# working with the morelli method.

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#### INTRODUCTION

We perceive our world as ambivalent and unpredictable, always being confronted with a plentiness of information, realities and ideologies. Houses get built and inhabited, they get transformed and valued, and sometimes, they get destroyed and forgotten. We acknowledge that everything surrounding us has evolved from processes of change, adaptation and failure - be it on material or immaterial levels. We also acknowledge that things are entangled and somewhat causally determined – even if we cannot trace the causality in it. If we want to engage in these processes, it is crucial to be aware of our means. As trained architects, we have been taught a broad range of tools, concepts and methods to read our world and order it by the logics of gravity, utility and composition. We have sometimes also been taught in sociology, economy, ecology, whatsoever. But in a world as ambivalent and unpredictable as ours, how can we use these skills in a meaningful way? How can we spot latent potential and create momentum to transform it?

#### THE MORELLI METHOD

It is crucial to find out where to start from. In the dense tissue of influences that are surrounding us, hooking in at the right spot is one of the most challenging things. We believe that these entry points can be found by working with *clues*, a term borrowed from the *Morelli Method* as described in 1979 by Carlo Ginzburg in the text *Clues and Scientific Method*.¹ The method itself was developed in the 19th century by Giovanni Morelli, an art

critic – initially trained as doctor – that aimed for verifying or falsifying the authorship of paintings through the careful analysis of seemingly irrelevant details: Earlobes, fingers – anything that does not obviously influence the overall character of an artwork. In his essay, Ginzburg venturously connects the Morelli Method with an array of philosophical problems about *how people see the world and how knowledge is acquired and organised.*<sup>2</sup> Ginzburg writes:

"In a social structure of ever-increasing complexity like that of advanced capitalism, befogged by ideological murk, any claim to systematic knowledge appears as a flight of foolish fancy. To acknowledge this is not to abandon the idea of totality. On the contrary; the existence of a deep connection which explains superficial phenomena can be confirmed when it is acknowledged that direct knowledge of such a connection is impossible. Reality is opaque; but there are certain points – clues, signs – which allow us to decipher it."<sup>3</sup>

Ginzburg talks about the implications of the Morelli Method for scientists, intellectuals, philosophers and art historians. Even though he never mentions architects explicitly, we believe that it can also be key to us – especially when trying to get a grasp in our world. What working with clues is offering is a shift of perspective, an interpretative tool to detect the seemingly irrelevant as revealing moments for a project: Similar to the work of a detective, we watch out for the overseen or unnoticed details – and transform them into productive reactions. By doing so, we often have to leave our comfort zone and travel far beyond our mandates.

#### **CLUES IN PRACTICE**

What working with *clues* could mean in research and practice shall be explored by a journey through a selection of works we did – as *8000.agency*, but also in wider collaborations (*ZAS\**). The cases of that journey are loosely connected and told in an anecdotical way. The different chapters try to offer insights into a working method rather than explaining the projects in their entirety.

### ON HOW TO APPROACH OUR WORLD

Why helping residents move – as a part of a graduation project – has taught us a lot about the demolition of a 1970s housing estate.

Siedlung Wydäckerring is an unsolicited research and design project on a 1970s housing estate in Zürich, which was doomed to be demolished. During the last year of its existence, we documented the the place and its inhabitants. Our aim was to find a set of arguments and ideas that would lead to an alternative evaluation of it. Siedlung Wydäckerring stands exemplarily for the fate of many buildings in Switzerland today. For many owners, it has become common practice to aim for a total replacement (Ersatzneubau) if the existing building does not comply with the standards that they wish for – or when the amount of money that can be invested is temptingly high.



A poster to advertise our help brought us into contact with the residents. We offered a *moving* service by architects, unprofessional but for free. When we were contacted, people weren't entirely sure if we really offered help for free.



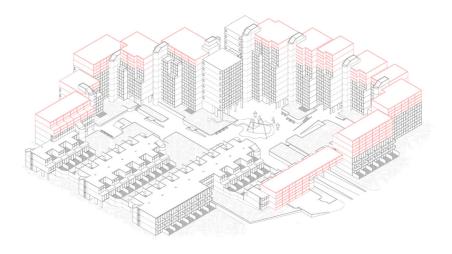


We spent a day helping a young scientist to move out of his studio to a new place. We did not only learn about his personal story but understood what it can mean to redevelop the existing city.

The Morelli Method was our guideline to take the seemingly unimportant events seriously and to get involved with their consequences. To let oneself be driven by hints and traces, follow them, and herby discover qualities and arguments that normally stay behind the curtain of a streamlined political and economic system.

At some point, the remaining residents had to leave their homes and move all their possessions out of the estate. We decided to offer them help to move. Very personal stories were shared, which were often highly connected to the place of investigation itself. We learned what the residents appreciated about their homes, what they would have changed, and what they think about the arguments for demolition. Spending a day with them and helping to carry their belongings out of their flats changed our role – we became actors ourselves. Experiencing another viewpoint made clear what drastic consequences planning decisions have on the lives of individuals.

With this experience and many more, we condensed our project to a film and a web archive.<sup>4</sup> The work does not only document the place in its last year, but also suggests visions that counter the arguments for demolition – always on the basis of *clues* that we had gathered. Actions such as helping to move, digging a hole in the garden, observing the birds within the estate – actions which at first glance do not seem to be directly useful – became enormously important in order to develop ideas that take up the qualities in the existing reality and develop them further.



Our oberservations lead to a variety of speculations, offering alternatives to the planned demolition of the settlement.





The clues we discovered were translated into spatial projects, reacting to stories of residents and small observations from our research.

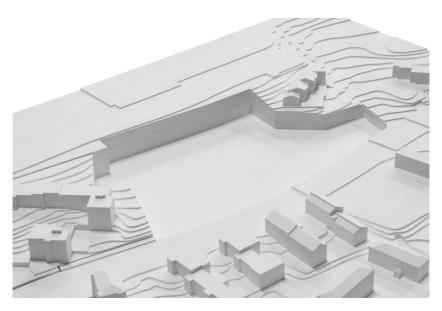
#### ON HOW TO TRICK PROCESSES

How deliberately mis-reading the task leads to a discourse on alternatives to streamlined destructive processes.

We have been thrown into a world where planning all too often starts from a tabula rasa – where an existing situation is to be completely replaced by a new idea. This is not only controversial from a cultural perspective, but it is also an ecologically and socially questionable strategy as we face climate crisis. The tabula rasa mentality goes so far that sometimes, in the plaster models handed over to the teams of architectural competitions, the existing situation is completely neglected – the site on the model is just a big hole. How can you start working with the existing if you are missing all the information? And how can you raise your voice once the premise of demolition is already set?

In the open competition for the *Siedlung Salzweg* in Zürich, the program was to demolish 130 apartments and construct 240 new ones. The legitimacy of that brief was not obvious to us – we had many questions. While thinking about the competition over lunch, we realized that there is even an official format in the competition process that is dedicated to this: the Q&A session.

In the Swiss comptetition system, all questions have to be answered by the organizers, and the answers are sent to all participating teams. Often neglected or used to obtain mostly legal and technical information, we used



The competition model was delivered as if the reality had already disappeared. The existing situation was not included, instead a big hole marked the project perimeter.



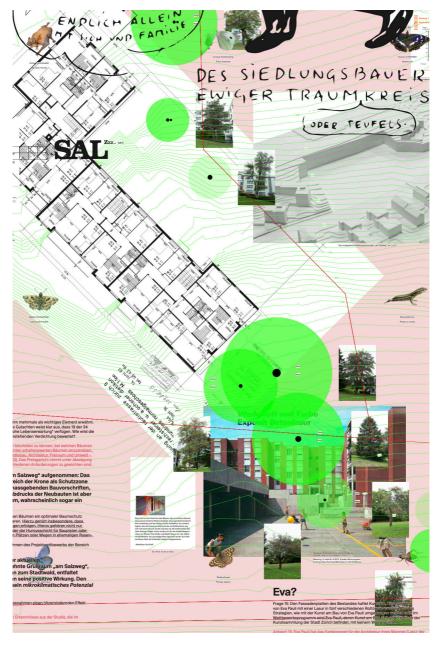
The existing qualities of the Siedlung Salzweg were not taken into account for the competition. We submitted a lot of questions to the Q&A. The compilation of it was shown at an exhibition at *Zentrum Architektur Zürich*, published via the collaboration as *ZAS\**.

this format to raise attitude-related questions and urged the organizer of the competition, the City of Zürich, to formulate their position towards the chosen tabula rasa strategy. The many questions we had in the beginning became a tool of research. By posing them officially at th Q&A, we managed to make an additional set of information open to the competitors – for example the plans of the existing and a long list of the many plants and animals that find a habitat on site.

To turn the Q&A into an investigative instrument was a little loophole that we found within an established process. We followed that *clue* spontaneously, and it caused a new reading of the situation from various perspectives: The organizers were confronted to consider the consequences of their brief, other participants started to discover the richness within the existing situation, and also other actors took up the discourse about the demolition of seemingly obsolete housing estates.

As competition hand-in, we put together a dense portrait of Salzweg's entangled reality, and complemented it with questions and demands to the city:

"The contemporary architectural discourse calls for contributions that deal with the complexity of what already exists. (...) With this collection, we intend to support projects that pursue a different strategy than the one prescribed by the competition." <sup>5</sup>



fragment of competition project: *SALZzz...WEG*, by Jens Knöpfel, Tamino Kuny, Lukas Ryffel, Oliver Burch, Jakob Junghanss.

#### ON HOW TO FIND ALTERNATIVES

How a cup of tea with residents may lead to an architectural concept for refurbishment.

Other times, we try to prove an alternative approach to the desired demolition and replacement, and start to include the reality where life had accumulated. In the preparation for another housing competition in Zürich for *Siedlung Luchswiese* – where the brief again was about a total replacement – we went for tea with current residents, getting to know their conditions of living there. We tried to find *clues* on where to act when starting from the premise of keeping the current living qualities intact.

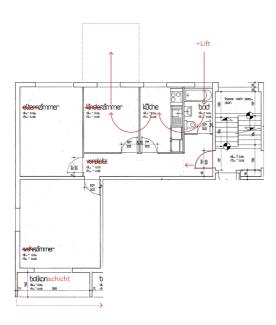
The existing buildings and their potential to be extended or transformed were the vocabulary of the proposal. After being together in the kitchen at a resident's home, we realized that a reshufflling of the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom could allocate all these uses into rooms that have sizes of today's expectations. Introducing another new room to the floor plan would make this reshuffling complete, additionally granting a barrier free access to all the apartments. A rochade of uses within a generic floorplan of the 1950s. And these interventions could even be possible while the inhabitants keep living in their flats.

Our proposal worked within the realm of the architectural system – making use of the means of architecture in a competition where one does not agree with the premises.





Visiting residents and getting to know about qualities and difficulties within the existing flats.



The floorplan allowed to reshuffle the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. The mandatory lift could be integrated into the house after transformation. A rochade of uses within a 1950s floorplan.

The proposal tried to provide spatial alternatives to what was asked for while staying close to the quantitative expectations. It's about how to react and align the brief with the reality – even though nobody had asked to take the existing reality seriously.

#### ON HOW TO SHIFT PERCEPTION

Why we must claim the right to develop alternatives to what someone had decided decades ago.

The participation in all these controversial competitions has led to another act. We got aware of the importance of these premises – of strategic decisions which were taken so long ago that no one dares to question them within an architectural competition. We understood that if we want to change practice, we have to intervene much earlier in the process: To create fertile ground for a productive discussion on how to dwell on the existing.

While walking through the city of Zürich with an employee of the office for urban planning, we learned by chance that three concrete towers – the former staff houses of the Triemli Hospital from the 1970s – were soon to be demolished. A sentence mentioned in passing, but one that made us alert. A *clue* we had to follow. Given the general housing shortage it felt very odd that these three towers with their 750 rooms were to be demolished without replacement. And it was also a mystery to us that no one had these plans on their radar, which, we then found out, go back to the late 1990s –



#### 1 AUFGABE

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Während die 790 Personalzimmer der drei Türme in den ersten Jahrzahnten nach Erstellung noch vorwiegend als solche genutzt unden, hat sich erste Fruikfons seit den 1998en gewandet. Einerseits haben sich die Arbeits und Liebensgewichnleiten des Spitzbersonsten Answichnöglichkeine Fruikfons seit den Statutzen Hausen Answichnöglichkeine Fruik vorsiehende Naturangen. Haute werden die der Türme televerse als Utherkunft für Gefüllcheite und als Henry der Statutzen und Studierredensimmer. "Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer." Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer. "Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer." Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer. "Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer." Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer. "Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer. "Die Zimmer entsprechen energelisch nicht den Studierredensimmer." Die Zimmer eine Studierre eine Studierre weite Studierre wei

Aufgrund der diversen bestehenden Potentiale in den drei Personalhäusern und dem akuten Mangel an Wohnraum in der Stadt Zürich hat sich die ZAS\* im April 2022 entschieden, einen spekulativen Ideenwettbewerb im offenen Verfahren durchzuführen, der

Investigating the case of the demolition of the city-owned Triemli towers let us organise an unsolicited competition to question their fate, together with the group ZAS\*. All information was gathered and put together to a competition brief.





The 45 submissions were juried publicly, opening the debate about the future of the Triemli towers to a wider public.

when people were not yet thinking much about the ecological impacts of building and demolishing, and when housing was less of a scarce commodity.

As part of *ZAS\**, a bigger association of architects, we organized a speculative competition about the towers – to trigger the collective intelligence of an engaged community of architects. We were sure: As citizens of Zürich – and therefore to a certain extent also the owners of the towers – we are allowed to think about the city's property in a speculative way.

The three towers had already served as buffer for whatever needed space: One tower was especially renovated to accommodate elderly people – a temporary retirement home. But also students who had freshly arrived in the city found a cheap room. And some of the floors were retrofitted for clinic spaces and office rooms. With the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022, it became even more obvious how useful these towers are – especially in times of crisis. The 750 existing rooms offer an enormous potential for a city with a severe housing shortage.

For the competition brief, we wanted to build on that potential. We proposed to accept the towers as a *Stadthotel* – a place that can accommodate people for short or for longer periods, and keeps on working as a buffer. We prepared all necessary documents to work with the towers: we recalculated the shadow studies, as the rules had changed in the meantime, and we prepared plans and a fire safety analysis. 45 submissions from all

over Switzerland beyond were publicly juried in order to open the debate about the future of the Triemli towers to a wider public.<sup>6</sup> In addition, all the submitted works were shown in an exhibition and we actively invited the authorities and politicians to discuss the topic with us. So, this case is still ongoing.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Working with *clues* allows to navigate into yet unpredictable realms. To us, this method offers a short outside view onto our field of competence. Arriving back home in the role of architects, we might use our knowledge and tools differently and act more consciously, taking the unnoticed into account. The way of acting and the media we act in is influenced by this search for *clues*. Sometimes a film is the right medium, sometimes it's the organization of a competition, and sometimes it's the basic means of architects – plan and section.

To follow *clues* means not to know yet where a project leads – or even when exactly it starts. To follow *clues* means to develop projects we could not have thought of without the active involvement of the world around us.

### Sources

 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method, Carlo Ginzburg, 1979

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and the Scientific Method, Carlo Ginzburg, 1979, Introduction by Anna Davin, p. 7.

 $<sup>^{3}</sup>$  Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and the Scientific Method, Carlo Ginzburg, 1979, p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The film and archive of the graduation project, ETH Zürich, 2020, can be watched here: https://www.8000.agency/wyd.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Quote from the competition entry: SALZzz...WEG, Jens Knöpfel and Tamino Kuny together with Oliver Burch, Lukas Ryffel, Jakob Junghanss (8000.agency)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The archive of all submitted projects + the competition brief can be found here: https://www.zas.life/triemli/index.html

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