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Im Bestand: Swissmill Architecting Hidden Futures

“Architecture is a temporary answer to a temporary need.” reads the plaque at the foot of the tower. Few people know the inscription, which is surprising, since every stone of the Swissmill tower has been a topic for debate since its construction in 2016. Since then, the project has been the subject of as much controversy as of myths and conspiracies. If you ask the residents of Zurich today what the windowless tower is all about, you will hear different stories.

Politics of fear. Architecture of crisis. Politics of precaution. Architecture for the future. What these stories teach us is that history is subjective, and we decide which narrative we choose in order not only to understand the present, but also to anticipate the future and open it up for imagination.

What if the rumors are true and the tower is not primarily to secure supply in times of crisis, but pursues a different goal? What if the tower has already inscribed its future use?

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Between Fact and Fiction

Switzerland has a long tradition of preparing itself for crises. Thus, one could say that the Swissmill tower is one of many architectures and infrastructures for potential emergencies, based on past and current concerns, such as the scarcity of food for the Swiss population. In order to guarantee the supply of grain for a wider Zurich population, the silo tower shall officially serve as a long-term storage facility. The biggest bank in Zurich, one could say.

Due to its presence and appearance the Swissmill tower has triggered an ongoing debate on the construction of high-rises in Zurich, bringing together social, ecological and economic aspects. From the need of housing, over the environmental consequences of construction, to the speculative potential of investment. A heated debate that finds its continuation in the new high-rise regulation that shall be implemented in Zurich and would allow for unlimited high-rise construction. Thanks to Swissmill.

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Architecting Conflicting Interests

Consequently, rumors persist that the process leading up to the construction of the building was an orchestrated act, aimed at architecting the conflicting interests of a growing Zurich population. Therefore, an alternative future use was inscribed in the building.

Beyond its present function as a silo and grain tower, the building was always meant to play different roles: as a social moderator, an ecologic case study, an economic value generator, a political design tool. The tower is therefore only one concrete manifestation of a series of topics: bigger in scale and importance, then the architectural object or local manifestation.

Learning Objective

Together we will research on the different topics that are related to the building's part and future and come up with a design for the reuse of the Swissmill tower.

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