Beyond Type – The Zurich undercommons

Zürich intends to densify its built areas by approximately 20% by 2040. This argument is used to justify the strategy of the Ersatzneubau that characterises the transformation of many areas in the city. Moreover, densification is used as a reason to demolish many existing buildings that do not seem fit for transformation, whether former industrial areas or more recent buildings that were not conceived to live in. But even apartment buildings make place for apartment buildings.

Intuitively, we feel that this is not the world we want to create. So firstly, we ask ourselves: for whom does the city wish to densify? Which people and practices are considered? The current Ersatzneubauten seem to offer mostly generic models of urbanity: apartments catering for standard families, collective spaces with coffee bars and upscale supermarkets, and public spaces designed for polite leisure.

As the Ersatzneubau replaces the material substance of the buildings, it also risks to erase often overlooked usages and practices that currently inhabit them. Practices that operate in the fringes of society and shelter those bodies and activities often unacknowledged, in service and/or in precarity: brothels, laundromats for hotel linen, temporary housing for construction workers, industrial kitchens, unofficial economic activities, drug addiction centres, arrival infrastructures. We all benefit from their existence, but wish to neglect them as part of the city's program.

Existing buildings possess an interesting duality: as built form, they seem fixed and unchangeable, while their mere material existence and multiple temporalities demonstrate a will to be appropriated and reinterpreted. Being solid and liquid simultaneously, present urban architecture seems to question the reciprocal relationship between matter and use. What if we, as architects, not only consider the re-use of existing buildings in material terms, but also in terms of the immaterial activities, scenarios, bodies and usages that inhabit them?

This master studio will engage with these practices that we consider crucial to make a city function but that are always the first to be pushed away. We understand them as undercommons, a term we speculatively lend from Fred Moten & David Harney's eponymous book. In Moten & Harney's terms, the undercommons are regimes of solidarity and co-existence between excluded groups and overlooked activities that do not need to be fixed, but should be seen as real alternatives.

Firstly, we will look for these undercommoning practices in the context of Zürich, both historically as of today. We will explore the urban role of these practices, but also their agency in constructing and reconstructing the built environment. Then, we will address them through a critical and historical study of architectural "types", the worldviews they import and often impose. As these practices do not fit into existing architectural typologies, they are often not considered relevant in the face of redevelopment. However, the very absence of type is precisely what they thrive on. How can we as architects deal with that contradiction? Finally, we will develop a design strategy that redefines the idea of an architectural project when working in existing urban fabrics for uses that exist beyond type.

From this perspective re-use and durability are understood both (i) as the capacity of the architecture of the city to transform and adapt through time, and (ii) as the aptitude of the architecture of the city to create a common urban environment that can accommodate a variety of urban citizens and practices.

We will ask ourselves: can we design beyond type, as a kind of un-type or non-type? Can we factor in appropriation, regimes of invisibility and inaccessibility as a strategy to design for undercommoning activities and practices? How can design and spatial strategy give these practices the right to exist while also allowing them to stay somewhat ungraspable? And, how does the constructive agency of these undercommoning practices make us think differently about the character of an architectural project and the role of the architect?

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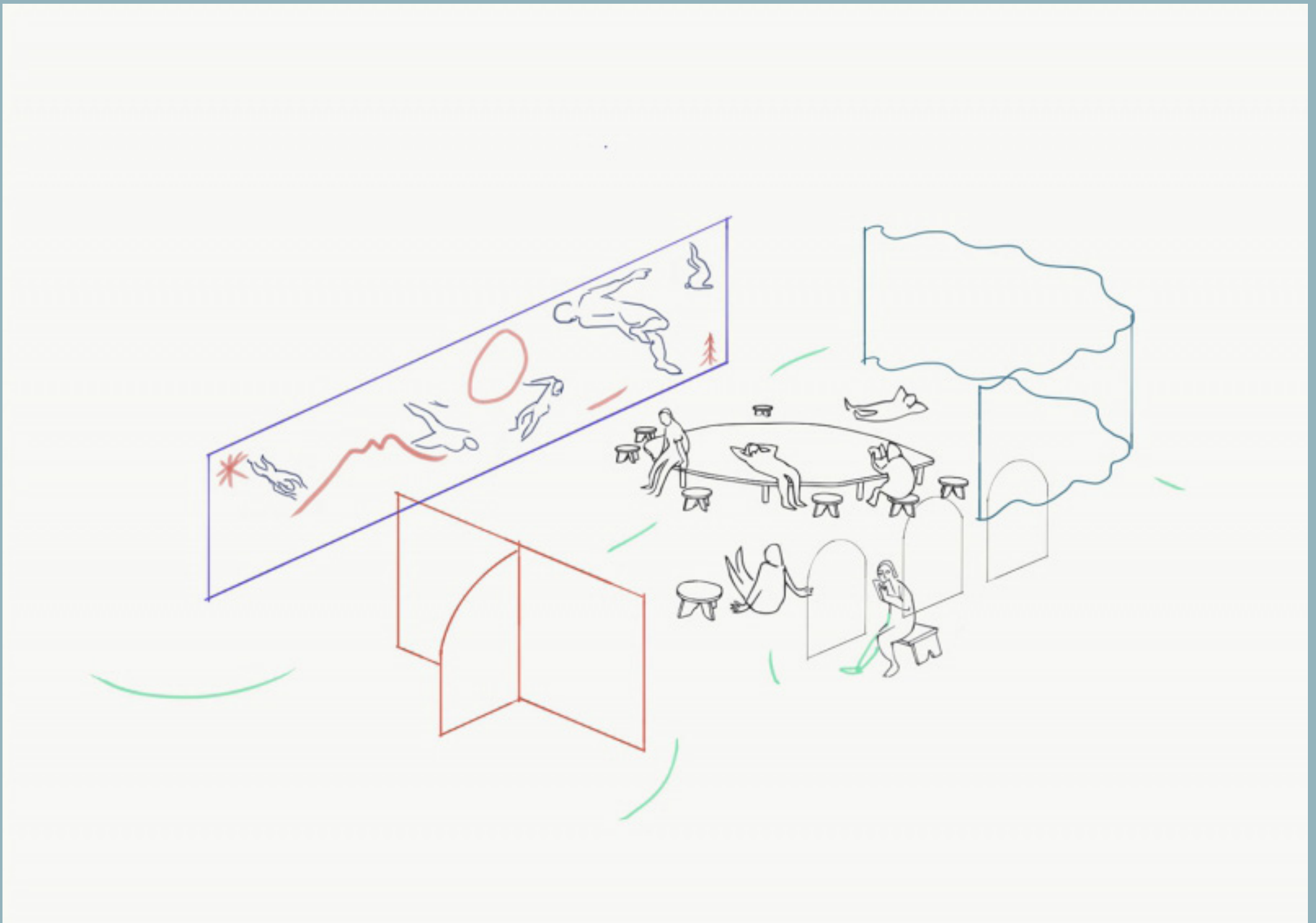
Christian Nyampeta, Study for Words after the World, 2017

Beyond Type — The Zurich undercommons

Preparation phase
- understand the given existing built site through profound research on its history, its structure, its expression, its tangible and intangible qualities and characteristics, concluding on how to trust in what is there
- engage with Zurich's undercommons: discover and engage with the invisible urban realities through the practice of walking and talking, concluding on which practices could come into conversation with the built site you work on
- study Zurich's undercommons through looking into the history of subversive practices inhabiting the city over time, focussing on the transformative role of these practices in the production of the city
- explore the tradition of re-use through studying historical examples, considering the relationship between the spatial, material and technical design choices and the capacity of buildings to transform and to create common urban environments
- reflect upon the role of practices of co-construction and prefabrication within the broader practice of architectural reuse

Elaboration phase
- develop a design strategy redefining the agency of the architect when working in existing urban fabric for uses that exist beyond type
- find an appropriate representation for making an architecture that embraces uses that are usually overlooked and neglected, uses that are the first to make place through the mechanisms of gentrification
- engage architecturally with the unfinished and ever evolving, how to design for something in motion

Work to be done in preparation phase
teaching formats
- in situ working and discussing
- seminars
- lectures
- visits

research and working formats
- archival research
- site survey or analysis
- drawings, models of the existing building and its context
- in situ interventions
- reflections on co-construction as design strategy

Expected outcome
During the preparation phase students will be asked to compose
A TRAVELOGUE

- understood as a series of narratives that reflect, in words and images, the various explorations and reflections
- that discovers the variety of Zurich undercommons, echoing Italo Calvino's claim in the renown book Invisible Cities that "For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name."
- that depicts building types as the spatial and material expression of particular worldviews, including social, cultural and economic ideas
- that narrates the architecture of the city as a matter that transforms and adapts through time, and has the capacity to accommodate a common urban environment

In order to gain insight into the building site, following work will be required

GROUP
- the theoretical study of the history of the building and its authors, owners and users
- a good understanding of the challenges at stake through interaction with different stakeholders.
- a detailed survey of the building and its surrounding to understand structural qualities, scale, flexibility and the translation of this information in a clear and accessible document

INDIVIDUAL
- a true understanding of the host space through scrutinising both the material aspects and the intangible, atmospheric qualities of the place through one's own senses, translating observations and impressions in sketches, models and in-situ interventions.

Ratio of grading by cooperation partners

Preparation phase

Chair An Fonteyne: 50% / Chair Tom Avermaete: 50% / Chair Benjamin Dillenburger: 0%

Elaboration phase

Chair An Fonteyne: 50% / Chair Tom Avermaete: 30% / Chair Benjamin Dillenburger: 20%

Master thesis HS21

Professur An Fonteyne + Professur Tom Avermaete + Professur Benjamin Dillenburger