

Beyond Type – The Zurich undercommons

Zurich 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.

We ask ourselves, for whom does the city want to densify? Which people and practices are considered? As the Ersatzneubau replaces the material substance of the buildings, it also risks erasing 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: Frauenhäuser, laundromats for hotel linen, temporary housing for construction workers, industrial kitchens, unofficial economic activities, brothels, asylum centres. The city benefits from their existence, but in practice wishes to neglect them as part of its program.

Existing buildings possess multi-layered dualities: as built form, they seem fixed and unchangeable, while through their mere material existence and multiple temporalities, they are able to be appropriated and reinterpreted. 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, people, 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 borrow 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. We take this as a reminder of the diversity and complexity of the city. The undercommons presents to us an often neglected spatial intelligence and reconfiguration of architectural type, expressed in the appropriation of existing buildings and spaces.

In this master studio, we aim to learn from these neglected actors and practices. We hold that an in-depth study of, with and through the undercommons can offer us clues to design according to different values than those that result in the generic ‘types’ of neighbourhoods, buildings and spaces that continue to emerge all over our cities.

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

We will ask ourselves: within the context of densifying Zurich, can we design an alternative, more inclusive and multi-layered architecture of the city, by engaging more profoundly with the existing material and social ‘undercommons’ presences? Does an engagement with the undercommons offer us the possibility to think beyond the standard ‘types’ of housing, collective and public spaces? 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 these activities and practices? Can we, as architects, creatively and spatially engage with the undercommons, not only as a site of interest but also as a site of care? Further, how does such an engagement with the undercommons make us think differently about the character of an architectural project and the role of the architect?

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Preparation phase: Methods of undercommoning

- Through embodied site analysis, understand the given site through in-depth research on its history, its structure, its expression, its tangible and intangible qualities and characteristics, concluding on making legible that which is overlooked and spatially relevant to the built site.
- Build knowledge and literacy on the concept of the undercommons, and bring this in conversation with architectural production today, engage critically with both historical and contemporary understandings of overlooked activities and spatial elements within the area through image making (drawing, collaging, film etc).
- Engage with Zurich’s undercommons:
- discover and engage with at least one invisible urban reality in detail through the practice of critical walking, talking and spatially recording; arriving at a practice that could come into conversation with the built site you work on.
- Explore the history of subversive practices in the city over time, focusing on the transformative role of these practices in the production of the city, identifying what roles, responsibilities and possible opportunities they play in shifting real estate values in the site arguing for continued occupation; ultimately engaging with raising social durability as critical to development.
- Explore the tradition of re-use through studying historical and contemporary examples, considering the relationship between the spatial, material and technical design choices with an interest to understand the capacity of buildings to transform and create common urban environments.
- Understand the built site in construction detail concluding on an awareness of how existing materials perform in the area of focus concluding on an assessment of how to keep existing elements, aligning with ecological durability and climate responsibility of architectural practice.
- Situate research work, research question and brief within the broader Master’s Thesis theme of durability as set out by Elli Mosayebi. State and visually show how the site and scope of exploration relate to durability and how the conceptual framework is applicable for the elaboration phase. Set base for spatial argument.
- Find an appropriate medium of representation for making that articulates knowledge harvested through conceptual framework, and that speaks to undercommoning with an architectural and multi-actor legibility. In doing so, the medium should determine and state who the audience of the research is.

Elaboration phase: Beyond type

- Develop an undercommoning design strategy redefining the agency of the architect when working in existing urban fabric for uses that exist beyond traditional types.
- Find an appropriate representation for making architecture that embraces uses that are usually overlooked and neglected. Use of representation that is critically applicable for conceptual approach.

- Engage architecturally with the unfinished, ever-evolving and ongoing, challenging approaches to building for that which is in motion.
- In responding to the brief set in the research phase, use your intended architectural design proposition to articulate the thesis argument.

Expected outcome

During the preparation phase students will be asked to compose:

A TRAVELOGUE travelogue / diary / logbook

- understood as a series of narratives that reflect, in images and words, the various explorations, reflections and critical understanding of the site.
- that discovers the variety of Zurich undercommons, echoing Italo Calvino’s claim in the renowned 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 and well represented record of the challenges at stake through interaction with different stakeholders and actors.
- 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 multi-layered 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.
- Development of conceptual framework and use of architectural proposition as the basis for thesis argument.

Ratio of grading by cooperation partners

Preparation phase

Chair An Fonteyne: 50% / Chair Tom Avermaete: 50%

Elaboration phase

Chair An Fonteyne: 50% / Chair Tom Avermaete: 50%

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