The Viral Balcony: Or the Vicissitudes of an Urban Element in Times of Pandemic

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1 For a historical introduction to this element, see Tom Avermaete, Rem Koolhaas and Irma Boom, *Balcony* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014).

2 Such an idea of the balcony emerging from a medieval military device, called the *hourd*, can for instance be found in Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, "Bretèche," *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, vol. 2, (Paris: Morel, 1854), 244–49.

3 Publicist Paul Planat underlines that, as a result of the symbolic importance of the balcony, from the "fifteenth century, artistic experiments made themselves felt in the balconies more than in any other part of architectural ornamentation." Paul Amédée Planat, "Balcon," *Encyclopédie de l'architecture et de la construction*, vol. 2, (Paris: Aulanier et cie, 1892), 236.

4 The French architectural theoretician Quatremère de Quincy speaks of a "*mode des balcons*" during the nineteenth century. Quatremère de Quincy, "Balcon," *Dictionairre historique de l'architecture, contenant dans son plan les notions historiques, descriptives, archeologiques: Biographiques, theoriques, didactiques et pratiques de cet art*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librarie d'Adrien Le Clere, 1832), 148—49.

5 Jo Wheeler, "Stench in Sixteenth-Century Venice," in *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture Since 1500*, Alexander Cowan and Jill Steward, eds. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 25–38, here 27. See also Amanda Sciampacone, "'Epidemics in a Mist': Medical Climatology and Cholera in Victorian Visual Culture," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 25, no. 4 (2020), 492–511.

In the spring of 2020, as COVID-19 induced lockdowns across Europe, citizens searched for alternative ways to appear in public, new modes of meeting one another, and tactics to share, care, and support their communities; in short, for different ways of *commoning*. One urban element has played a key role in these efforts: the balcony.

The balcony is not a new urban element. [1] According to some accounts, it first appeared in medieval military architecture, where it took the form of a cantilevered platform from which to attack the enemy. [2] The balcony can also be understood as a symbolic urban element. Religious and secular leaders used the balcony as a platform from which to address crowds and, even in their physical absence, it remained a means to represent their power within the city's public space. [3] The many balconies on papal palaces, town halls, and belfries bear witness to the symbolic charge of the balcony. This capacity to symbolize authority in society can be seen in nineteenth-century paintings by French artists such as Gustave Caillebotte, Berthe Morisot, and Édouard Manet, in which the balcony became the visual expression of bourgeois culture. [4]

In the mid-nineteenth century, the balcony would receive an additional connotation, firmly linking it to viruses, bacteria, and disease. Architectural thinking about housing and the city became strongly influenced by a resurgence of interest in the atmospheric origin of epidemics, or "miasma theory." The belief that bad air directly caused disease can be traced back to the ancient world and is implicit in some of the oldest names of diseases such as malaria, but in the nineteenth century, thanks to discoveries in climatology and increasing problems with air pollution associated with early industrialization, the theory gained new currency in European metropoles. [5] Though miasma theory was soon replaced by germ theory, the preoccupation

with clean air persisted well into the twentieth century, and many modern architects and urban designers emphasized the importance of providing balconies in urban settings. [6]

It was probably the Swiss architecture critic Sigfried Giedion who summarized the modern role of the balcony most clearly in his book *Befreites Wohnen* (Liberated Dwelling), which was published as a result of the first Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne. [7] This book identified the balcony as a universally applicable element that had the capacity to introduce light, air, and openness into the modern dwelling. Giedion explained: "the 'new architecture' has unconsciously used these projecting 'balconies' again and again. Why? Because there exists the need to live in buildings that strive to overcome the old sense of equilibrium that was based only on fortress-like incarceration." [8] Indeed, the spatial agency of the balcony is highly contingent on its tectonics, morphology, and materiality. Along with doorways and windows, the balcony is a threshold element: it mediates between the home and the street, the private and the public. The balcony has a particularly liminal quality, for it encloses private space while also projecting it into the city's public sphere.

The desire to overcome a state of incarceration also led to a rediscovery of the balcony's capacities in the twenty-first century. In the first weeks of March 2020, in many European countries the balcony emerged as a domestic space to exercise and socialize with neighbors, as a private platform to enjoy the outdoors and publicly support health workers, and as an individual stage for collective musical performances. New relationships have emerged from the productive friction of the individual and collective realms on the balcony. Spurred by the extraordinary conditions of COVID-19, we have witnessed poignant balcony exchanges to combat loneliness. From the individual balcony, collective practices have emerged. Images and videos that circulate online show balcony talks, lectures, dinners, concerts, dance parties, and DJ sets. The balcony was able to play these different roles thanks to its typical physical characteristics, but they were also (usually unwitting) recapitulations of the various historical functions alluded to above.

Cultural mores and climatic conditions inform the balcony's form and materiality which, in turn, regulate how the balcony is (or can be) used. In Islamic societies, for example, the *mashrabiya* or enclosed balcony that protrudes from the street-facing wall of the house is screened with near-opaque carved wooden latticework. Thus, in addition to providing much-needed shade and allowing for a breeze to pass through the home, it also protects residents' privacy and female modesty. [9] The balcony acts as a

[6] Paul Overy, *Light, Air and Openness: Modern Architecture between the Wars* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007) 83—97.

[7] Sigfried Giedion, *Befreites Wohnen* (Zurich: Füssli Verlag, 1929).

[8] Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concrete,* trans. J. Duncan Berry (Los Angeles: The Getty Center, 1995), 147.

[9] Bechir Kenzari and Yasser Elsheshtawy, "The Ambiguous Veil: On Transparency, the Mashrabiy'ya, and Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 56, no. 4 (May 2003), 17—25.

mediating screen between indoor and outdoor environmental conditions and between private and public realms.

In Ancient Rome, an early form of the balcony, known as a *maeniana*, resembled a loggia or stage-box, suggesting a close connection to the theater. The space of the balcony could accommodate spectators, thus bringing the experience of the amphitheater to the streets. [10] As an architectural element, it persisted into the Renaissance. It was widespread in cities like Venice, from the Doge's Palace to local artisans' residences. [11] Its formal and material omnipresence persists today across Italian cities, where its theatrical character was on full display during the early months of COVID-19 confinement. [12]

Balconies have enormous political potential. At a macro-level, they are often used as tools to exert and express power. Meanwhile, at a micro-level, they can not only facilitate and regulate citizens' access to the benefits of air and sun but also support their right to the city, and their ability to participate and appear in the public realm.

One of the earliest expressions of the balcony's macro-political capacities comes from the Mughal Empire, during which Akbar the Great (1542–1605) transformed the pre-Mughal Hindu ritual of sun greeting into a daily ritual of greeting the Islamic ruler. A balcony positioned the emperor closer to the heavens, thereby allowing his subjects to greet him with the sun. [13] Since then, examples of the use of balconies in expressions of power have multiplied, for instance from papal to royal to presidential power. Think, for instance, of the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, where the pope periodically delivers his *"urbi et orbi"* blessing, or the prominent role that the balcony at Buckingham Palace plays during British royal ceremonies, such as Trooping the Colour, or the balcony at the Casa Rosada, the Argentinian Presidential Palace, from which Evita regularly addressed throngs of devoted followers.

The political agency of the balcony can also be observed on a smaller scale, in less explicit and more mundane ways. It is now evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought structural inequities in our society into the limelight. In one of the pandemic's earlier episodes, in February 2020, the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship was quarantined in Yokohama for a month, becoming one of the first spaces of contamination outside China. The narrative that quickly emerged was a tale of two types of passenger: one with a balcony, the other without. [14] Those in internal rooms — including families with young children and non-essential cruise ship workers — were confined to their mechanically ventilated quarters and allowed just an hour on deck each day for

10 Katherine E. Welch, *The Roman Amphitheatre: From Its Origins to the Colosseum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32–35.

11 For an overview of this transformation, see Tom Avermaete, "Balcony," in Rem Koolhaas, ed., *Elements of Architecture* (Cologne: Taschen, 2018), 1078–1238.

12 See Matt Fidler, "Balcony Spirit: Hope in Face of Coronavirus," *Guardian*, March 19, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/mar/19/balconies-sites-hope-coronavirus-in-pictures (accessed January 29, 2021).

13 Catherine B. Asher, "Sub-Imperial Palaces: Power and Authority in Mughal India," *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993), 281–302.

14 See Doug Bock Clark, "Inside the Nightmare Voyage of the *Diamond Princess*," *GQ*, April 30, 2020, https://www.gq.com/story/inside-diamond-princess-cruise-ship-nightmare-voyage (accessed January 29, 2021).

supervised exercise. In contrast, passengers who paid for larger, more expensive external cabins had regular access to air and sunlight on their personal balconies, with more room to roam without risking contact with potentially contagious passengers on deck. The balconies on the *Diamond Princess* proved a particularly vivid premonition of inequalities in balcony access following the global spread of COVID-19. Similar questions were raised in many cities, particularly in North America, where balconies remain relatively uncommon, and often attract higher rents. [15] For those without a balcony, going outside for fresh air and sunlight was accompanied by a risk of exposure to COVID-19.

      The balcony also provides an ambiguous concurrence of the individual and collective urban realms, often becoming a site of tension. Since the twentieth century, for instance, architects seem to have prioritized the consistency of collective street appearance over the individual manifestation of the balcony. [16] Indeed, pioneering schemes like Sven Markelius's Collective House (Stockholm, 1932) used the careful modulation of balconies to provide the optimal healthy balance of privacy and sunlight to the individual but, even more importantly, acted as the public expression of progressive, collective living philosophies within. [17]

      The field of tension between individual and collective realms also becomes apparent in the written and unwritten rules of the balcony. Practices such as nude sunbathing on a balcony elicit questions regarding the laws of decency in our cities. Often, firm regulations have been put in place to avoid individual transgressions of such collective norms. [18] In cities like Zurich, strict governmental noise legislation combines with local behavioral covenants in preventing residents from certain behaviors such as shaking out carpets on their balcony or limiting the use and storage of barbecues. [19]

      When the first wave of lockdowns struck Zurich, the Chair of the History and Theory of Urban Design at ETH Zurich started to gather visual material related to these collective balcony practices on its Instagram account, catalogued under the hashtag #viralbalcony. Beginning with a call for followers to submit their own balcony experiences, this archive brought together widely shared photographs and videos alongside more intimate vignettes from the pandemic. Submissions covered a physically distanced Shabbat on the balconies of Zurich Wiedikon, clapping and cheering for first responders from Toronto's balconies, and white flags hung in honor of healthcare workers in the empty streets of Belgium. [20] Social media, in this way, became a means of assembling a crowd-sourced archive of the balcony in crisis, from global

15 See Linda Poon, "A Lesson from Social Distancing: Build Better Balconies," *CityLab*, April 20, 2020, https://www.citylab.com/life/2020/04/apartment-design-balcony-private-outdoor-space-zoning-laws/610162/ (accessed January 29, 2021).

16 "Balkone, Terrassen/ Balcons, terrasses/ Balconies, Terraces," special issue, *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 81, no. 6 (1994), 2–5.

17 Such progressive components included a communal kitchen, restaurant, child-care facility, and professional laundry service to relieve women of the burden of unpaid housework. See Lucy Creagh, "An Introduction to *acceptera*," in Uno Åhrén, Lucy Creagh, and Kenneth Frampton, eds., *Modern Swedish Design: Three Founding Texts* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 126–39, here 135.

18 What is considered transparent varies greatly, even between similar cultures. In many places in the United States, it is illegal to be naked in any publicly visible place, even inside or on a balcony. In the UK, however, it is legal to be naked on a balcony, or indeed any public place, as long as the nudity is not deliberately provocative.

19 Regular online forum posts on balcony rules and expectations attest to the confusion felt by new arrivals to Zurich. See, for example, *glocals*, April 30, 2017, https://www.glocals.com/forums/general/BBQs-on-balconies-in-apartment-blocks---are-they-allowed--239732.htm (accessed January 29, 2021); *English Forum Switzerland*, October 14, 2011, https://www.englishforum.ch/other-general/128550-rules-balcony.html (accessed January 29, 2021).

20 These posts can be viewed on the Instagram account @avermaete_gta_ethz (accessed January 29, 2021).

users in real time. Simultaneously, the hashtags allowed for a set of indirect and surprising analogies to emerge — including works of art, film stills, historical curiosities and cartoons — that revealed the changing role of the balcony in society.

The cases outlined below complicate an easy division between balcony haves and have-nots. In Hausmann's Paris, the fifth-floor poor were provided with balconies, even if only to ensure harmony. Rural Greeks were able to trade their private gardens for balconies in the *polykatoikies*. Expressions of support for health care workers on the balcony today continue a tradition of radical, political uses of the balcony in cities from Zurich to Mumbai. Across all these cases, the balcony reappears as a place to connect meaningfully with others.

21 For one widely debated essay, see Sabrina Tavernise and Sarah Mervosh, "America's Biggest Cities Were Already Losing Their Allure. What Happens Next?" *New York Times*, April 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes. com/2020/04/19/ us/coronavirus-mov- ing-city-future.html (accessed January 29, 2021).

22 For more information on Haussmann's transformation of Paris, see Louis Girard, *Nouvelle histoire de Paris: La deuxième république et le second empire, 1848–1870* (Paris: Hachette, 1981); David Zanten, *Building Paris: Architectural Institutions and the Transformation of the French Capital, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); François Loyer, *Paris Xixe siècle: L'immeuble et la rue* (Paris: Hazan, 1994); Jeanne Gaillard, *Paris, La Ville 1852–1870: L'urbanisme parisien à l'heure d'Haussmann des provinciaux aux Parisiens — La vocation ou les vocations Parisiennes* (Paris: Champion, 1977); Pierre Pinon, *Atlas Du Paris Haussmannien: La ville en héritage du second empire à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions Parigramme, 2016).

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Ultimately, the case studies presented here do not support abandoning the city, as some commentators have argued, but rather represent a call to think about its design more carefully. [21] Just as people are reconsidering the performativity, use, and access to parks, streets, and other public spaces in our cities, so, too, should we reconsider the balcony. The balcony has proven itself an adaptable tool in connecting people, maintaining relationships and mental health, providing us with sunlight and fresh air, and affording a political voice even in isolation. But the balcony is only a desirable urban feature if it provides access to safe and healthy environments, a civic-minded society, and an open public sphere.

The prominence of the balcony under COVID-19 represents a call for architects and planners to reengage with urban policies, real estate mechanisms, and building designs that would ensure that balconies are provided to more citizens and remain a core feature of cities in the future.

The Bourgeois Balcony in Paris
Maxime Zaugg

The transformation of Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century makes clear the intense relationship between the architecture of the balcony and discourses of disease control. [22]

Haussmann's widening of the streets provided greater distance between individual buildings, while extensive sewage systems allowed for the sanitary discharge of wastewater, and more and larger open spaces brought fresh air into the city. In addition to these large-scale urban interventions, more modest architectural elements also played an important role in this "hygienization" of Paris; one of them was the balcony. Introduced as an extension of the bourgeois apartment, it rapidly became a ubiquitous urban element in the city. From a sanitary point of view, it was commonly believed that disease could be avoided by maintaining physical distance between people and the dirt in the street. [23] As a threshold space between interior and exterior, the balcony came to be understood as both a protective buffer and a means of access to clean air for the dwelling. However, the ideal and the real did not always coincide. Indeed, at the time, French newspapers such as *Le Figaro* and *Le Temps* reported that on warm days, it was frequently impossible to spend time on the balcony due to the smell of the streets. [24]

The balcony also contributed to the radical transformation of Paris into a coherent, urbanistic whole, and aided its conversion into a true bourgeois city. The balcony extended the interior salon into the urban realm, making it a stage for the *mise-en-scène* of bourgeois urban life. Haussmann's vision included the harmonization of building facades, demanding that balconies be aligned horizontally and face each other across the boulevards. These so-called *balcons filants* (continuous balconies) were usually situated on the second and fifth floors, following the strict class orders of the buildings. While the second floor (also called *bel étage* or *étage noble)* was reserved for the upper class, the fifth floor was intended for lower classes who may not have received balconies but for reasons of aesthetics and harmony. The resulting views and theatrical qualities of the balcony became a recurrent subject for painters at the time. Artists including Gustave Caillebotte and Édouard Manet captured the ways in which members of the bourgeoisie staged themselves to be objects of observation on their balconies while also actively

[23] Aruna D'Souza, *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 54.

[24] David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 230–31.

observing urban life through the balustrades. Manet's painting of the self-confident Parisian bourgeoisie on the balcony was dryly interpreted, years later, by René Magritte. **fig.1**

The *Polykatoikia* Balcony in Greece
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fig.5 Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, 118 Benaki Street apartment building, main elevation, Athens, 1975
Source: Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis private archive

25 See Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, *Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a City* (New York: Newmark Press, 1998).

26 See the introduction to this article above, 139.

27 See Marianna Charitonidou, "From the Research of a Modernity That Could Be Greek to a Multiplicity of the Present: 'Greek-ness' in Architecture or Architecture in Greece?" in Andreas Giacoumacatos, ed., *Greek Architecture in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century* (Athens: Gutenberg, 2016), 166–76. See also David Leatherbarrow, *Uncommon Ground: Architecture, Technology and Topography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

The specificity of the Greek balcony during the second half of the twentieth century is set within a particular context: the emergence of the so-called *polykatoikia* typology (πολυκατοικία, from πολυ-, multiple, and -κατοικία, residence). The birth of the *polykatoikia* was, in part, a response to an increase in Athens' population. The defeat of the Greek army in August 1922, marking the end of the Greco-Turkish War, and the so-called Great Fire of Smyrna in September 1922, led to the arrival of refugees from Asia Minor. 25 In 1929, the "horizontal property" law emerged as a means to enable (and even promote) a system of *antiparochi*: a cashless contract between an entrepreneur, who would construct and sell the *polykatoikia*, and the owner of a building site, who would in return receive one or more flats in the newly built *polykatoikia*. Realized without any state support, the *antiparochi* system not only modernized Greek cities and turned large numbers of citizens into apartment owners but also helped to house the Greek citizens who migrated to Athens from decimated villages and towns after the civil war (1946–1949). The construction of *polykatoikies* intensified in the late 1950s and reached its peak during the 1960s and 1970s.

The *polykatoikia* soon became the symbol of Greek modernization, and its balconies contributed significantly to the optimization of passive heating and cooling strategies. Moreover, *polykatoikia* tenants also attributed symbolic value to their balconies. While northern European modernist debates placed emphasis on the technocratic aspects of the balcony, exemplified through slogans such as "light, air, and openness," 26 for Greeks the balcony also offered access to the spiritual aspects of natural light. In the 1960s, modernist Greek architects such as Aris Konstantinidis claimed that modern society had lost its connection with nature and, through a renewed engagement with light, aimed to reinvent the relationship between modern architecture and nature. 27

Being on the balcony of the *polykatoikia* thus came to be understood by many Greek citizens as a way of being in touch with the Mediterranean's light, spirit, and nature.

The practices taking place on *polykatoikia* balconies construct what Hannah Arendt calls a "common world," [28] which bridges public and private life and fosters the creation of common knowledge. Between the remembrance of a rural pattern of living, concerns for hygiene and climate, and the spiritual symbolism of light, the balconies of the *polykatoikies* represent a unique social and spatial physiognomy in the city of Athens.

The Micro-Politics of Mumbai's Balconies and the Right to the City
Fatina Abreek-Zubiedat

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, the balcony's political capacities have gained new significance. Across the world, balconies have acted not as private spaces but as visible platforms for urban populations to connect and partake in social life by sending greetings, singing, clapping, and so on. In 2020 India, for instance, residents were encouraged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to offer a collective applause for healthcare professionals and essential service providers from their balconies every day at five o'clock in the evening. Such activities were not directed at those in the streets below, as these were empty due to the containment restrictions, but at those around them. This raises the question: does the balcony have the potential to regulate entry to the public sphere and "the right to the city?" [29]

In Mumbai, the second most populous city in India (after Delhi), balconies have a long cultural tradition. [30] Balconies played a critical role in the chawls of Bombay from the second half of the nineteenth century. The outbreak of a devastating plague epidemic in 1896 and the disorganization of economic and labor circuits triggered panic among the commercial elite, Bombay's mill owners, and the British colonial officials, and forced the latter to consider the issue of workers' housing. In response, the colonial state created the Bombay Improvement Trust to strengthen the commercial activities and to provide sanitary accommodations for the poor and working

28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9.

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29 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 7–8.

30 Maura Finkelstein, "Ghosts in the Gallery: The Vitality of Anachronism in a Mumbai Chawl," *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (Summer 2018), 937–68, here 950.

fig. 2 Chawl galleries in Dadar, Mumbai Source: Maura Finkelstein

31 Caroline E. Arnold, "The Bombay Improvement Trust, Bombay Millowners and the Debate over Housing Bombay's Millworkers, 1896–1918," *Essays in Economic and Business History* 30, no. 1 (2012), 105–23; Vanessa Caru, "'A Powerful Weapon for the Employers'? Workers' Housing and Social Control in Interwar Bombay," in Prashant Kidambi, Manjiri Kamat, and Rachel Dwyer, eds., *Bombay Before Mumbai: Essays in Honour of Jim Masselos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 213–35, here 214.

32 James Holston, "Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries," *City & Society* 21, no. 2 (December 2009), 245–67, here 261.

33 Neera Adarkar, ed., *The Chawls of Mumbai 2011: Galleries of Life* (Bombay: ImprintOne, 2012); Manjiri Kamat, "The Palkhi as Plague Carrier: The Pandharpur Fair and the Sanitary Fixation of the Colonial State; British India, 1908–16," in Pati Biswamoy and Mark Harrison, eds., *Health, Medicine and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 2001), 299–316.

34 On the influence of liberalization on the urban development of Mumbai and the chawls, see for example Kidambi, Kamat, and Dwyer, eds., *Bombay Before Mumbai;* and Navtej Nainan, "Lakshmi Raj: Shaping Spaces in Postindustrial Mumbai: Urban Regimes, Planning Instruments and Splintering Communities" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2012).

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classes. Two decades later, with the spread of 1918 Spanish Flu, the Bombay Development Department carried out far-reaching housing programs. **31** The development operations conflated power and control, and accelerated the rise of real estate speculation and class differentiations.

With the growth of the textile economy in the latter half of the twentieth century, Mumbai experienced a surge of migrants from the hinterland. As the city was unable to provide housing for all these migrant workers, mill owners responded by creating a new housing type — chawls. Chawls are typically four- to five-story high buildings with eight to sixteen single-occupancy rooms per floor. These rooms are commonly connected by exterior, gallery-like balconies. **fig. 2** Most chawls have an inner courtyard along which the floors are designed. Occupied by the "insurgent citizens" **32** of the working class, these balconies were historically used for political activities and became public platforms for political debate in the old Bombay. **33** Although these chawl balconies are still a prominent feature of Mumbai today, their political role has diminished following India's economic liberalization of the early 1990s, which has increasingly marginalized the urban poor. **34**

Zurich Balconies as Displays of Protest and Support
Irina Davidovici

During the weeks of lockdown, balconies throughout the world have broadcast messages of hope, solidarity, or grief on homemade banners. In Zurich, balcony banners represent an established, if low-key, political tradition which has its origins in the Swiss direct democracy system. Several times a year, as citizens prepare to vote on public issues with municipal or federal consequences — from the setting of minimum wages to the construction of a local by-pass — pre-printed canvas signs are hung from windows and balconies, announcing the inhabitants' voting intentions. In contrast to the official posters, which are aimed at undecided voters and urge *Ja* or *Nein* depending on which interested parties paid for them, the home banner tends to advertise where the vote is headed in the household. In November 2020, orange canvas banners were hung on balconies across the city in support of the initiative for corporate responsibility. They became a familiar sight in the weeks leading up to the vote, which, despite being rejected nationally, carried 52.8 percent of the Zurich vote. Rather than seeking to persuade, such banners confirm the implicit class solidarity of the kind of progressive, environmentally conscious, middle-class inhabitants who might occupy themselves with public ideological displays. Their concentration in a building

can be an informal indicator of its demographics, for example the collective ownership of a housing cooperative whose members are often politically active.

Among the balcony banners of Zurich, a few—larger, unrulier, ostensibly painted by hand—express the political views of the more radical Left. Depicting feminist and environmentalist messages, they tend to protest the neoliberal status quo independently of specific upcoming referendums. These banners also hang from old factory buildings or from improvised structures, signaling the existence of squatting communities or autonomous social centers. Given the nearly full occupancy of Zurich housing stock, however, squats and the homemade banner as its external manifestation are less likely to be observed in the city's residential quartiers. To see such hand-painted banners hanging from the elegant cast-iron railings of a nineteenth-century residential block would today be an exceptional occurrence. Such sights have been relegated to the archival records of the grassroots social movements that rocked Zurich in the 1980s, as the city transitioned from a predominantly manufacturing economy to its current status as a global center for financial services. fig.3 The organized building occupations and squats continued well into the 1990s and 2000s—from the protest occupation at Stauffacher Aussersihl (9–12 January 1983), to the established squats of Wohlgroth (1991–1993), Binz (2006–2013), and the soon-to-be-cleared autonomous cultural center at Koch Areal. Inherently precarious, in order to prolong their existence some of these temporary communities adopted the institutional format of housing cooperatives, within which they continued to implement a radical ideological program. While Karthago and Dreieck are the pioneers of this typical Zurich phenomenon, Kraftwerk1 and Kalkbreite remain to date the most visible examples, having since developed several new-build, large-scale estates in the city center and on the periphery. In the course of these transformations, the balcony as an architectural element has played an important representational role, going through a parallel trajectory of institutionalization.

The balconies of the Grunderzeit townhouse at Badenerstrasse 2, the focus of the Stauffacher occupation of 1983, served as the platform from which the protest became visible—and audible. Using the facade, the building's anarchist inner organization was projected further out unto the city. 35 Decorated with banners, flags, and balloons, masked squatters took over the small corner balconies during the protest. In their absence, grotesque cardboard masks adorned human-sized papier-mâché figures perched on the second-floor balcony, and the murals of squatting figures were depicted with white paint between the windows under

35 P. M. *Stauffacher, Aussersihl: Über die inventiven Kräfte der neuen Weltgesellschaft* (Zurich Verlag der Inventiven Kräfte, 1985).

the defiant slogan *Wir sind noch da (& dort)* (We are still here (and there)). A giant mobile, made of empty supermarket baskets, was suspended from the top floor. The banners hanging from balconies or between windows held a variety of anti-imperialist and anti-police messages, equally protesting against the United States' occupation of Grenada and the Swiss arms trade.

Easy to dismiss as attention-grabbing props, these decorations were, on the contrary, part of an established iconography consistent with the protesters' ideological agenda. Shortly after the police clearance, with the buildings once more boarded up,

fig. 3 Banners on Badenerstrase 2 in Stauffacher, Zurich, November 1983 Photographer: Gertrud Vogler/Source: Sozialarchiv Zurich

a Stauffacher activist published the pamphlet *Bolo'Bolo* (1983) under the pseudonym P. M., imagining an anti-capitalist utopia of autonomous communes (bolos), either built from scratch or taking over existing buildings. Intermediary spaces and elements were to be used as connective elements between distinct buildings, emphasizing their unity. Thus, houses could be "partially topped off with terraces for planting and provided with glass greenhouses to reduce energy loss" or "connected by arcades, intermediate buildings, communal halls, and workshops" — the common aim being that "different parts of the bolos should be reachable without exposure to the weather." **36** Some of these connective elements were represented as galleries or balconies stretching across the various facades, thus using architecture to transform the heterogeneous block into one autonomous entity. P. M.'s theoretical utopia was so closely attuned to Zurich's alternative culture as to anticipate features of its actual buildings. In the Wohlgroth squat, best known for its "Zu Reich" (Too Rich) mural

36 P. M., *Bolo'Bolo*, 3rd, Eng. ed. (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 106—8.

that greeted trains into the main station, a number of occupied nineteenth-century speculative townhouses were connected with precarious, improvised bridges.

The squatting communities and neighborhood associations that later adopted the legal format of housing cooperatives also altered existing buildings and designed new ones according to a collective way of living. [37] Both the Karthago Cooperative, founded in 1991 by the original Stauffacher squatters, and the Cooperative Dreieck, formed by a neighborhood association in order to resist the demolition of an old perimeter block, added collective spaces and used balconies and terraces as gathering places protected from the elements. In this process, the balcony emerged as a characteristic figure of cooperative life. In its tailor-made, designed reiterations, it is deep enough to contain large tables for communal dinners, benches for informal meetings, and even to store everyday items. In keeping with the cooperative's ecological credentials, balconies are extensively planted and roof terraces often equipped with solar energy panels. Kraftwerk1's Heizenholz development, designed by Adrian Streich, restored and extended two existing blocks through a connecting external circulation, integrating staircases and deep, covered verandas for collective use. The Kalkbreite development by Müller Sigrist (2009–2014) is organized around a connecting circular route that opens onto roof terraces with commanding views of the ensemble and the city, perfect for communal outdoor parties. And the blocks of Kraftwerk1's Zwicky Süd by Schneider Studer Primas (2009–2016) are connected with galleries and walkways, some opening onto suspended balconies. From these, as from other balconies in Zurich, pre-printed banners are hung at the time of upcoming referendums, confirming through their message the ideological leanings of residents. fig. 4

Since the 1980s street protests, Zurich balconies have been ritually colonized to act as billboards for ideological programs, vertical platforms for political protest. During the coronavirus crisis, they made public individual messages of solidarity and support, whether hung on homemade banners or expressed through applause. Their informal political role has been to canvass public opinion through the all-too-literal addition of words on canvas. These supplementary, improvised uses of the Zurich balcony

37 Developed in collaboration with the city, the programs of these developments were defined in consultation by work groups, then put into application by architects selected through competition. See for example Margrit Hugentobler et al., *More than Housing: Cooperative Planning; A Case Study in Zurich*, Edition Wohnen (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016); Sabine Wolf et al., *Kalkbreite: Ein neues Stück Stadt* (Zurich: Genossenschaft Kalkbreite, 2015).

fig. 4 A balcony scene in today's Zurich Photographed by Irina Davidovici

indicate how it transcends the condition of a bourgeois filter between private and public lives. It becomes itself a banner, a screen for the projection of the citizens' beliefs into the political realm — which is, after all, one manifestation of the thoroughly Swiss democratic procedure of raising your hand to be counted.