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Cooperative planning under pro-development urban agenda? A collage of densification practices in Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Like in many cities and regions worldwide, densification is the current urban development paradigm in Switzerland. Although considered one of the main policy mechanisms for sustainable land use, densification strategies are mainly employed by the private sector, causing adverse social effects. Additionally, profit-oriented urban planning challenges the traditionally exercised norm of cooperative planning. By analysing multiple case studies of densification projects in Zurich, this paper elucidates the nature of cooperation in contemporary urban planning: Is cooperation perceived as genuine inclusion of the weaker parties, or is it dominated by the negotiations between the powerful ones? To address such questions, we examine the main cooperative mechanisms and bottlenecks to achieve effective cooperation; the dominant alliances in planning; and the ways these actors identify compromises. The research reveals an elite-driven and pro-development collaboration approach among public authorities, landowners, and developers with minor integration of less powerful actors, despite the continuous effort to advance (formal and informal) planning instruments to secure social inclusion. Consequently, the study offers some directions for refining contemporary Zurich's mainstream planning approach to address the challenges posed by the neoliberal discourse and practice, hence, being relevant for similar socio-spatial settings confronting a pro-development urban agenda.

1. Introduction

Land in densely populated urban regions worldwide has become scarce and is a highly contested urban resource. As a result, the current urban planning paradigm in many cities is to densify the existing settlements (e.g., Dembski et al., 2020; Holman et al., 2015). Densification should have three main sustainability benefits: (1) to protect unbuilt land and biodiversity and prevent further land uptake, (2) to help reduce CO2 emissions from mobility and energy through compact development, (3) and to increase the supply of housing (Wicki et al., 2022). Despite the evident sustainability benefits, densification also leads to a more intense commodification of urban land whereas different actors engage in contestations of how urban land is used, valued, and distributed (Harvey, 1973; Logan & Molotch, 1987). This is exemplified by the

financialisation of urban development, understood as an increasing dominance of financial actors, markets, practices, measurements, and narratives at various scales (Aalbers, 2019).

In Switzerland, densification has become the central paradigm in spatial planning policy, practice and research.¹ Densification was introduced as a legally binding policy objective in the revised Swiss Federal Spatial Planning Act of 2014, obliging the Swiss cantons and municipalities to apply the principle of 'inward development' (RPG SR700). According to the recent statistical data provided by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO, 2021), between 2013 and 2018, the population grew by 10.9%, while the settlement area grew by 5.9%, while in the previous statistical period (2004–2009), the population had grown by 6.7%, and the settlement area had expanded by 9.6%. Other studies also confirm the rise of construction activities in the existing settlement areas (Lutz

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¹ Some of the recent scientific projects dealing with the topic of densification are: "Green and Dense Cities," by Future Cities Lab, the Singapore ETH Centre (<https://fcl.ethz.ch/research/cycles-and-districts/dense-and-green-cities.html>), "Densifying Switzerland: Acceptance and Public Support for Densification Projects in Swiss Cities," by the ETH Chair of Spatial Development and Urban Policy (<https://spur.ethz.ch/research-overview/spatial-planning-and-development/-densifying.html>), and "Governing Densification," by the University of Bern, Unit for Political Urbanism and Sustainable Spatial Development (<https://www.goverdense.org>).

et al., 2023). As expected, the highest densification ratio has been perceived in great urban centres – Zurich as an economic node and Geneva as the seat of international organisations – with the assumed density in the newly built areas of 20,000 people per km² (FSO, 2021). Although environmentally-responsible densification can contribute to increased diversity of land uses across smaller areas, shorter distances, preservation of city nature, and high-quality open public and recreational spaces (Jiang et al., 2023; Perić et al., 2023), large urban redevelopment projects usually create socio-economic disparities like displacement, gentrification and social exclusion (Debrunner et al., 2020; Gerber & Debrunner, 2022; Kaufmann et al., 2023).

The direct democracy of Switzerland implies that planning decisions and urban development projects can be contested by Swiss citizens (Debrunner et al., 2022; Keller et al., 1996; Papamichail & Perić, 2023; Wicki & Kaufmann 2022). Accordingly, cooperative planning – planning to gain consensus about visions for urban development using various participatory tools and with planners acting as facilitators in the process – is considered a norm in Swiss urban planning practice (Scholl & Hoch, 2018; Steiner, 2003). Hence, the principles such as ‘participatory democracy’ (Taylor, 1999), ‘inclusionary argumentation’ (Healey, 1997), and ‘voices of ordinary people’ (Innes, 1995), as deeply embedded into the collaborative planning theory, seem to convincingly match the Swiss direct democracy socio-political setting. More precisely, initiatives to institutionalise participatory local urban planning (Stadt Zürich, 2006), informal collaborative planning instruments – the test planning method (Scholl, 2017) or competition of ideas (Papamichail, 2019), bottom-up mechanisms oriented towards consensus-building (e.g., *Drehscheibe*), and tailored-made procedures for planners to act as jugglers over diverse interests (Grams, 2019; Perić & Hoch, 2017) found a fruitful ground in the Swiss spatial planning context.

However, challenges to genuine collaborative planning are numerous: sluggish regulatory changes disable full embrace of various argumentations in the policy-making process (Sudau & Grêt-Regamey, 2023), initiatives to ingrain participatory mechanisms into formal planning instruments get rejected (Stadt Zürich, 2022b), local authorities and economically powerful developers exclusively focus on specific development interests (Debrunner & Kaufmann, 2023), and municipalities lack financial and personnel capacity to resist landowners’ needs and goals (Debrunner & Hengstermann, 2023). Given the complexity of densifying existing settlements, the planning instrument of the special land use plan (*Sondernutzungsplan*) has recently gained prevalence over more traditional land use and zoning regulations. By fuelling the neo-performative planning approach, i.e., prioritising projects of the private sector over the regulatory planning instruments (plans), such a tool ultimately favours economic benefits over social and environmental planning outcomes.

With previous in mind, in this article, we test the resilience of cooperative planning in rapidly densifying urban environments. More precisely, we examine how goals planning has been set upfront by the societal challenges (e.g., profit-oriented, pro-development, neoliberal discourse) affect the very nature of planning as an activity aimed at protecting the public interest. In other words, is cooperation still perceived as an exchange among broad actor-networks with planners facilitating the overall discourse and process, or does it gradually become oriented towards planners making partnerships with more powerful stakeholders “from which the city can profit” and not necessarily all affected parties (Interview, city planner 2)? By studying a collage of planning processes in several urban densification projects in Zurich, we elucidate the patterns driving current urban development processes and explain the nature of interaction among numerous stakeholders (e.g., self-interest-driven, directed towards a common good, or hybrid) and identify the main cooperative mechanisms undertaken; major bottlenecks in achieving effective cooperation; the main allies and key opponents; and the ways of identifying compromise. By attending to the nature of cooperation – genuinely inclusive or elite-driven, the research tends to reveal the nuances of social inclusion in

various planning mechanisms and instruments in contemporary Zurich’s urban development.

The paper continues with a brief literature overview of various control mechanisms that tackle a pro-development urban agenda, to underscore practical values and theoretical principles of the collaborative planning paradigm. Such an overview distils pragmatic levels of social inclusion that will be examined through empirical cases. Preceded by a description of the research methodology, the central part of the paper illustrates diverse actor-networks in three cases of urban development in Zurich. The discussion section identifies the extent to which different levels of social inclusion were implemented in practical cases. The conclusion critically assesses the advantages and obstacles emerging from the stakeholders’ encounters in contemporary Swiss planning practice, finally providing some recommendations for advancing traditional cooperative planning influenced by neoliberal urban development.

2. Conceptual background: pragmatic levels of social inclusion

The threat over the ultimate goals of planning – the protection of the public interest, social equity and growth restrictions – exists in various socio-spatial settings (both developed and developing countries) as affected by the global trend of urban neoliberalism. Such global challenge directly questions the role of the public sector and the extent of governmental control vs. deregulation mechanisms (Fainstein, 2001). For example, the United States capitalism relies upon the market mentality, hence understanding government as a business and using planning as a tool for making business happen (Peck & Theodore, 2019; Petretta, 2020). In European traditionally liberal democracies with a strong capitalist outlook, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland, the extent of governmental support is limited to the one in favour of the private interest so that planning must respond to market conditions (Waldron, 2019), hence causing the de-democratisation of the planning system (Lennon & Waldron, 2019). Weakened European welfare democracies (e.g., in Scandinavia) struggle to provide more room for public deliberation and negotiation of the interests initially defined by developers (Machiels et al., 2021) as, instead of providing public goods, urban planning becomes the enabler of creating financial assets (Aalbers, 2019). In fragmented and politically polarised societies of Southern Europe (e.g., Greece and Italy) and the Middle East (e.g., Turkey), financial interests for monetising the land (without attending to social values) are coupled with ‘capital urbanisation’ and ‘populism’ (Perić & D’hondt, 2022; Savini & Aalbers, 2016; Tansel, 2017; Sager, 2019). In post-socialist European countries, influential political figures emerge as vital collaborators and facilitators of developers’ concepts, thereby establishing a foundation for the ‘top-top’ approach, involving a state-driven mechanism of urban development embedded into ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Müller & Trubina, 2020; Perić & Maruna, 2022; Zeković et al., 2023-a). In the Global South, the ‘privatisation of planning’ tends to replace local administration with private governance (Shatkin, 2011).

As planning usually transforms into the tool serving the interactions among powerful parties, the previous evidence proves that governmental control is not enough in tackling a pro-development agenda. Instead, effective control mechanisms emerge through bottom-up informal initiatives (Papamichail & Perić, 2023), using experiential learning (and not only expert facilitation) as a mechanism to support collaboration (Ataöv & Haliloğlu Kahraman, 2009) and relying upon the skills and knowledge of the non-governmental and community organisations (Piletić, 2022; Yuan et al., 2021). Furthermore, genuine involvement often improved the quality of plans even as it required more effort and investment than anticipated (Yuan et al., 2021). Most notably, efforts to mandate collaboration, i.e., to formally impose the procedures and mechanisms that request broad participation of diverse stakeholders, involvement in many phases of joint plan-making, and consensus-based decision-making, were ineffective (Majoor, 2018). On

the contrary, the collaboration proved useful when those affected shared uncertainty about the future, as it often failed when a minority of the actors enjoyed unilateral assurance, e.g., ownership over the land in question, legitimacy in decision-making, and economic supremacy, which all may trump democratic inclusion (Knaap et al., 2015; Knieling et al., 2015). Consequently, compromises emerge when potential antagonists generate enough uncertainty to allow modest give and take (Salet et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the collaborative paradigm proved to be a building block of the various policy toolkits (Perić et al., 2021). Notably, Damsurski and Oleksy (2018), based on the extensive discourse analysis of the key urban and territorial planning policies (global and European) that emerged since the beginning of the new millennium, identified significant trends and principles related to the communicative/collaborative paradigm as ingrained in planning policies.

Finally, considerable criticism over the collaborative planning tenets is not negligible and revolves around the following: the idealistic nature of enabling everyone to express their own needs and interests equally (Harris, 2002; Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000), consensus as the 'death of difference' (Hillier, 2003), and collaboration as a smokescreen to the real decision-making hence reinforcing polarised power-geometries (Ruming, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2011). To address such critiques, collaboration theorists stress that power can be understood as the management of uncertainty in specific situations. Therefore, it is not inequity that necessarily undermines democratic collaboration, but inequity generated by the systematic uneven distribution of uncertainty (Hoch, 2019). Ultimately, informed by Habermas's (1985) lore revolving around the 'power of good argument' and Giddens's (1984) acknowledgement of the importance of agency (and not only structure) in social and political processes, the collaborative approach gained traction because it spoke to the practical challenge planning faced (Freidmann, 1987; Healey, 1992, 1997; Innes, 1995, 1996; Booher & Innes, 2002; Innes & Booher, 2010).

Inspired by previous practical and theoretical research and to address the research problem recognised by this study, we offer the conceptual framework composed by five pragmatic levels of social inclusion. Namely, differing in the nature of the exchange, the extent of mutual interaction among stakeholders, and the effect of such encounters, we describe five nuances of social inclusion, starting from the least demanding to the most complex one, as follows.

- Exchange: disclosure of information among various stakeholders about facts and beliefs; an essential step towards fostering mutual understanding, conflict-resolution and consensus-building.
- Sharing: active feedback among stakeholders through conversation and reciprocating of facts and beliefs in the context of the problem perceived.
- Coordination: capitalization on previous levels to adjust strategies, plans and expectations guiding stakeholders' roles and conduct for the situation; these may be unilateral or mutual adjustments.
- Collaboration: meaningful stakeholders' engagement and agreement on joint action in practical ways to obtain previously unattainable ends.
- Governance: stakeholders' amendment of personal ends to align more closely with initial opponents to attain projects neither could obtain without collective action.

Attaining certain levels of social inclusion within urban redevelopment processes can become challenging when one or more stakeholders possess unilateral certainty. Nevertheless, it remains important to delineate these levels, as they articulate the necessary conditions for fostering social discourse and offer a valuable guide for democratic planning. Since processes of social inclusion, participation, or collaboration are inherently tied to the specific context of planning and the involved stakeholders (Hofer & Kaufmann, 2022), the formulation of social inclusion levels demands careful consideration.

These levels of social inclusion are crafted with precision, using concepts that are sufficiently broad to encompass various scenarios, yet inclusive of variables that may exhibit variations across specific cases. In essence, accommodating an array of diverse strategies, agreements, and types of collective actions across collaborative planning endeavors, enables comprehensive and site-specific analyses that, since grounded in a robust framework, allow for potential generalisations across different scales, ranging from local to international.

3. Methodology and data

To examine the nature of actor-networks on the case of densification projects according to the previously mentioned pragmatic levels of social inclusion as a conceptual background, we applied qualitative in-depth multiple case study analysis as the main method. Relying upon the principle of data triangulation as a necessary condition to conduct valid qualitative research (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2023), the mixed-method case study approach included the following: 1) content analysis of the most relevant city regulatory and strategic documents and other informal reports (structural plan, city strategies, zoning plans, building laws, urban competitions' documentation, developer's studies and project visions, community organisations' protocols, etc.) – 19 documents in total; 2) discourse analysis of the newspaper articles from the Zurich daily press – including two prominent newspapers, *Tages Anzeiger* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* – covering in total 127 articles published between 2013 and 2022; and 3) examination of diverse stakeholders (developers, landowners, residents, community representatives, planning professionals, and city officials), including 12 interviews conducted between February 2022 and March 2023. The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling, i.e., informed by documentary and discourse analysis that helped to identify the key stakeholders involved in phases of strategic planning and project development. For details on the interviewees' position and experience, see the Appendix. The type of semi-structured interview allowed us to elucidate not only facts but also opinions and perceptions, providing an opportunity for each interviewee to cover the issues particularly important from their perspective.

The seemingly small number of interviews is because the same persons (e.g., developers, planning officers, and public representatives) have been assigned responsible roles in several planning processes covered by this research. Also, and in contrast to other interviewees (specifically developers), public representatives were challenging to reach (despite numerous attempts). To overcome the possible methodological shortcomings, only the most experienced senior members of each interviewee group were selected as informants (Harrison, 2002), and a combination of non-reactive data (public documents and newspaper articles) with reactive data (interviews) was applied to increase the reliability of the case study research (Webb et al., 1999). Finally, the background data were obtained through attending three public exhibitions (held in May and September 2022 and June 2023), six exploratory interviews with the larger group of informants (e.g., city planning officers and project managers) responsible for similar urban redevelopment projects, and informal talks with the locals, while conducting the field research on the selected sites.

Taking Alstetten, one of the fastest-densifying districts in Zurich, as a testbed, we select the cases of the Koch Areal, Tueffenwies School Area, and HdM project site to showcase diverse dynamics of cooperation based on various triggers of urban (re)development, manifold formal and informal tools used, plenty of stakeholders included and diverse interactions and power-geometries identified. The analysis focuses on.

- 1) the position of professional/public sector planners in urban densification (including different phases, e.g., first idea on development, formulating the development proposal, and implementation steps) towards developers, local authorities, and the community;

- 2) the approach applied and values promoted by developers (e.g., functional, directed to profit only and/or exercising political influence);
- 3) the strategies and mechanisms used by the local community to protect the local identity and local needs; and
- 4) the response of the public authorities (reactive, i.e., fully supportive to the investors' demands and/or proactive, i.e., enabling the setting for addressing both private and public interests).

As introduced in the conceptual framework, by integrating the previous research dimensions, the following findings critically reflect upon the levels of social inclusion by each stakeholder in each of the analysed cases.

4. Contemporary urban development in Zurich: shades of social inclusion in densification projects

The following section provides a brief illustration of the nuances and types of social inclusion exercised in the planning phase of three recent densification projects in one of Zurich's districts undergoing a considerable transformation of its built environment.

4.1. Altstetten: a fast-densifying Zurich's district

The district of Altstetten, in addition to the Oerlikon district, is one of the fastest-growing city areas (including residential growth and rising employment rates). Located in the western part of Zurich, the district covers 12.1 km² and extends from the Limmat River to the Uetliberg Foothills (Fig. 1). Following the predicted urban development scenario that Zurich's population would increase by more than 20 per cent by 2040, Altstetten confronts the severe challenge of housing additional

13,000 residents (Stadt Zürich Statistik, 2023). Such growing urban population and, consequently, increased urban densification demand further bring tremendous dynamics into the planning process and the ways of coordinating various and often conflicting interests, needs and visions of many urban stakeholders, stretched between pro-development agenda and gentrification as its outcome.

Another reason for choosing Altstetten is the prevalence of several communication channels that were established between stakeholders in the debate about densification. For example, in addition to the city-wide informal communication mechanisms, such as area management (co-ordination of spatial visions between the city planners and landowners), 'Participation for Zurich's Future' (internet platform), 'My Neighbourhood' (internet platform of the City of Zurich directed to the civil society actors), 'Diagonal' (est. in 2019) and 'Drehscheibe' (est. in 2021) are particularly popular in Altstetten, serving to inform the broader population and collect their inputs about the current urban development projects (Holenstein, 2023).

To narrow down the research, three distinct areas within the Altstetten district with dynamics actor-networks were selected: Koch Areal, depicting intense collaboration among the parties sharing similar visions despite numerous distractions; Tueffenwies School Area illustrating the expansion of stakeholders' interactions, from the initial neglect of different beliefs to participatory actions; and the HdM project that allowed for meaningful engagement yet under the pro-development agenda. The main stakeholders involved, the landownership structure and the future land use for each case are depicted in Fig. 2.

4.2. Koch Areal: pragmatic and place-insensitive approach

One of the most complex contemporary developments in Zurich, the Koch Areal revitalisation, brought to the fore an enormous number of

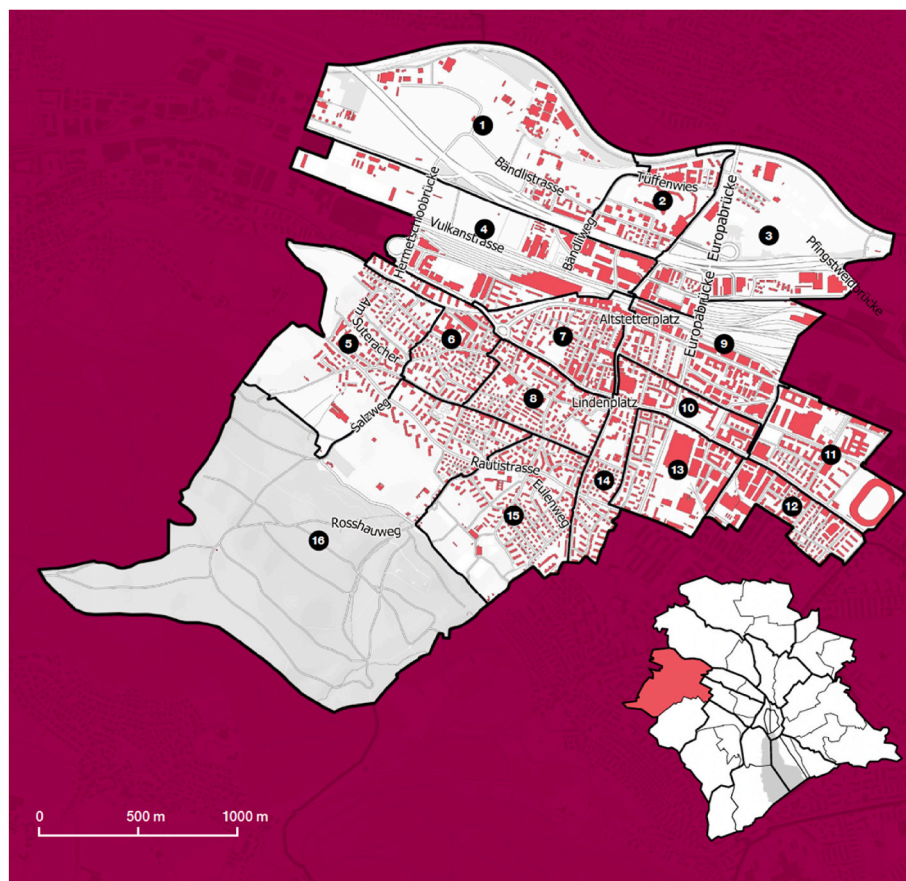


Fig. 1. The position of Altstetten within the urban area of Zurich. Source: Stadt Zürich Statistik, 2023.

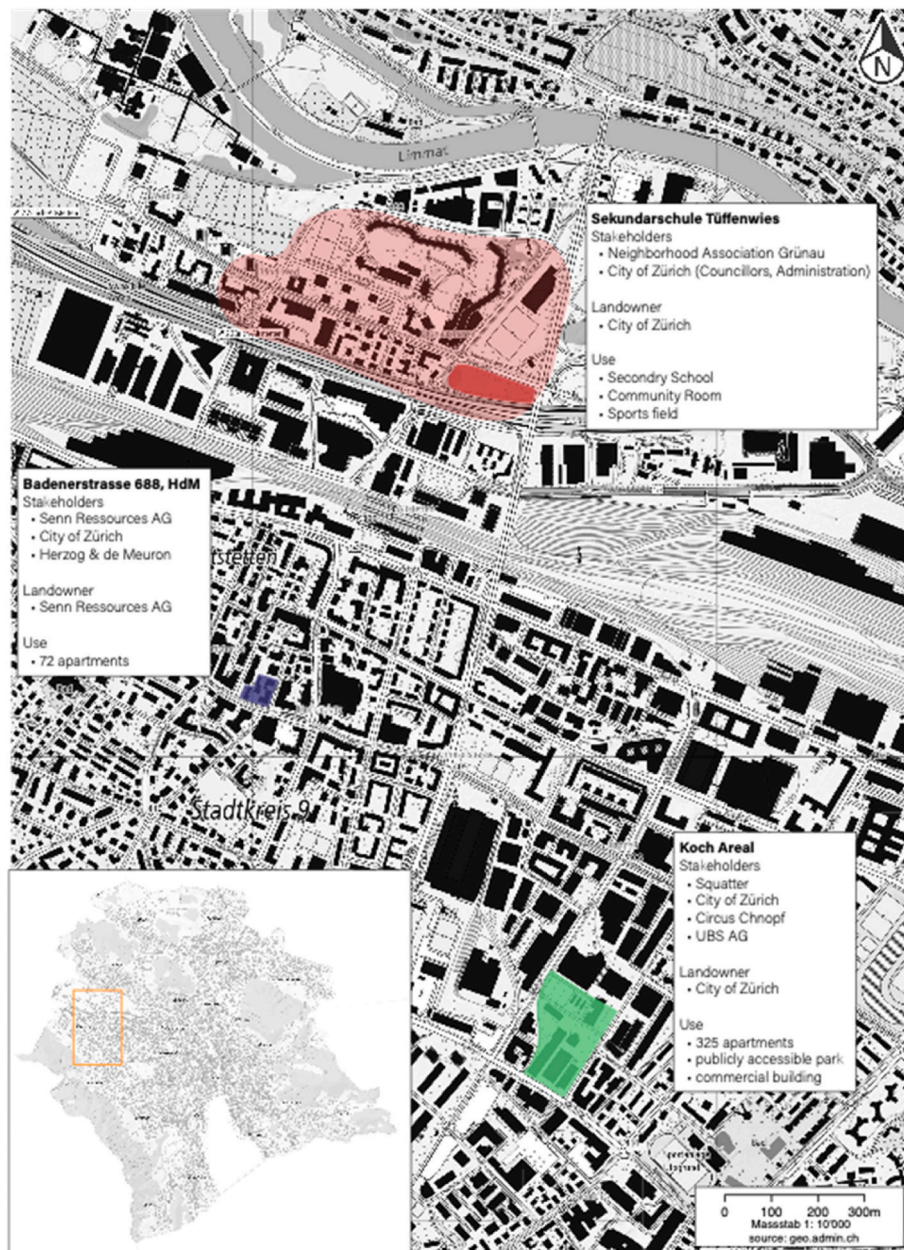


Fig. 2. The position of three selected cases within the neighbourhood of Altstetten. Source: Authors.

stakeholders, spanning politicians and planning professionals, for-profit developers and cooperatives, squatters and residents, with constant attention from the public. Stretched between the polarised visions of the SENN Development, a renowned profit-oriented regional developer active in many densification projects, and the traditionally strong squatter scene in Zurich, oriented towards strengthening immaterial values of the place, the project depicts numerous shifts in developmental directions ultimately dictated by the imbalanced uncertainty mainly among the elected officials closely affecting planners' approaches.

Originally used as a brewery and malting complex, after the city-wide change in the industrial policy at the end of the 1990s (focused on displacing heavy industry from the urban areas), the area was bought by UBS AG (a Swiss bank). However, the slow revitalisation process made the site suitable for about one hundred squatters who moved there from other city squatter areas that had to be cleared. Under the motto of "preventing further demolition of facilities and bringing new creative potential" (Interview, squatter 1), the squatters inhabited the area in May 2013 by developing a multicultural centre to become a significant

node in Zurich's cultural offer. The leaders of the local cultural scene quickly made strong bonds with both neighbourhood residents and also larger Zurich population, who recognised the reused area as "a meeting place for building solidarity and social networks" (Interview, ex-city councillor). The negotiated term of use with UBS AG allowed the squatters to use half of the site for three years free of charge as long as UBS owned the land.

Around the same time, in the spring of 2013, the city policies started to also revolve around social dimensions of development, however, not necessarily drawing upon cultural places as nodes of collective identity. The more mainstream political will to increase affordable housing in Zurich, according to the then valid Building and Zoning Code of the City of Zurich (*Bau- und Zonenordnung, BZO*), prevailed, so, in December 2013, the City of Zurich purchased the land – 3 ha of land for CHF 70 million (Metzler, 2013). Since then, several different visions about the land use transformation have occurred (Figs. 3 and 4), each influenced by a dominant political narrative. Most notably, while the 'greens' proposed to build a school on the site to secure enough school space in

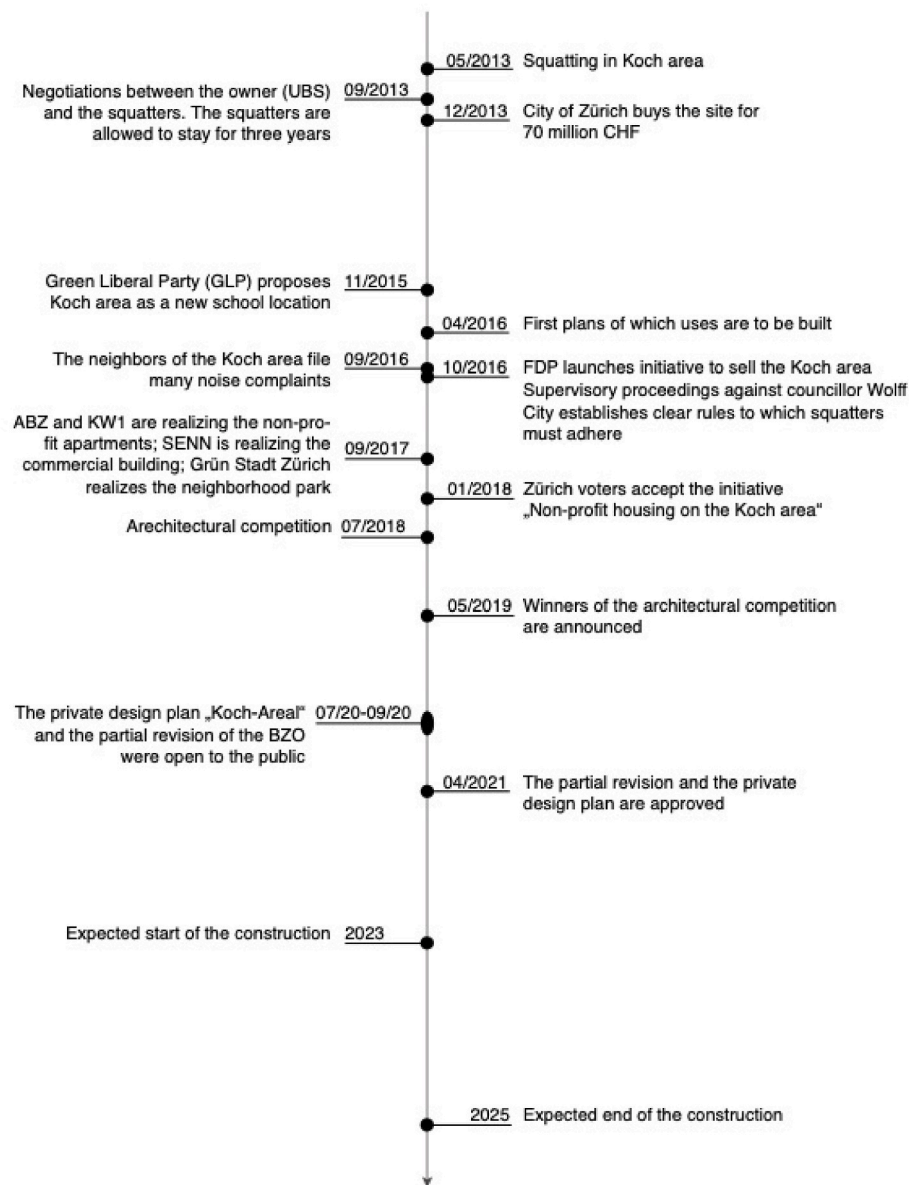


Fig. 3. Koch Areal: the process timeline. Source: Authors.

the neighbourhood, both the right-wing party and liberal democrats called for the squatters' eviction and sale of the site to private developers (despite a collision with the municipal law), the latter even raising the initiative 'Residing and living in the Koch-Areal' in fall 2016.

As a reaction to such oppositional political pressure, the City Council intensified interaction with the city administration to jointly prepare the steps for future action. The City Planning Office was first greenlighted to proceed with the informal test planning procedure to collect the initial ideas on the site development. As a result, the development concept served as a base for the Housing Cooperative Zurich (*Wohnbaugenossenschaft Zürich*) to call a tender for potential investors based on the qualitative award criteria (as set in the Building Lease Agreement), so the developers have been selected merely on the merits of the proposed land use and urban design concept. Despite "the absence of the legal base on which to oblige private investors and developers on cooperation" (Interview city councillor, October 2022), the previous two instruments helped the city to secure far-reaching control over the planned development vision – the subsequent architectural competition, the design plan (*Gestaltungsplan*) and, accordingly, the revision of the Building and Zoning Code (*Stadt Zürich, 2016*), has been influenced by

the initial procedural steps so that unforeseen 'trade-offs' could not appear during the process. The cooperation among the various bodies of the city administration was immense in order to ingrain as many social dimensions in the proposal as possible and to secure the public interest. In all these efforts, the city was pressured by noise complaints of the neighbours, and the right-wingers' vehement demand for squatters' eviction and selling the city land to private developers (*Fritzsche, 2017*).

Despite numerous distractions, the public administration focused on advanced coordination of action now with other sectors but the public. The final constellation of stakeholders in charge of implementing the urban design concept included two cooperatives (ABZ and Kraftwerk1) and one for-profit developer (SENN), with the neighbourhood park to be realised by Green City Zurich (*Grün Stadt Zürich*), a city department in charge of green open spaces. Deliberation about various approaches, proposals and, finally, strategies, through extensive exchange, listening, and adjustments of unilateral visions, culminated in the agreement to proceed with a proposal containing a public park, two affordable housing buildings, and one commercial building (*Schoop, 2017*) – a solution that would not have been possible if each stakeholder did not give up some of their initial goals to finally achieve previously unattainable

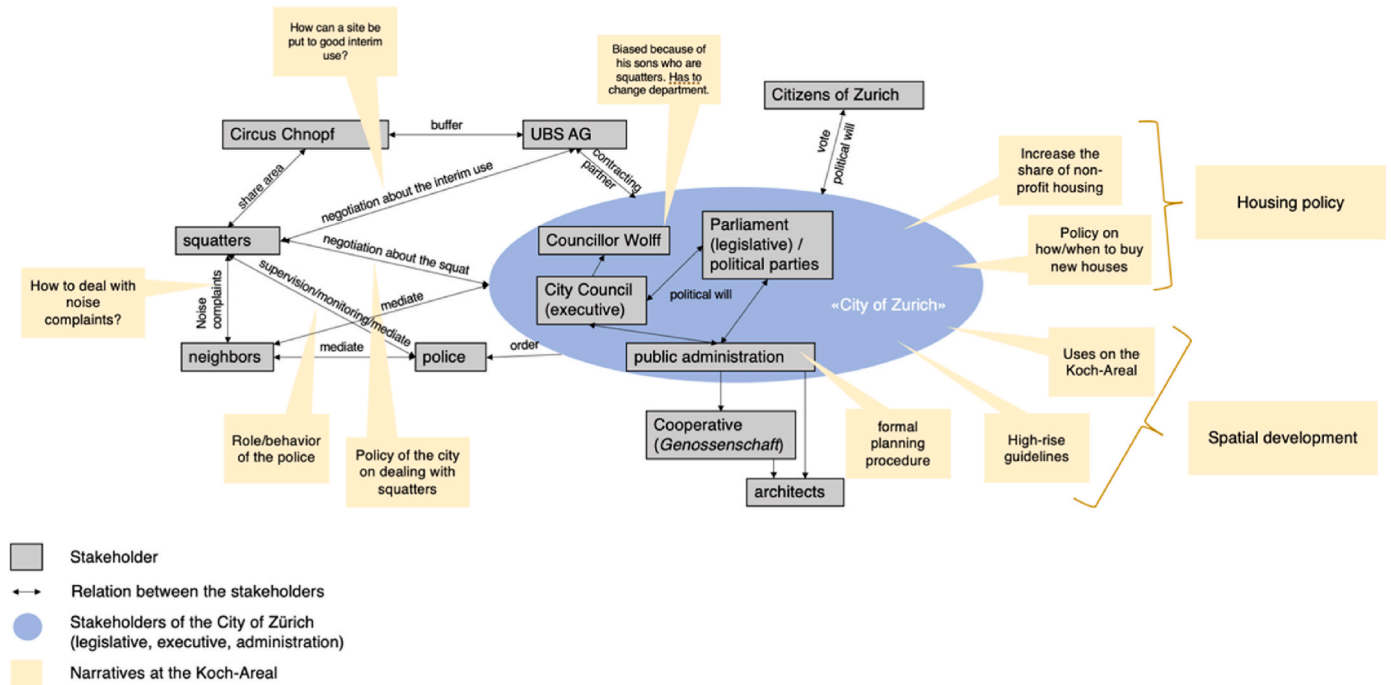


Fig. 4. Koch Areal: stakeholders and the dominant narratives. Source: Authors.

ends. At the beginning of 2018, the referendum confirmed the City Council’s proposal for non-profit housing on the Koch Areal while rejecting the liberal democrats’ popular initiative.

The local acceptance of the project, both among the neighbourhood residents and squatters, acted as a counterbalance to the otherwise well-designed and skilfully facilitated joint feedback between those with professional and financial power supported by elected officials. The surrounding area’s residents were included sporadically through post-festum ‘participatory labs’, i.e., when the development concept was already created and development contracts were released. The locals’ belief that the private sector is always “a step ahead” (Interview, squatter 2) became evident in the decision to demolish the creative centre. However, developers felt inconvenient, too: “for the right-wing parties is what we are doing leftist; for the squatters there, we are the establishment” (Interview, developer). Yet, they have managed to establish fruitful collaborations with two significant long-term partners: the cooperatives with whom they have previously collaborated on various projects, and the city administration with whom they engage in “constructive discussions” (Interview, developer).

Nevertheless, the planners, being a critical link in implementing political will based on the compromise between economic and social goals, missed an opportunity to expand the area with space for a wide variety of residents and to integrate the creative potential of the current residents. Instead, they agreed with the general developer’s approach: “Who can live for free in 2022?!” (Interview, developer) without being attentive to the identity of a place “where you can live independently with hundreds of other people and define the rules yourself” (Interview, ex-city councillor). Although considered a failure of genuine collaborative governance, the Koch Areal finally attained public acceptance: the building lease agreements and the partial revision of the zoning plan were approved by the City Council in December 2021, while the credit for the neighbourhood park got citizens’ approval in April 2022.

4.3. Tueffenwies School Area: from ignoring citizens to the “role model” of citizen engagement

Located in Alstetten’s northern neighbourhood Grünauring, the Tueffenwies School Area put the local neighbourhood association in the

spotlight. Namely, the local community organisation Grünau, a spin-off of the Alstetten district association, has been active since 1978 as “a bridge between the city administration and residents” (Interview, Grünau community representative 1). Its goal is to protect local needs and interests, particularly in securing enough social infrastructure, green areas and meeting points for ongoing exchange and share of concerns and ideas about the current and future growth of the neighbourhood (Quartierverein Grünau, 2023).

In the spring of 2018, the community got accidentally introduced to the Tueffenwies School Area project (Figs. 5 and 6) when the City Planning Office, during their every-third-year visit to the area, announced a proposal for a large-scale secondary school to be constructed on the central green area of the neighbourhood. The proposal had been produced in a collaboration between the city departments in charge of planning and education, which reacted to a burning issue of a

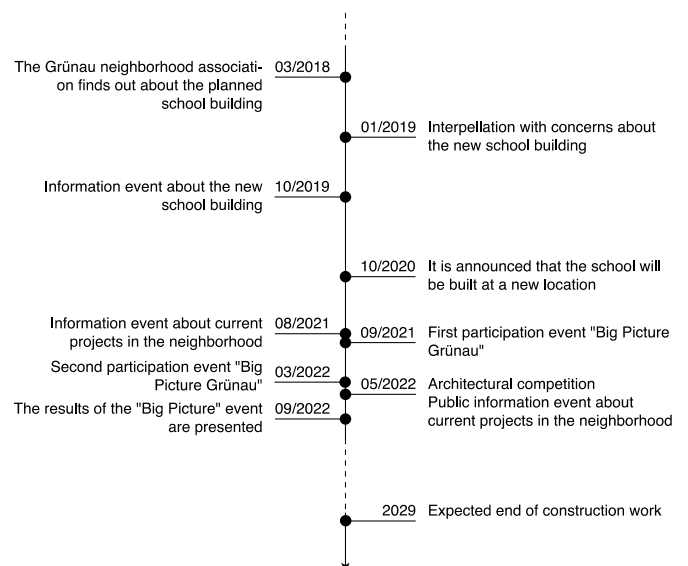


Fig. 5. Tueffenwies School Area: the process timeline. Source: Authors.

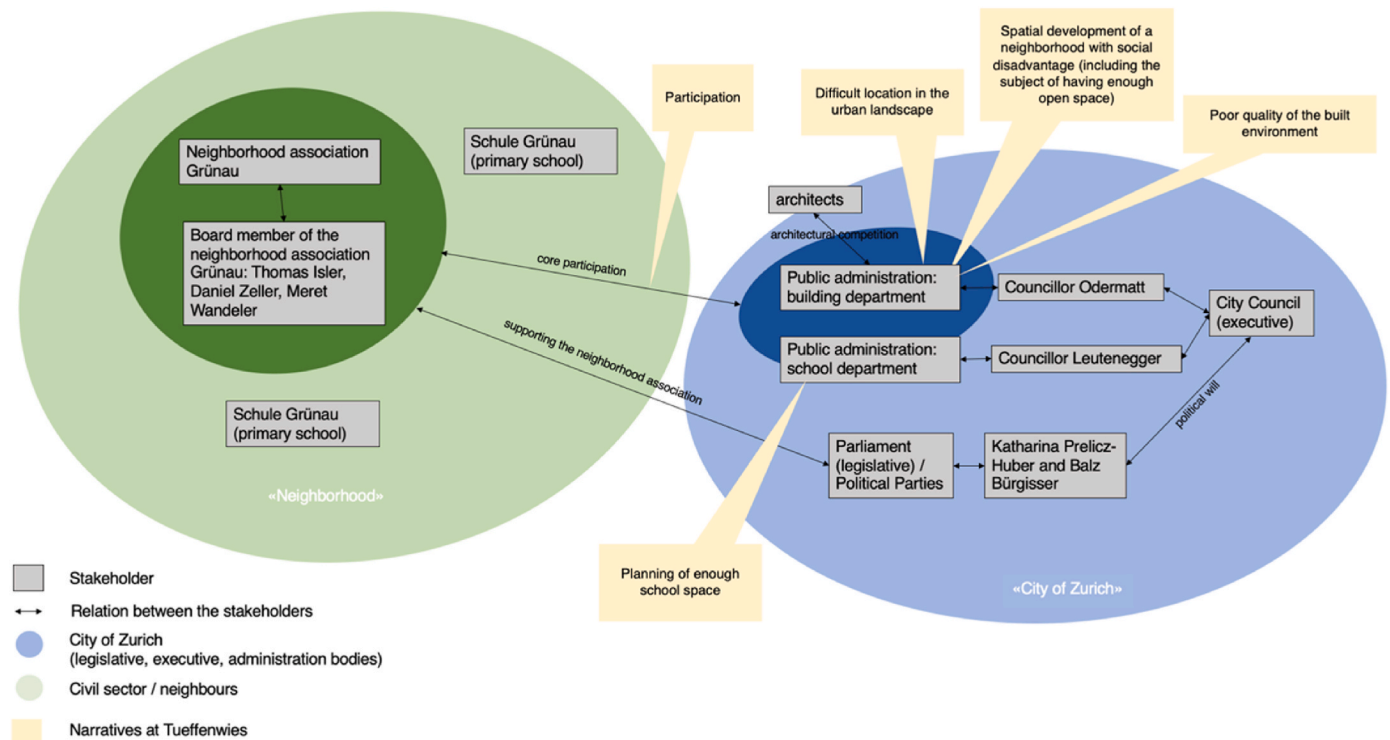


Fig. 6. Tueffenwies School Area: stakeholders and the dominant narratives. Source: Authors.

lack of school space in the entire city and a particularly precarious situation in Alstetten due to many development projects (e.g., Labitzke Areal, Vulcano high-rises, Zollfreilager) rising the neighbourhood population (Pfändler, 2019a). To remedy the problem, the professionals, without any exchange with the locals to gain their input, agreed that the growing district of Alstetten needed a new educational centre to be conveniently located close to the major transport axes bordering Grünauring.

As the Grünau community was not included in any previous discussion, its Board accused the city of presenting the community with a “*fait accompli*” (Interview, Grünau community representative 1) embodied in a poorly shaped plan, which, due to the lack of conversation with residents about their needs, “sacrificed the heart of the neighbourhood” (Interview, Grünau community representative 2). As the locals were sure about the school proposal flaws – the project being too large, the accessibility to and across the area, and microclimate elements poorly addressed – they became certain “to find an alternative place” and “to present it to the City Council” (Interview, Grünau community representative 1).

Although the dissatisfaction grew among the locals, the city planners neglected the community concerns addressed in official letters and personal conversations. Such an attitude was supported by the City Council, whose representatives claimed no decision was made except that the feasibility study had been carried out (Pfändler, 2019b). Fed up with the continuous politicians’ ignorance over the year, at the beginning of 2019, the Grünau representatives took a proactive and stepwise approach by conducting a series of informal talks. Firstly, they addressed the ‘greens’ in the City Parliament to file a motion of questioning the proposed place for a new school (January 2019). The persuasion was irresistible: “Who is against the school? It is just in the wrong place! We don’t want to ruin but to improve our community, and we know how to do it” (Interview, Grünau community representative 2). Secondly, the community held a round table in the neighbourhood with representatives of the majority in the City Parliament (greens, green-liberals, liberal-democrats, and social-democrats) to foster a discussion about the reframed counterproposal (March 2019). The members of the

parliament got convinced about the validity of the community concerns and they secured that a conversation with the city councillor in charge of urban development will happen (April 2019). Although the concerns among city parliamentarians were on the rise, the councillor provided no specific feedback regarding the community proposal. Instead, they were awaiting a decision on the submitted motion while also proposing the organisation of a participatory event in the near future.

Indeed, the event with all the previously mentioned parties was organised by the City Planning Office in the summer of 2019. However, when informed about the lack of room for debate on the two critical issues – the size and location of the new school – the community began to boycott the entire process as they did not “want to discuss the façade and colour of the benches!” (Interview, Grünau community representative 2). To confront the resistance from city planners to change the initial area development proposal, the community board decided to mobilise as many people as possible against the city planning office’s vision for the school area development. Firstly, they visited all the residents in the area and spread leaflets describing the problem to raise awareness among the locals. Secondly, the relevant information went through *LokalInfo*, a popular magazine read by many interested in neighbourhood events. Lastly, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published an article strongly criticising the City Council’s decision.

That article was critical in finally reaching the full attention of both the city councillors and city planners who were invited to an open information event at the community centre, attended by more than 200 people convinced that only adjustment of the initial school vision can bring a sustainable solution. Under a tense atmosphere, in a packed hall, and with many hecklers, the city councillors felt great uncertainty about the official planning proposal (but also their political reputation), so it opened room for the community organisation to “shuffle the cards again” (Interview, Grünau community representative 1), i.e., to streamline the communication channels between the community and politicians, this time for the sake of mutual agreements, respects towards local visions and beliefs, and, ultimately, strengthening the mutual trust as a cornerstone of inclusionary planning and decision-making. As a result, the City Council secured the approval of the new school area

(according to the community visions) and the funding in December 2020 (Stadtrat Zürich, 2020).

To capitalise on the previous process and to address the overall Grünau neighbourhood development, in the summer of 2021, a participatory pilot project, ‘Big Picture,’ started with the kick-off event, including city politicians, local expert departments, relevant federal offices, and interested local parties. Over a year, several participatory tools and mechanisms were devised to increase the output by various stakeholders: round tables, public exhibitions, site talks, direct invitations to the neighbourhood residents, and media updates. The City Planning Office also developed a specific approach creating two expert teams – one to develop a future proposal for the school in cooperation with and based on the feedback from the residents, and the other one in charge of shaping participatory mechanisms to reach as large an audience as possible. Professionals admitted that the process was “an innovative approach, rewarding experience to build upon, but also a great effort on top of regular planners’ activities” (Interview, city planner). Innovation was seen in the organisational structure during the pilot phase, though the inclusionary efforts were still modest – the planning officials shifted from an exclusive focus on information sharing to a modest effort at coordination. Locals felt they “won against ‘silos’” (Interview, Grünau community representative 1), initiating a merging between the expert knowledge (embedded in the city planning and education departments) and local cultural beliefs and values. For the city officials, it is “a prime example of the cooperation between the city government and the public” (Interview, city councillor), although the dramatic embrace of collaborative strategies emerged only after extreme uncertainty and pressure posed to the politicians’ positions and image.

4.4. HdM project: as little cooperation as possible

The HdM (Herzog & de Meuron) case emphasises the role of the SENN firm, an influential regional actor in contemporary urban development in Switzerland. Equipped with multidisciplinary teams, SENN acts proactively: the plans for the HdM site were elaborated not only for the company’s benefit but also already anticipating and adjusting to the policy interests of the city administration and elected officials, long-term partners in densifying Zurich. These plans avoid locations and venues that would generate uncertainty in the municipal review and, hence, offer a more streamlined yet cooperative approach to the level of mutual needs.

Not only in a role of a developer but also a landowner, SENN commenced the urban design procedure with the renowned architectural office Herzog & de Meuron back in 2020. As the urban design proposal fit within the framework and requirements set in the Building and Zoning Code (Stadt Zürich, 2016), there was no statutory need to involve a broader set of stakeholders except the city administration (Figs. 7 and 8).

According to the developer, the overall approach of the city administration was “quite balanced” (Interview, developer) during the process: some developers’ visions were rejected not to endanger broader social benefits, but there was also much trust in the developer’s overall strategy, and, hence, some procedural shortcuts occurred. Regarding the former, informal procedures “stumbled across the political arm” (Interview, developer), as seen in the case of rejecting the developer’s proposal to swap a well-located pocket park adjacent to the site plot with another part of the HdM land. Namely, the Building and Zoning Code (Stadt Zürich, 2016) prescribes providing leasehold rights only to cooperatives, not developers. Any concession to the developer’s demands would mean a harsh violation of the values promoted by the centre to left political majority, and the City Council opted to keep the political balance instead of attaining more profit for the city through enlarging the construction plot.

On the other hand, the developer’s vision was acknowledged in two crucial steps while issuing the building permit. Firstly, the Building Committee (*Baukollegium*), a city authority composed of both

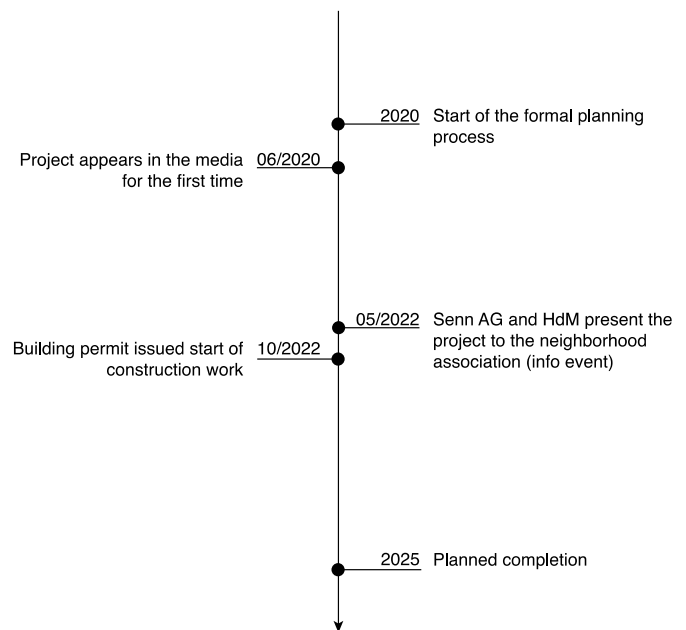


Fig. 7. HdM project: the process timeline. Source: Authors.

architectural experts and members of the city administration in charge of assessing any urban development proposing densification, decided to omit the test planning procedure and directly engage with Herzog & de Meuron as “they [HdM] were eminent and ready to engage in a dialogue” (Interview, city councillor). Secondly, the developer restrained from the exceptional densification possibility of up-zoning the site (the so-called *400% Streife*, meaning the possibility of constructing the 80-m high and 12-m wide street façade) as defined in the Study on High-Rise Development (Stadt Zürich, 2022a), instead remaining within the standard construction regulation as in the current Building and Zoning Code with the utilization of 200–205 per cent.

Although seemingly trying to avoid excessive density for the sake of broader public benefits – e.g., through refraining from creating “the needle in the park” (Interview, developer), staying within the limits of the current zoning regulation allowed the developer to have more autonomy and secure a streamlined project implementation, without any interference of the locals who might have affected the project certainty. A firm avoidance of a potential local referendum and consideration of local voices was thus a strategy to escape a genuinely collaborative approach. City officials turned a deaf ear: “It is a completely private development in which the City is not directly involved” (Interview, city councillor), while the planners tolerated the absence of up-zoning despite the omnipresent goal of densification, as given in crucial framework documents, e.g., the Communal Structural Plan (Stadt Zürich, 2021). In other words, the HdM project overruled the planning instruments.

Such modest densification, nevertheless, still entailed displacement. The current residents and users of the site and its neighbourhood were subtly forced to leave the area: the project provides no office/commercial space for rent, residential rental prices will be much higher than before, and there are no housing units offered at affordable prices. The oppositional local voices were rare. On the contrary, the Alstetten district association found “densification to be done beautifully [while] cheap housing is antisocial” (Interview, Altstetten community representative). The fact that the district association does not entail members who truly represent the district population (60 per cent of which are foreigners) complicates the social goals of the city towards social mixing, equity and cohesion. In this case, despite obvious disadvantages for locals, the association’s more powerful, established members (meaning more long-time Swiss members) saw no need to counter the private

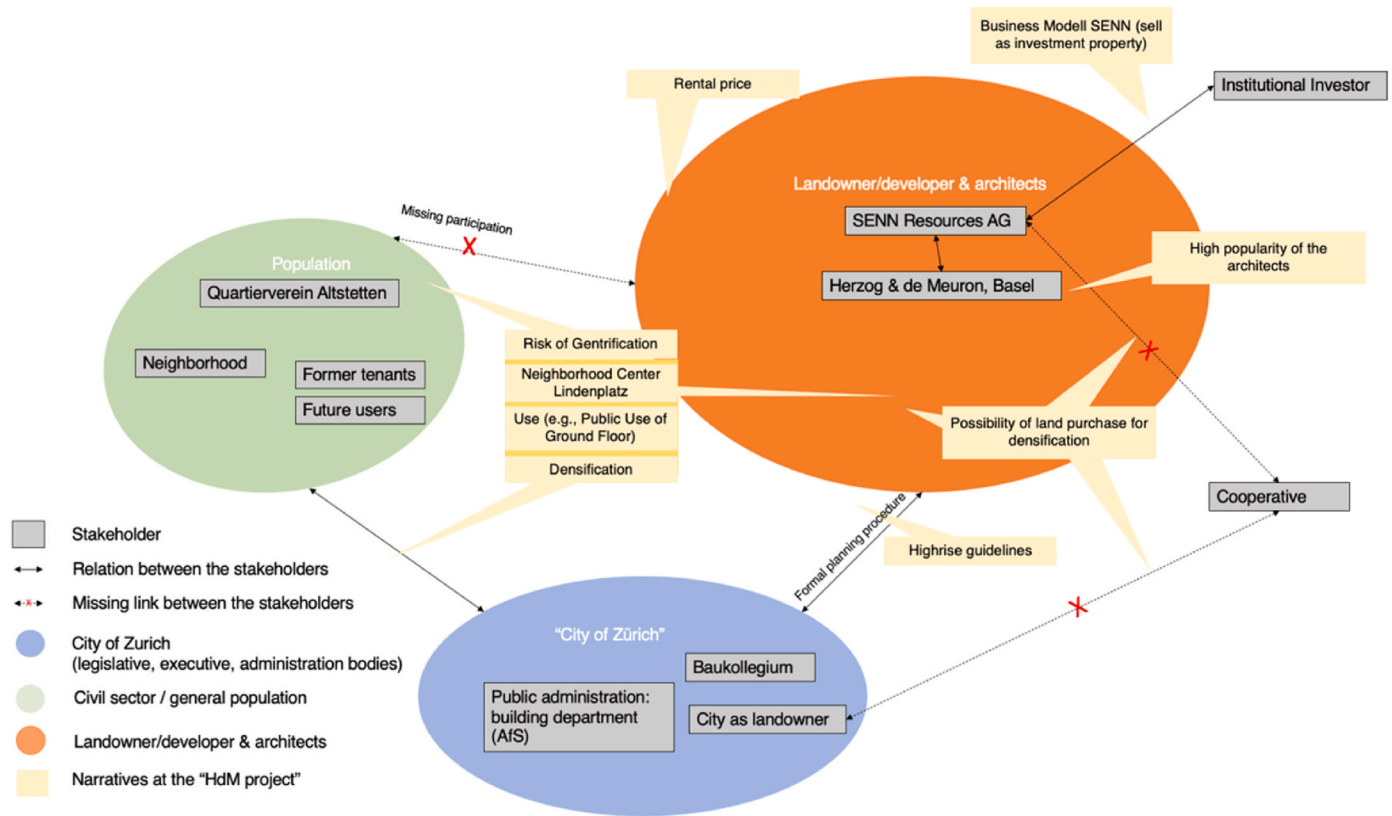


Fig. 8. HdM project: stakeholders and the dominant narratives. Source: Authors.

sector urban development project. Failure of social inclusion in Zurich’s district that needs it most (due to cultural and ethnical diversity) – and the tremendous success of the local community in the Grünauring case in the same district – proves the structural and organisational fragmentation, which disables intrinsic forms of social inclusion in general, and in planning practice in particular.

5. Discussion: cooperative approach in densifying Zurich?

In depicting the current approach to urban development in contemporary Zurich under the rationale of densification, the analysed cases indicate the discrepancy between the norm of cooperative planning aimed at securing the inclusion of various parties and its practical implementation, which usually favours these enjoying unilateral certainty. More precisely, though engagement of various stakeholders is evident, the domains of planning cooperation beyond the mutually agreed benefits of powerful parties to enable the disadvantaged to have a say need further advancements.

In the Koch Areal case, the complex actor-networks, seen in a range of opposing political agendas and a commitment of investors to pursue their goals, still resulted in some social benefits. For example, two buildings will be built by two cooperatives, in contrast to one constructed by a for-profit company, to address the need for the rising number of affordable housing apartments. Nevertheless, intangible values in the area before the redevelopment ideas emerged, e.g., the Koch Areal as a cultural hot spot of the entire neighbourhood and a crucial element in the city’s cultural scene, have been neglected. Also, compared to more engaging participatory tools, the citizens’ voices – limited only to the informal feedback on the architectural solution or referenda on the public budget designated for the area development – seem insufficiently considered in a public debate. In addition, the new redevelopment process put a final closure on squatting as an acceptable residential practice: the current squatters protested against their

displacement and had to find other sites to settle down. Finally, the Koch Areal case also shows the strong influence of politics, as the political debates around the site and hostile campaigns against the practices of squatting greatly influenced the standpoints of city planners, making them pragmatic players tailoring their proposals accordingly to the narratives by the more decisive actors.

Despite the city decision-makers initially ignoring the community’s opinions, needs, and visions for improving their immediate living area, the determination and perseverance of the local community in the case of the Tuffenwies School Area triggered a genuine synthesis of expert and experiential knowledge. Such fruitful encounters were made possible due to maximum performance and concessions on both sides, with a clear trigger in the ‘ordinary citizens’ and not planning professionals. The local community secured substantial bottom-up engagement, upon which planners transformed its role from those ‘turning a deaf ear’ to community visions and beliefs to acting as natural facilitators in the overall process of the neighbourhood development. Though the absence of the private sector’s interest in this specific project made the stakes not so high, i.e., both community and planners agreed on common goods without the lingering rationale of making a profit, the fact that public voices challenged and succeeded in changing the assigned land use are considered an exception in the current planning practice. The expert attitude towards capitalising on the pre-planning phase bottom-up efforts to grow into a traditional planning approach is a promising sign for dealing with similar future incentives. It remains to be seen if such bottom-up initiatives can also challenge urban development plans when profit is at stake and when professionals and politicians are not forced to act to protect their reputations but for material (financial) benefits for the city.

Finally, the HdM example shows how as little cooperation as possible intrinsically satisfies the developer’s needs causing no exceptional ‘trade-offs’ with the public bodies. Planners’ absence of attending to the professional principles set in strategic guidance documents and city

officials' tacit approval of the pro-development approach made developers more independent regarding how and whom they want to cooperate with. Namely, higher buildings and more land occupancy would be more financially profitable but brings time constraints and process risks. Most importantly, all the neighbours must be convinced of the benefits of higher density and actively support new development. As this can be challenging in an area populated mainly with moderate-to low-income foreigners, the pragmatic developer's approach to abandoning the idea of more densification also blocked more complex interactions with residents and public representatives. Hence, it calls upon the increased responsibility of city politicians and experts to secure and enforce more interaction, avoid the adverse effects of developer-led incentives, and create a path towards social equity and democratic urban planning.

To sum up, planners are stretched between the goals of politicians, developers, and the public, which all, to various extents, dictate the levels of social inclusion. If initiated by a community organisation, the levels of including various beliefs, cultural norms, and experiential knowledge will likely be higher. Developers tend to comprehend the necessity of planning agency under the motto 'as much as needed, as little as possible' in the vein of the (neo)liberal planning approach. Politicians subtly put their positions, images, reputation, and, finally, interests above these of a broader public. Hence, planners are not that powerful in coordinating the values intrinsically ingrained in the postulates of the planning profession. Instead, they are rather pragmatic, 'go with the flow' and tend to invest only if broader societal and political circumstances (social insurgency or political will) enable room for that.

Testing the norm of cooperative planning on different case studies of the Alstetten district (Koch Areal, Tueffenwies, HdM) elucidates the fact that different types of collaborative practices have been applied to various extents in various projects. Although the essential *exchange of facts and beliefs* about the development initiatives was generally well achieved through a few instruments (exhibition events, round tables, site talks), information about the future densification projects was not always timely presented to the public (i.e., it happened after the agreements between the developers and city officials have been made). The *sharing of knowledge, feedback and raising the level of mutual trust* was most evident among the stakeholders with less uncertainty – mainly politicians as decision-makers, generally pro-development oriented, and developers – as the financial enablers of densification mechanisms, and where the need for greater public engagement was omitted, as seen in the HdM case. The greater use of formal planning tools and a range of statutory mechanisms, as well as increased *coordination* among the public bodies with continuous feedback between planners and decision-makers through a controlled private sector involvement, was depicted in the case of the Koch Areal. Nevertheless, all these webs of action did not seem to prove sufficient to protect the locals and their interests. Genuine *collaboration* is considered rare, except when planners, triggered by the citizens' incentives, get to recognise existing power imbalances and, thus, actively support voices without financial or land resources, as evidenced in the case of Tueffenwies. Hence, *collaborative governance* is yet to evolve, on the one hand, backed by the direct democracy setting of Switzerland, but inevitably struggling under a globally pursued neoliberal urban development approach and a financialisation of densification.

6. Conclusions

Contemporary urban development in Zurich exercises the principles of a globally dominating profit-oriented urban development paradigm. This entails an elite-driven cooperation (i.e., cooperation among public authorities, landowners, investors, and developers) that resembles a kind of growth-machine (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Molotch, 1976). Yet, these urban development patterns happen without excessive usurpation of public goods and public interest and with a continuing employment of mostly non-statutory planning instruments designed to protect common goods and values and, thus, increase social inclusion.

There are several reasons behind such a state. Firstly, there is no direct feedback between politicians and developers: while city councillors may implicitly support the pro-development approach, direct lobbying for specific initiatives is outside the repertoire of the governing political structures. Secondly, no large international consortia, but primarily domestic institutional investors (such as pension and insurance funds) and mid-size developers compose the Swiss growth machine. Finally, such an elite-driven urban planning approach still allows experts to exercise their regulatory role by using various tools and policies to steer the development (e.g., selling the public land only to cooperatives).

However, the involvement of residents may be regarded as the weakest link in the dynamic actor-networks, with both politicians and planners not attending enough to the 'ordinary citizens': in the Koch Areal, residents and squatters aiming at preserving the identity of a local multicultural centre were overruled; in the Tueffenwies School Area, an immense effort of the local community triggered planners' attention to work together on solving the local problem (and not vice-versa); finally, in the HdM site development, it was the developer to avoid more complicated procedures of involving the neighbours, while city planners did not advise and let alone impose a more cooperative approach.

The current obstacles to embrace a genuine cooperative planning approach may be a source of inspiration for future advancements in Zurich but also in other contexts facing similar socio-spatial problems. For example, although pass-by deregulation mechanisms of the neoliberal developments are difficult to be challenged, planners need to go beyond what they call a "pragmatic approach" (Interview, city planner 3), which is actually a kind of planners' 'comfort zone' – they orient themselves towards proactive stakeholders, usually embodied in private developers, with enough ideas, visions and, importantly, sources for some concrete development actions. However, as shown, only the extraordinary local effort made urban planners aware of other design solutions for the area, but also about advancing the planning procedure itself – to include more citizens' input, listen to various voices, comprehend different perspectives, and try to embrace them in a joint vision, and doing this timely, i.e., in early phases of the planning process when possible solutions are just to be debated. In other words, planners have to step outside their 'internal worlds' and face reality by acknowledging opposition and learning from various worldviews (Özdemir & Tasan-Kok, 2019; Blair Howe, 2022). Finally, planners need to overcome the political will and agreements – strategic planning and visioning should be based on genuine planning skills and knowledge and not just tailored to the given circumstances (e.g., political will, developers' incentives). Democratic planning is instrumental when professional planners neither wish to have nor possess unilateral certainty about their plans. Planners need to recognise, explore, and expand the zones of uncertainty to include more agents in the urban development process and create more opportunities for robust, inclusive planning (Hoch, 2023).

Hence, cooperative planning as a procedural norm in Zurich's planning practice has yet to evolve through inducing more intrinsically bottom-up approaches aimed at broader community engagement. The analysed cases show that social equity, inclusion and spatial justice are still challenging to implement, even in the Swiss direct democracy setting. With a global strengthening of the neoliberal development paradigm, countering social displacement and exclusion is not expected to be prioritised within the political agenda. Nevertheless, even when profit is not an ultimate planning outcome, the nature of planning fails to be genuinely cooperative, revealing politicians as the weakest links in ensuring securing the active involvement of the least powerful parties – ordinary citizens. Therefore, from the professional perspective and taking the stand that planning is inherently embedded into a socio-spatial setting, approaches such as transformative planning (Albrechts et al., 2020) – planning for and with people – may help planners to listen to what is happening on the ground with the very locals and not forget the very essence of their profession as the way not to be lost in many

challenges of contemporary urban development.

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Appendix

Table 1

List of interviewees.

Date	Case study	Stakeholder group	Position
01.02.2022	Tueffenwies	Community organisation (Quartierverein – QV) Grünaeu	Member of the QV Grünaeu Board (1)
01.02.2022	Tueffenwies	Community organisation (Quartierverein – QV) Grünaeu	Member of the QV Grünaeu Board (2)
03.02.2022	HdM, Koch Areal	Developer (SENN Development AG)	Managing Director
11.02.2022	Koch Areal	Local residents	Squatter (1)
11.02.2022	Koch Areal	Local residents	Squatter (2)
20.05.2022	HdM	Community organisation (Quartierverein – QV) Altstetten	Member of the QV Altstetten Board
09.06.2022	HdM	Developer (SENN Development AG)	Managing Director
08.09.2022	Tueffenwies	City of Zurich, City Planning Office	Senior City Planner (1)
23.09.2022	Tueffenwies, HdM, Koch Areal	City of Zurich, City Council	Member of the City Council
08.10.2022	Koch Areal	City of Zurich, City Council	Ex-Member of the City Council
15.02.2023	Tueffenwies, HdM, Koch Areal	City of Zurich, City Planning Office	Senior City Planner (2)
15.03.2023	Tueffenwies, HdM, Koch Areal	City of Zurich, Mayor's Office, Department for Urban Development, Society and Space Unit	Head of Unit, Senior City Planner (3)

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