was seen as the most favourable, despite being the most costly. Finally, a city council resolution from 2015 recommended the preservation scenario,[2] confirming the city's commitment to that path. So, in 2015, the scenarios seemed to serve a decision-making process and the definition of a preferred future that would then be worked towards.

However, despite the political commitment to the ensemble and the administrative steps taken, the revitalization of the buildings has not become a reality (Figure 2). Only building A has been fully renovated (in 2021) and is rented and used by the city. Building C was purchased by a private investor in 2015, but renovation work has not been completed. It turned out that times were too uncertain to determine a future. When the chosen future did not materialize, the function of scenario-planning changed, as will become clear below.

2 Stadt Halle (Salle), VI/2015/01130, Grundsatzbeschluss zum Erhalt des Scheibenensembles im Zentrum des Stadtteils Neustadt, 20.08.2015. See pp. 5–6.

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Figure 2: The Hochhausscheiben A, B, and C in the centre of Halle-Neustadt, 2016.

Source: Hühne, Geschichtswerkstatt Halle-Neustadt.

Since its adoption, the 2015 resolution has been repeatedly referred to in statements, plans, and brochures, as this political decision has subsequently guided administrative work. In a 2019 workshop, the planning team developed internal scenarios for the buildings, once again outlining three familiar options: 'renovation', 'vacancy and conservation', and 'demolition and new construction' (internal table, 2019). This time, consistency with the objective of preserving the buildings was included as an evaluation criterion: In the created evaluation table, '+' indicated coherence with the objectives, '0' meant no direct effect, and '–' meant direct contradiction (internal document, 2019). However, the planning team outlined more or less the same options. In the end, the practice of scenario-building seemed to be an integral part of planning routines – especially in addressing the contingency and the uncertainties of the present – rather than merely serving as a tool for developing a strategy. When it came time to summarize the results of the workshop, one planner was given the 2015 scenario tables and asked to make minor adjustments. Scenario-building turns out to be a repetitive re-enactment of past futures, ensuring administrative continuity. Indeed, what I observed is consistent with a commonly cited paradox of planning, which suggests that planning often pushes the fu-

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ture further away while responding more to the past than the future (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013; Färber, 2019; Farías, 2020; Valverde, 2011). This repetition, I argue, sustains the multiplicity of possible futures but also contributes to the persistence – and vacancy – of the buildings.

When asked about the role of scenario-building, one planner remarked: 'We have everything ready; we are prepared for any eventuality' (field notes, 18 August 2020) – a sentiment shared by colleagues who viewed development as beyond their control but believed they could adapt to any changes (group discussion, 14 April 2021). Here, scenario-building is less about fixing a future than about conceptualizing 'the possibilities that time offers space' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013: 2). Planners understand their role as managing change, not making it, as they operate within a city shaped by market forces and the dynamic 'interplay of economy, technology, society and politics' (Schubert, 2015: 145) that can only be indirectly influenced through planning regulations (Farías, 2020: 177). Embracing uncertainty and complexity, they see flexibility as a practical response to the future (Pizzo, 2015: 136).

Navigating: Acting on distant and near futures

This section explores how planners have navigated between long-term visions and short-term measures when translating strategies for the revitalization of Halle-Neustadt's centre into action. The focus is on how different futures – both near and far – become related in planning and how my interlocutors navigate through and along these futures.

I am referring here to the implementation of the 'Neustadt Centre Structural Concept' (Strukturkonzept Zentrum Neustadt), which was developed by a Berlin architecture firm for the city of Halle. In April 2019, the city council adopted this concept as a concretization of the redevelopment goals for the area, which includes the high-rise buildings and their immediate surroundings. The concept aims to give concrete ideas and form to the redevelopment objectives and provides guidance, but is not binding, thus requiring planners to balance long-term visions with short-term measures. For example, I assisted to discussions on redesigning the entrance area of building A, where it was important to ensure that changes did not compromise the long-term goals for revitalizing the area as a whole, including the high-rises. Conversely, long-term ideals can sometimes stifle progress if their objectives prove unattainable. The achievability of these objectives and the feasibility

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of their implementation depend on a 'future present' that is only partially predictable. This is particularly true when private actors are involved in the implementation process (field notes, 1 March 2021, 4 March 2021). Navigating these temporalities and the contingency of the future becomes a matter of keeping scenarios open and preventing immediate actions from blocking the path to extended visions.

The 'Neustadt Centre Structural Concept' contains broad visions, such as adaptation to climate change, as well as variants and proposals, which the planners divide into long-term and short-term measures (field notes, 5 May 2021). The overarching objectives involve preserving the architectural ensemble, revitalizing the high-rises through repair, and carrying out energy-efficient refurbishments and climate adaptation measures. In a presentation I attended in 2018, the architects emphasized a phased approach to implementation, outlining a long-term strategy with several options for upgrading the pedestrian passages around the high-rises (field notes, 22 November 2018). By 2021, planners were translating these strategic visions into actionable steps. Together with their colleagues from the departments of green space maintenance and traffic planning (Grünflächenpflege und Verkehrsplanung), they defined time frames, designated different zones, and prioritized actions while working on several fronts simultaneously (field notes, 8 April 2021, 7 June 2021).

Within the planning department, there was disagreement on whether to prioritize incremental steps or focus on the bigger picture, particularly in relation to the reorganization of parking and traffic. According to the concept, optimizing parking is crucial for revitalization and adapting to the needs of future users (Schönborn Schmitz Architekten, 2018: 6). Consequently, public funds were earmarked for the demolition of underused car parks cluttering the spaces between the Hochhausscheiben, and negotiations with reluctant owners were to be intensified. If an agreement could be reached, the funds would be prioritized for these larger projects, as this step was considered essential. Failure to agree could jeopardize key projects and reduce or negate the impact of smaller actions. Both approaches – starting with big goals or focusing on smaller steps – carry risks. Starting with ambitious goals is consistent with the overall vision but may falter if intermediate steps fail. Conversely, prioritizing immediate actions risks losing sight of broader goals (field notes, 8 April 2021). The planners underscored that coordinating short-term and long-term actions is linked to credibility, and that only visible changes can signal the city's commitment to its long-term vision (field notes, 18 June 2019).

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In practice, these temporally different futures are intertwined in intriguing ways. Distant futures often seem elusive or unattainable, making short-term measures a vehicle of hope – steps that might, for instance, eventually enable the revitalization of the high-rises. As another example, parking reorganization is seen as a necessary step to attract investment by making the area more attractive, ideally leading to future revitalization. The challenge is to align these actions with a vision for the high-rises as active, inhabited spaces while also addressing current constraints.

Planners thus navigate between long-term visions and immediate actions, balancing the multiple temporalities involved in managing the site. The image of the planner as navigator began to take shape in planning theory in the late 1980s. Albrechts (2004: 750), drawing on John Forester and his own earlier work, argues that planners, as navigators, are called upon to actively shape the 'course' of change without misusing their power. Jean Hillier (2011: 25) draws on Michel Foucault's 'metaphor of ships and navigation (pilotage)', describing strategic planning as a journey marked by unforeseen risks and dangers that require constant course adjustments. Quoting Jacques Derrida, she suggests that there had been a 'need for development of a new, more flexible, form of strategic planning which "if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated"' (Hillier, 2011: 25). Navigating previously unknown trajectories, according to Hillier, involves experimenting with strategies that prioritize flexibility and openness to emerging possibilities (ibid.: 27).

Planners as navigators self-identify as 'managers of change' – a change primarily driven by private investment (Schubert, 2015: 145; Farías, 2020: 177). Such planning, according to Hillier (2011: 25), would be more concerned about trajectories than about outcomes; it becomes a site of experimentation. Planners navigate between long-term and short-term 'planes', a term that Hillier (2011: 27) takes from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Whereas long-term strategic plans and trajectories contain 'multiplicities of ideas, many of which never come to actualization', short-term planning, such as '[l]ocal area action plans, design briefs, detailed projects [...] tend to be relatively local or micro-scale [...], and content specific'. According to Hillier (ibid.), such plans resonate with Deleuze and Guattari's 'planes of organization' and 'facilitate small movements or changes along the dynamic, open trajectories of planes of immanence'. These two planes of planning on which planners act simultaneously are interwoven and are knit together sometimes more harmoniously, sometimes rather loosely. While planners navigate processes

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that are largely shaped by factors beyond their direct control, such as private investment, they do not simply navigate towards clearly defined goals and 'function smoothly as neutral means to given (and presumably well-defined) ends' (Albrechts, 2004: 750), nor do they simply wait for externally driven change. Of course, they have guiding principles that naturally change over time (Abram, 2017: 76). This is evident in the evolving vision for Neustadt's centre, a centre which now stands in sharp contrast to its original modernist conception. The contemporary vision, as articulated by the architect whom I had the opportunity to interview, prioritizes 'buildings shaping space', in the tradition of European cities, as opposed to the modernist ideal of 'buildings in flowing space' (field notes, 27 November 2018). In committee discussions on the concept, the central goals for the centre of Neustadt include activating the high-rises and tackling what is referred to as an 'enormous urban planning deficiency'. The aim is to create a spatially defined public space, similar to *Wilhelmian-style* neighbourhoods (committee meeting, 22 November 2018). City planners have drawn inspiration from books, the historic centre of Halle, and other European cities in order to move away from modernist paradigms and towards 'human-scaled' public spaces (field notes, 4 May 2021). These efforts reflect what Simone Abram identifies as different forms of the future: abstract visions 'around which to articulate hopes and fears for collective life, for ideals [...] and moral standpoints', as well as comments 'on the world as it is today, and how we would prefer that it was' (Abram, 2017: 73). Abram stresses the need for pragmatic connections between abstract visions and concrete actions because without such connections, long-term plans and guiding principles risk becoming 'just words' (Abram, 2014: 130).

In Halle, the realization of the different steps of the redevelopment concept depends on the willingness of private owners to cooperate, thus the future is highly uncertain. Facing uncertainty, planners act on different short-term futures at the same time, all while trying to keep the extended vision alive. In order to cope with the plans and related promises made in public-private negotiations, and with the need to respect budgetary constraints, planners often face dilemmas that reshape or even dissolve original plans. This is consistent with Laura Bear's description of dissolved plans and the changing roles of bureaucrats in the speculative city (Bear, 2013). As the deputy mayor of Halle noted, the final outcome is unlikely to be fully in line with the concept, but these plans provide an essential starting point for dialogue and further development (interview, 28 May 2021). Planners are aware that the path to the future emerges 'as a dialogue between people's attempts to plan and shape futures and contin-

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gent events beyond their control' (Alexander and Sanchez, 2018: 5). Despite acknowledging that some visions may not be realized within the 15-year planning horizon, the planners in Halle see long-term planning as a means of ensuring continuity across electoral cycles (field notes, 8 April 2021, 27 May 2021). However, doubts persist about the value of formulating long-term goals when immediate obstacles – such as owner resistance – make them unattainable (field notes, 25 January 2023). The city's planners are often frustrated and sometimes question the value of long-term goals in the face of weak negotiating positions, limited investment prospects, and failure to take even the smallest steps.

My interlocutors often oscillate between the overarching concept and its translation into practical action. They are used to thinking in terms of spatial and temporal modules that allow them to adapt to changing circumstances. Laws and regulations aim to provide structure and strengthen the position of planners and municipalities, but planners fear that overly rigid frameworks could hinder rather than facilitate the future (field notes, 28 June 2021). The challenge is to find the right balance between structure and flexibility to ensure that planning remains a useful tool for shaping desirable futures.

Producing indeterminacy: The present as a space of potentiality

As discussed in the previous section, the planners in Halle have oscillated between near and distant futures, maintaining the long-term vision of redeveloping the centre of Neustadt and revitalizing the Hochhausscheiben while adapting to emerging (im)possibilities. The challenge is not only to strike this balance but also to effectively communicate the vision to a wider audience, convincing them to get involved in co-creating the future. In 2021, the city of Halle produced a brochure based on the 'Neustadt Centre Structural Concept' to showcase Neustadt's potential, particularly to investors and the public. This effort illustrates a key move in future-making in a mode of standby: the production of indeterminacy. As I will now show, the production of indeterminacy is the result of the uncertain and open future in the present and an integral part of planners' efforts to promote co-creation.

I draw on Ringel's study of Bremerhaven's urban infrastructure transformation, which highlights moments when the present has been re-evaluated and expectations for the future recalibrated, involving the production of indeterminacy (Ringel, 2018: 69). For example, Columbusstraße, the city's main street, lost its function and value after deindustrialization, being considered

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even a 'material obstacle to the city's future' (ibid.: 75) and a failure of 1970s urban planning. Later, urban planning reconsidered Columbusstraße's potential for new connections, revaluing Columbusstraße. In this moment of revaluation, as Ringel argues, planners rendered the street's existence indeterminate by 'referring its contemporary existence to the past while excluding its present from the future' (ibid.). With the example of Columbusstraße, Ringel shows that indeterminacy is not inherent to the future but is actively produced in the 'moment of (temporal) revaluation' (ibid.: 74). Ringel suggests that when dismissed infrastructures are reinvented, 'ideas of the future already roam the present' (ibid.: 86). Taking Ringel's argument to Halle, I suggest that the city's 2021 brochure renders the centre of Neustadt and the high-rises indeterminate. It does so through temporal narratives that emphasize the distant past and the future while overlooking the immediate past and the present, and through messages and a visual language that highlight the architectural neutrality, flexibility, and potentiality of the site.

First, the brochure emphasizes the historical significance of the Hochhausscheiben while downplaying their more recent past, often framed as a period of decline. By focusing on their origins, it disconnects the present from the immediate past, creating space for new possibilities. In doing so, it activates the present as a space of potentiality by pointing toward an imminent future, reflected in the brochure's subtitle, 'Impulses from the Centre', and its objective to 'give an impetus' (interview with the architect, 27 November 2018). The renovation of high-rise A is presented as evidence that change is underway (City of Halle, 2021: 6). Shortly before the editorial deadline, one planner hastily took photos of the newly completed façade. It had been agreed that the photo needed to be taken in good weather – to produce an image that conveyed optimism and suggested that the future had already begun. Although it took several more days for the weather to improve, the planner chose to wait rather than digitally enhance the existing image. Earlier photos had already been taken, but in them, a construction crane was still in place, and building A remained covered with tarpaulins. The longer the brochure's finalization was delayed, the more likely it became that the placeholder photo could be replaced with a photo showing the completed building under clear skies (field notes, 12 April 2021, 12 May 2021, 17 May 2021).

In 2021, the city's alderman expressed optimism, anticipating that a future for all five high-rise buildings would be defined within 3 years (interview, 28 May 2021). Meanwhile, convincing other stakeholders of this potential remains central to the concept and the brochure. Similar to Bremerhaven, the build-

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ings' temporal existence has been deliberately destabilized; the recent past is erased to emphasize future potential, aligning with Catherine Alexander and Andrew Sanchez's notion of indeterminacy as 'an imaginary state that provides the precondition for certain value-creating interventions' (Alexander and Sanchez, 2018: 2).

Second, the brochure repositions the high-rises as flexible structures capable of diverse future uses. Visualizations from commissioned studies demonstrate adaptability and transformative potential and frame the high-rises as objects awaiting reinterpretation. The city planners argue that developing and visualizing possibilities facilitates conversations about transforming the area and the buildings. The feasibility of renovation often depends on perceived suitability for various uses and the capacity to support diverse future needs. Indeterminacy, evoked through images and ideas, becomes a central strategy in this process. An open future – defined by adaptability – emerges as critical in navigating the uncertainties of urban redevelopment and the future's contingency. Structures that can easily adapt to contemporary needs lower construction costs, increase profitability, and appeal to prospective tenants. Consequently, the flexibility of the structures has been a recurring and contentious topic among planners and architects. As early as 2002, for example, a group of architects developing a redevelopment concept for Halle-Neustadt's centre described the structure of the Hochhausscheiben as follows: 'If it is stripped down and cleaned, skeletonized, so to speak, the naked structure of the stacked levels remains; it remains usable cubature. It is existing capital that merely needs to be reinterpreted. The functionally neutral structure allows for various possible uses' (ARGE Architektur und Planung, 2002, preamble to part 4 of the concept).

Visual imagery is not merely illustrative but strategic, helping to demonstrate the potentiality of the Hochhausscheiben. Reflecting on this, the city's alderman shared: 'I've also noticed that they [investors] can't imagine some things, but after conversations, examples, and trying it out, there's this kind of "aha effect"' (interview, 28 May 2021). In 2014, for example, representatives from the state's Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment used visualizations from an international urban design workshop on Halle-Neustadt when attending real estate fairs to attract potential buyers for the Hochhausscheiben. The professor leading the student workshop told me that, unlike the eastern German participants, the international students focused solely on the buildings' solid structural condition – they were not influenced by the negative image of prefabricated housing estates in Germany. They identified

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the main issue as the absence of people, rather than any inherent flaw in the architecture. As the professor explained, the workshop aimed to demonstrate precisely this point – that the buildings could indeed be revitalized. And in the professor's view, the students had succeeded in proving that conversion was indeed possible (interview, 27 November 2018). These visualizations simplified the complexity of the buildings by focusing on their structural framework to emphasize flexibility. This process, as I interpret it, generates indeterminacy. While the preservation of the high-rises has been defined as a political goal, the city administration stresses that the future's form remains open. Similarly, the architects commissioned for the Structural Concept in 2018 used black-and-white renderings, depicting the buildings and their surroundings as neutral volumes functioning as vessels, emphasizing adaptability over specificity.

However, the approach and strategy of the city and state – to develop concepts and visualizations that show the high-rises as neutral cubes that convey the message of a place 'where any dream can be realized' – has caused scepticism among the citizens of Halle. They have perceived a persistent gap between vision and reality. Public frustration culminated in 2014 during forums where participants criticized the steps taken by the city as a superficial tactic to buy time, accusing the administration of 'doing something without doing anything' (Halle Spektrum, 12 February 2014). Over the years, the primary role of the concepts has been to draw attention to the buildings and to create spaces of possibility, thus acting as a 'device of interessement' intended to generate publics and enable the 'enrolment' of investors (Callon, 1984: 211). In addition, as I understood it, the commissioning of concepts was simply one of the things that could be done. Unfortunately, this has not led to any visible development of the buildings for many years.

As Dawdy (2010: 772) points out, modern ruins are 'continually re-created out of a conjunction of imagination and materiality'. The same can be said of standby, which operates as a configuration that stabilizes the potentiality of the future. The hope for future development ties the city administration to the buildings in the form of a promise that is non-binding but rather an 'organising agencement [assemblage] that is only somewhat monitored. This almost uncontrollable presence in absence (or virtuality) of the promise attunes the time-space in a perhaps reliably loose way – and demands endurance to keep it staying' (Färber 2019: 267). To keep the future open, the city engages in maintaining (the potentiality of) standby. One fundamental condition of standby is the anticipation of an 'on' – or at least the possibility of a future decision.

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For the city of Halle and its planners, the production of indeterminacy is a way of embracing contingency and uncertainty with the overarching aim of securing a future for the Hochhausscheiben ensemble. This involves deliberately blurring the material characteristics of the structures to emphasize their adaptability and openness to new uses. The aim is to preserve not only through conservation, but also through adaptive transformation in collaboration with private partners. Ultimately, by producing indeterminacy, the planners seek to keep the present flexible, ready to pivot towards a range of future possibilities. The present state of the buildings is thus framed as a moment of potential rather than finality. By rendering the present indeterminate, Halle's city planners hope to mobilize both public and private actors towards a shared vision of the future, one that remains open and full of promise.

Conclusion

The case of the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt sheds light on future-making in a standby mode. After 1989/90, these high-rises became symbols of uncertainty, characterized by decay, speculation, and a lack of clear future prospects. Unlike interim spaces in the cities of Copenhagen or Bremerhaven that await gentrification (Ringel, 2020; Lapiņa, 2021), the Hochhausscheiben exist as objects without a market for them. As one city planner said: 'The problem is that I have a product that is simply not in demand – too bad!' (interview, 2 October 2018). However, these buildings invite the (re)making of futures without prescribing their form or time frame. The standby mode thus appears as a socio-material form of engaging with uncertainty and contingency.

This chapter partially challenges Lisa Baraitser's as well as Kemmer, Kühn, Otto, and Weber's framing of standby as a durational power and coping mechanism in times of crises (Kemmer et al., 2021). While their perspective highlights standby's role in enabling persistence, the findings from Halle reveal its function as a strategy for sustaining futurity. Here, standby is not just about persistence or claiming more equitable futures but about maintaining the openness of the future. It reflects the impossibility of determining futures in the present and goes beyond merely coping with contingency – it embodies a form of waiting that anticipates private investment while balancing a lack of agency, possibility, and uncertainty. This dynamic points to a temporal agency that ensures the future remains accessible yet undefined.

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Throughout the sections of this chapter, we have come across different practices of making the future and the different forms the future takes within these practices. As I have shown, scenario-building, initially a tool for political decision-making on preservation, has evolved into a framework for preparedness while navigating unpredictability. The role of scenario-building thus changed with the growing uncertainty over whether preservation of the Hochhausscheiben could actually be achieved. Today, it allows planners to have a sense of being able to respond to and be prepared for all eventualities. This aligns with a shift in urban planning described in the literature, where uncertainty is no longer an obstacle but a generative condition. The other practices of future-making – navigating short- and long-term futures and producing indeterminacy – also refer to the presence of the uncertain future as it is in a standby present. Standby forces planners to constantly negotiate temporal horizons, preserving the potentiality of the present while holding space for futures yet to be made. This strategic indeterminacy allows planners to remain ready for action, ensuring that even in periods of inactivity, the possibility of reactivation and revitalization endures.

This chapter argues that standby, as a mode of post-industrial and post-socialist being, offers a distinctive way of engaging with the future – a continuous process of future-un/making, in which uncertainty and possibility coexist. Planners' efforts reflect both the exhaustion and resilience needed to sustain urban futures shaped by hope and precarity. Navigating stasis and change, they cultivate an openness to multiple potentialities rather than pursuing a fixed trajectory. Standby thus emerges not as passive state but as a productive force – resisting closure while preserving the potential for transformation, embodying the unique space-time entanglements of post-industrial and post-socialist spaces. Standby affects those seeking futures for vacant buildings. It is '*not energetically neutral*' (Wiedemann, 2021: 44; emphasis in original), as it demands money, emotion, and work to maintain the buildings' availability and potential. In eastern German municipalities anticipating renewed vacancy, urban strategies institutionalize standby: Some buildings are designated as 'observation properties' and placed in a state of minimal maintenance (Röding et al., 2017). Standby, here, emerges both as a symptom and a strategy of negotiating the uncertain futures of the built environment.

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