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GET RICH OR DIE TRYIN'¹

fig. 092

Reproduction of Ai Weiwei's 'Study of perspective', 'Prime Tower'.

Zürich, 2012.

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Lukas Manz
Barbara Thüler

Production of capital versus the city: The 'Prime Tower' in a critical perspective²

The 'Prime Tower' stands as an icon for current city planning and is the new image of the city of Zurich. It shows in an explicit way which social class this development is directed towards. It strengthens Zurich as a financial and economic hub in the global competition.

The story of the emergence of the 'Prime Tower' illustrates the change of paradigm in city planning within the last two decades. The city planning policy, «the city is built»³, finds itself in radical opposition to the present opinion that «Zurich grows; we are dependent on the growth of the city and on the growth of the economy.»⁴ Coming from the present city-planning director, this statement indicates the strong influence of private industry in today's Zurich city planning. This change typifies the dilemma of modern city planning, which has to perform a balancing act between economic, social, and political interests. In the case of the 'Prime Tower' and Zurich West, the area development led to a gradual merging of economic and political interests and to the exclusion of citizen participation. As a result, the 'Prime Tower' is a symbol of the undemocratic development of the area of Zurich West, and thus an expression of the power of capital in the city.

The development and re-thinking of the industrial area of Zurich West was first discussed in the 'Stadtforum Zürich' in 1996. The 'Stadtforum' provided a direct exchange between all the actors involved in the urban development of the city. It was a reaction to the rapid economic and social modifications of society. The aim was to reach a «democratic urban society that is looking for a collective rationality». Zurich has to become more «competitive and attractive in the global competition of metropolises», at the same time, «the environmental, living, and life quality for the population should be improved».⁵

Due to this gathering of all the relevant actors at one roundtable, the range of interests concerning urban

development was extremely broad. It was an experimental and empirical approach to city planning. The formulated recommendation to the City Council was to approach the urban planning of Zurich West as a cooperative development. The actors should consist of landowners, entrepreneurs, the city, the canton and the affected citizens. This recommendation was implemented by the City Council in February 1997.⁶ One year later, in May 1998, the 'cooperative development planning Zurich West' was initiated among the private landowners and the city administration. Three national and international planning teams were each developing a master plan for the Zurich West area. The results were discussed in a 'task force', consisting of the landowners and the administration, which led to a partial revision of the building and zoning regulations for the area of Zurich West.⁷ Planning guidelines and common interests were formulated that were to be reflected in the further planning of the individual properties. Zurich West should get a «significant rise of value, consisting of an attractive mix of functions and the flexibility towards the markets».

Furthermore, the area should «improve the city's position in the global competition for direct foreign investment», generate a «reasonable return on invested capital and offer new homes to citizens of various social and economic classes».⁵ The decisions were communicated to the City Council and the public after this first planning phase.

The initial idea, which was to perform this urban development in a cooperative framework, was finally not made possible as intended by the 'Stadtforum'. «We carried out the planning mainly together with the landowners and the investors.»⁴ This contrasts with the initial idea of cooperation compromising all the relevant actors. Compared to the ambition of social diversity the city was aiming for, Patrick Gmürs statement seems surprising.

The site on which the 'Prime Tower' is situated today was formerly owned and used by the 'Maag-Zahnräder AG'. In 1990, the company was converted into the real estate company 'Maag Holding AG'. The individual properties of 'Maag', 'Coop', 'Welter-Furrer' and the city of Zurich ('Maag Areal Plus') were too small to respond to the requirements for public space, mixed functions and infrastructure in each of the properties.⁸ As a consequence, a Public Private Partnership was founded.

In a Public Private Partnership as a model of cooperative work, the city governments are «increasingly expected to serve as market facilitators rather than saviours from market failures». As a consequence, «cities are no longer as able to establish regulatory barriers to capital; on the contrary, they are expected to lower such barriers.»⁹ This poses a conflict between the duty of the politicians, who have to act according to the common interest of the people, and the investor who wants to maximize his profit. A Public Private Partnership avoids a holistic view of urban development and reduces the focus on the reduction of costs and accumulation of capital.¹⁰

In 2001, 'Diener & Diener' emerged as the winner of the urban study competition of the 'Maag Areal Plus'. Their design included for the first time the intention to project a tower next to the Hardbrücke. 'Diener & Diener' defined a maximum elevation height of 530 meters above sea level. This set the height of the future 'Prime Tower'. Three years later, the city of Zurich released the special building regulations for the 'Maag Areal Plus'. They included the possibility of a higher density and the allowance of a high-rise project of up to 126 meters.⁷ The rate of the residential space of the 'Maag Areal Plus' was fixed at 27%. Residential space for 1,500 people and 5,000 office places were planned. As a matter of fact, the proposed tower envisioned residential space in the upper floors.⁸ The international design competition for the 'Maag Tower' took place in the same year, 2004, and was won by 'Gigon/Guyer' Architects. The tenants of the 'Prime Tower' consist of 'Homburger AG', Zurich's leading law firm, 'Deutsche Bank AG', 'Swiss & Global Asset Management AG', a leading asset management firm, 'Citibank AG Switzerland' and the 'Zürcher Kantonalbank', all exclusively connected to the financial sector.¹¹ The rent is set at an average of CHF 500 per square meter and year.¹² As a comparison: hypothetically, in order to achieve the profitability defined by the 'Swiss Prime Site', five apartments per floor – each of them with approxi-

mately 200 m², would have to be rented out for CHF 10,000 per month.

The intention of 'Maag Holding AG' was to attract major high-profile companies with the ideal location in order to activate the 'Maag Areal Plus'. The proposal by 'Diener & Diener' to build a high-rise building with mixed uses was therefore dropped. 'Maag Holding AG' was furthermore taken over by 'Swiss Prime Site', the largest real estate company in Switzerland. The acquisition of 'Maag Holding' by 'Swiss Prime Site' has clearly determined the type of future tenants. Their value of owned properties within Switzerland is CHF 8.2 billion. 'Swiss Prime Site' selectively purchases «high quality offices and retail properties on the best-located spots of the major Swiss cities» and invests «only in profitable objects that generate a reliable cash flow and allow a substantial dividend to shareholders.»¹³

The story of the emergence of the 'Prime Tower' demonstrates in crucial twists the change of paradigm in the city planning policy of Zurich. The object 'Prime Tower' cannot be read only as a radiant urban sculpture but should as well be seen as a manifestation of power by the private companies over the public authorities. The urban development in the early 90's was promoted as a social-democratic process. In the context of Zurich West, cooperative development planning was introduced as an approach to deal with large-scale landowners and all the other actors involved in the city development. The intention of creating a part of town that included all interests was soon abolished. The 'cooperation' was in this case executed through agreements between private enterprises and the city – and the exclusion of the general public.¹⁴ In addition, the specific example of the 'Maag Areal Plus' showed how private firms could have their interests taken up by city planning regulations. According to the 'Maag Holding AG': «in our case, the Public Private Partnership is a success.»⁸ In other words: the private firm successfully influenced the special building regulations and therefore into the planning process. The public authorities accepted to only provide the legal guidelines for the project. This is, after 'cooperative planning', another step away from the social-democratic intention and towards a neoliberal planning approach.

By putting the fate of the planning into the hands of the private firms, the city approves planning to be a tool for the real estate industry to accumulate capital. In the case of the 'Prime Tower', 'Swiss Prime Site'

«The accumulation of capital and misery go hand in hand, concentrated in space.»²

was able to use its influence to achieve a maximal financial return. The 'Prime Tower' provides an example of how this growth of influence by the private firms affects the townscape of the city planning. «Gentrification is the neighborhood-based manifestation of neoliberalism. Not only has it created a profit opportunity for real estate capital, but it also created a high-profile ideological opportunity to replace public housing, public space, and so on – with the entrepreneurial privatized landscapes of the present.»⁹ As a further result «we have the problem that we create mainly residential space for very well-off citizens. This is due to the fact that most of the properties are privately owned.»⁴ Jason Hackworth's and Patrick Gmür's statements declare arguably that this form of urban development is not driven by the city in terms of welfare but defined by the capital of the private industry.

In the recent vote, 76% of the citizens of Zurich approved a higher rate of state-supported housing. It becomes clear that there is certain disapproval with the present city development. It is questionable if the pursuit of the city of Zurich towards the financial capital will lead into a future socially and economically sustainable city. According to David Harvey, «capitalists behave like capitalists wherever they are. They pursue the expansion of value through exploitation without regard to the social consequences».¹⁵ Protests like the 'occupy movement', which also reached Zurich, demonstrate a clear tendency of antipathy towards the massive concentration of financial power. As a matter of fact, the present precarious situation is the result of the past 20 years of city planning that leaves the city administration in a weak and powerless position. It becomes evident that a shift in policy is more than urgent when the director of the 'Amt für Städtebau', Patrick Gmür, affirms that «if an investor has the possibility to build high-end real estate, then it's hard for me when I say we have to care about the social mix».⁴

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