Buildings on Standby

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Stitching the Post-Socialist Cityscape

Fig. 1
Hochhausscheiben A—E.
Photo by Dorenkamp 1974

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Ends and Beginnings

Since the late 1990s, four of the five high-rises known as Hochhausscheiben A—E remain unused, caught in a prolonged state of standby: a future-oriented and contested condition of availability. Over the past decades, their future has been uncertain. Visions ranging from demolition to preservation have been repeatedly proposed and debated, yet none have materialised.

By focusing on the un/making of these futures, the book sheds light on the dynamics of urban in-between spaces. It engages with questions of urban transformation not through completed projects but through a case in which the materialisation of possible futures has been repeatedly deferred. Vacant structures such as the Hochhausscheiben raise urgent, though often overlooked, questions: What prevents demolition or reactivation? What holds such buildings in place? And what can long-term in/activity tell us about the limits and conditions of urban change?

As the buildings persist and their vacancy continues, the question of what they could become equally remains open. The prominent location and enduring presence of the Hochhausscheiben make them impossible to ignore. No planning for Halle-Neustadt can bypass them – yet they have resisted all attempts to define their future. Despite physical decay and recurring calls for action, they remain caught in-between, part of an unfinished and perhaps unfinishable project of urban transformation after socialism. The buildings embody latent potential – but one that has not been realised. They are an 'obstacle' to planning for Neustadt and Neustadt's future (cf. Ringel 2018b, 70), a focal point for contestations over urban future-making and a bargaining chip for trust and responsibility.

In both professional and academic discussions on East German urban development after 1990, little attention has been paid to the spaces and structures caught between demolition and development, between plan and realisation (Beer 2002). An exception is Wezkalnys's (2007, 222) work on Berlin's Alexanderplatz, described as a '*Platz im Wartestand*' – a square waiting for a better future (original emphasis). More commonly, research on urban transformation in eastern Germany focuses either on symbolic struggles over architecture or on urban policies such as Stadtumbau Ost (Urban Restructuring East), particularly their governance (Bernt 2009; Grunze 2017). Fragmented urban landscapes are outcomes of uneven distributions of ownership and interest (Bernt 2009, 764).

This book takes a different approach. It starts with the buildings themselves and analyses the conditions that have prevented both their demolition and reuse. By asking how these structures have remained in this prolonged in-between state, the book examines the temporalities, relations and practices that shape the search for futures in the post-socialist city. In doing so, it sheds light on broader processes of urban transformation after 1989/90 – particularly in terms of urban planning amidst uncertainty in the neoliberal city.

Hochhausscheiben A—E, Halle-Neustadt

The high-rise buildings, simply named A, B, C, D and E, are located in Halle-Neustadt, a district of Halle (Saale), East Germany. With almost 250,000 inhabitants, Halle is the most populous city in the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt. Halle-Neustadt, counting around 47,000 inhabitants in 2022, was built as the socialist model city Halle-West mainly for the workers of the local chemical industries as an independent city. It was therefore also called Chemical Workers' City. After German reunification in 1990, Halle-Neustadt was incorporated into the city of Halle.

In the plans for Neustadt, the Hochhausscheiben were meant to provide a vertical frame to the otherwise rather flat functional buildings and facilities and to create a concentration in the centre by combining living and working. They are located north of and at right angles to the main axis running through Halle-Neustadt from east to west, the so-called Magistrale. The Magistrale encloses the centre to the south, while the buildings enclose it to the east and north (Schlesier et al. 1972).

The buildings owe their name to their shape. The term 'Hochhausscheiben' describes the fact that the buildings are slim and tall towers, constituting an ensemble of buildings standing close and parallel to each other as if they had just been cut apart: 'Hochhaus' is the German word for high-rise building, while 'Scheibe' (that's what they are also called locally) literally means slice. The buildings are tall and long, but narrow in width (around 58 m long and 17 m wide). Four of them line up in parallel; the fifth, Scheibe E, stands slightly offset. They were built as industrial monolithic construction, and each consists of 18 floors plus ground floor.

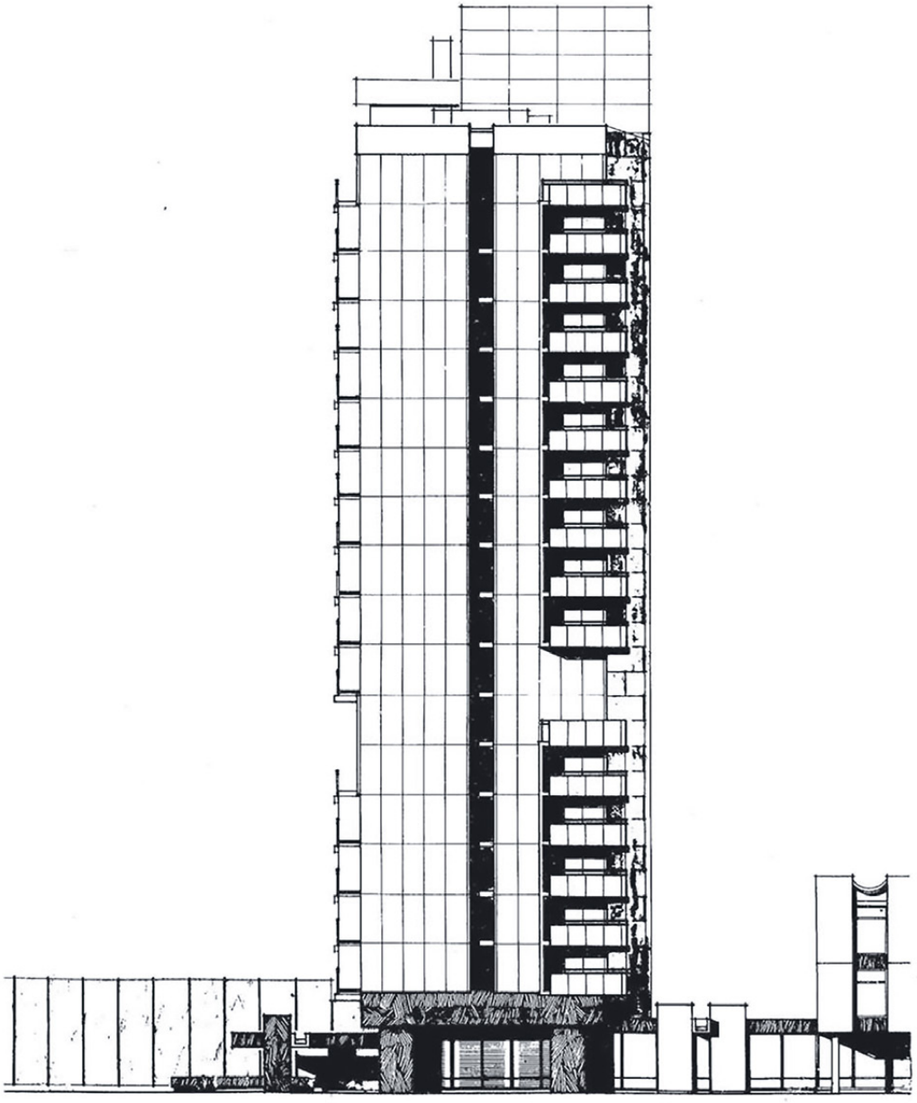
The centre of Halle-Neustadt can be traced back to designs by, among others, Joachim Bach, deputy chief architect of the Chemical Workers' City, and his team. They were all members of the office of the chief architect Richard Paulick, a Bauhaus graduate, who had been summoned to Halle to promote innovative building, scientific expertise and the visibility of Halle-Neustadt. From 1963, his employees and then his fewer known successors took over and were responsible for the planning and implementation of the high-rise buildings. Architect Bach (1993) remembered that Halle-Neustadt was meant not only to express socialist ideals but also to be different from a capitalist, western city. While in western cities, city centres were characterised by an expansion of the tertiary sector from the 1960s onwards, with the construction of large department stores, banks and office buildings, here in the east, the centre was meant to be multifunctional and explicitly also residential. The original plans for the centre of Halle-Neustadt included cultural institutions and a prominent symbol of the city's foundation in the chemical industry: a skyscraper that was to be called 'Hochhaus der Chemie' ('high-rise building of chemistry'). The residential function, as Bach (1993, 24) wrote, 'was also to find visible expression in the originally four, later five, Hochhausscheiben, which were designed as dormitories for single people, students and those who were only there temporarily'.

The initial concept for the centre of Neustadt, developed in an urban design competition, was, however, only partially realised and considerably modified. This has been explained as a result of the regime facing economic constraints and the changing priorities of the political elite. Bach (1993, 33) writes about the construction of Halle-Neustadt:

> Everything was dominated by the responsibility for the progress of construction and the associated constant pressure of deadlines. There was hardly any time for fundamental discussions. The problems of construction were the subject of discussion – not the idea. The city was not discussed, it was built.

The prominent tower was never realised in the centre and the constructed pedestrian passage connecting the Hochhausscheiben also strongly deviated from the original concept (Bach 1993, 29–30). Instead of the two-level galleries, the pedestrian areas were reduced to the level for delivery and parking, and two-storeyed business buildings were constructed between the high-rises (31). 'The grand gesture', as Bach writes, 'remained a fragment' (32). Fahr and Hagenau (1994, n.p.) equally note that 'the plan for the centre always remained a plan, as the centre of Halle-Neustadt seems to be cursed'.

In contrast to other planned volumes for the centre of Halle-Neustadt, the Hochhausscheiben were realised. The first Hochhausscheibe to be built was Scheibe E, after an agreement had been signed between the City Council and one of the local chemical works (Buna) that it would be used as a single persons' dormitory for the workers of the chemical plant. 'The dormitory accommodates employees of the Buna chemical works who have to live away from their families during the week or for a longer period of time. The room programme was adapted to the different functional needs', reads the explanatory report on the buildings' construction (VE(B) Wohnungsbaukombinat Halle 1970, 2). Scheibe B equally served as a dormitory for workers, while Scheibe A and C were dormitories for students and Scheibe D comprised housing offices.



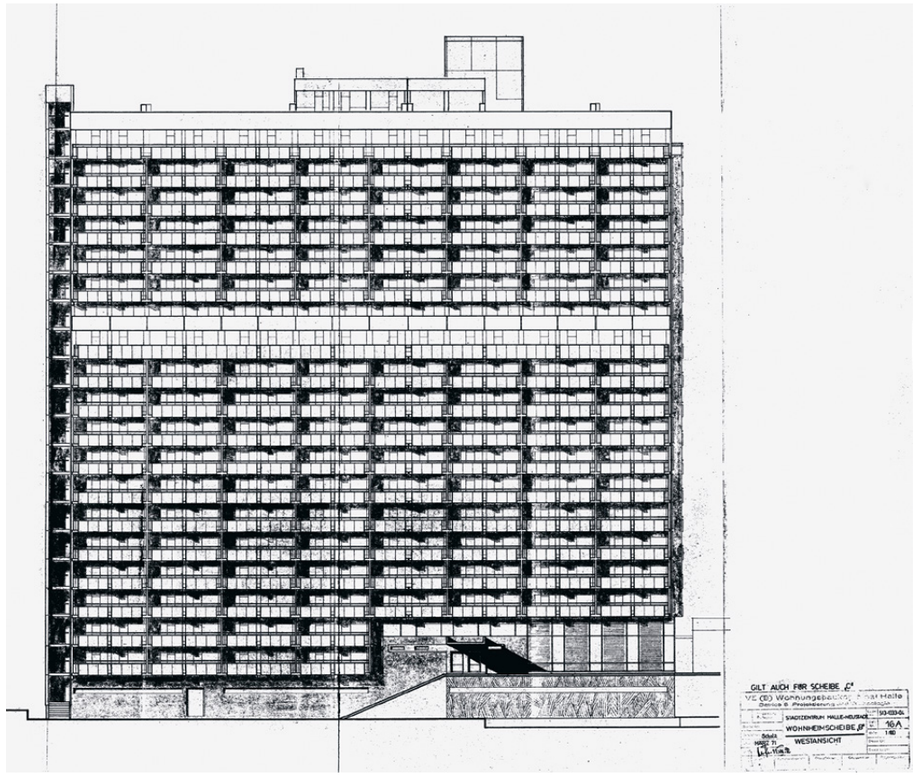


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Fig. 3
Hochhausscheibe B, west view.
VE(B) Wohnungsbaukombinat Halle 1971

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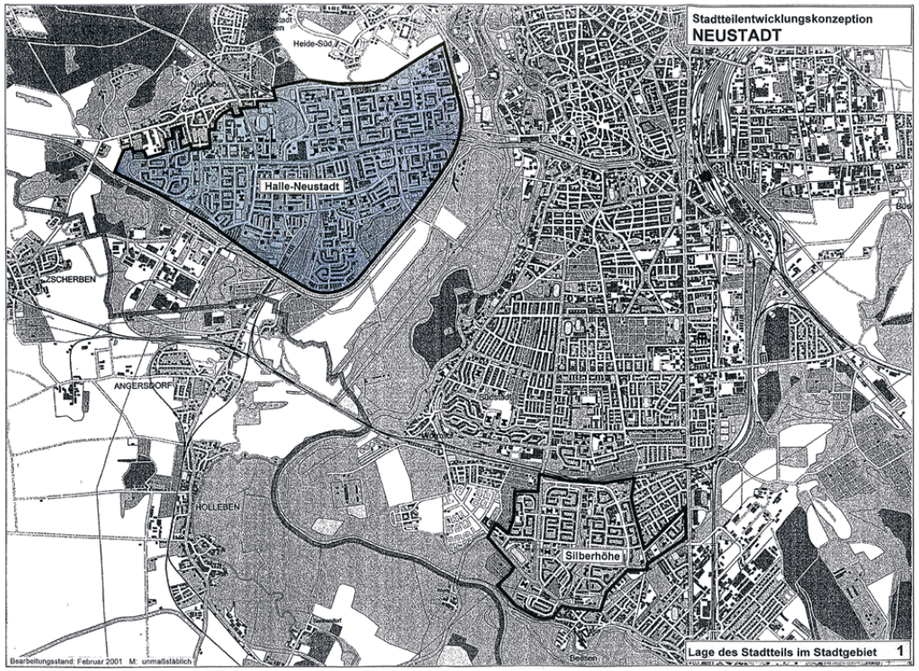
Fig. 2
Hochhausscheibe E, south view.
VE(B) Wohnungskombinat Halle 1970



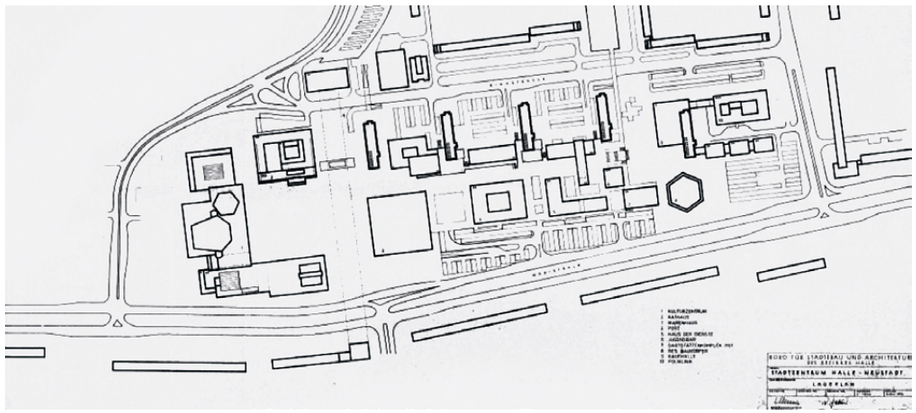


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Fig. 4
Map of Halle (Saale) and Halle-Neustadt,
Neuordnungskonzept für den Stadtteil
Halle-Neustadt. Schultz 2001

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Fig. 5
Site plan of Halle-Neustadt's Centre.
Office for Planning and Architecture 1970

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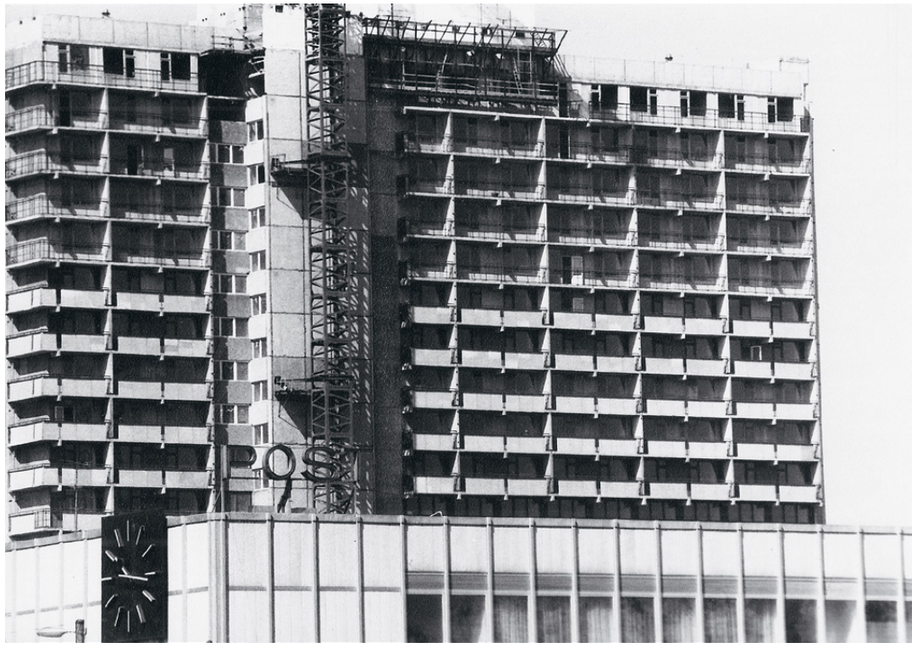
Fig. 6
The opening of Hochhausscheibe E,
Liberal-Demokratische Zeitung 1971



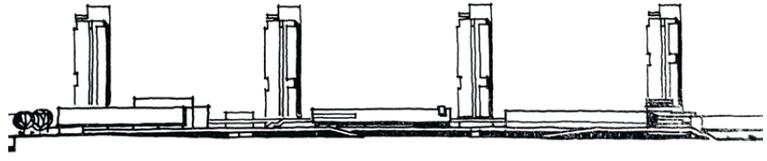


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Fig. 7
Scheibe A under construction.
Photo by Dorenkamp
ca. 1971

▲
Fig. 8
Hochhausscheiben A, B, C, D: planned as
vertical accents. Schlesier et al. 1972, 120

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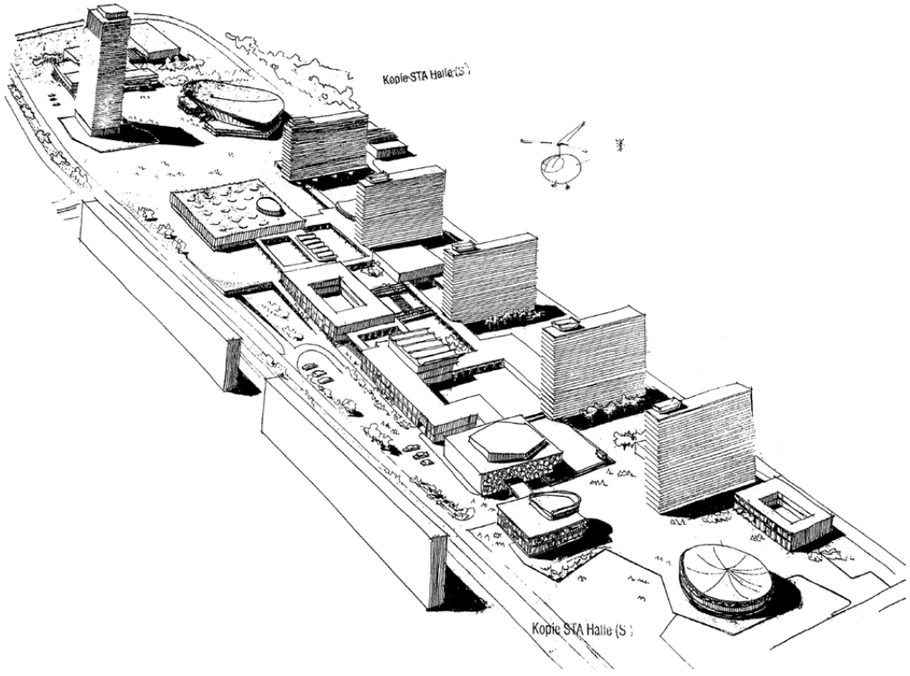
Fig. 9/10
Postcards of the Hochhausscheiben from the 1970s



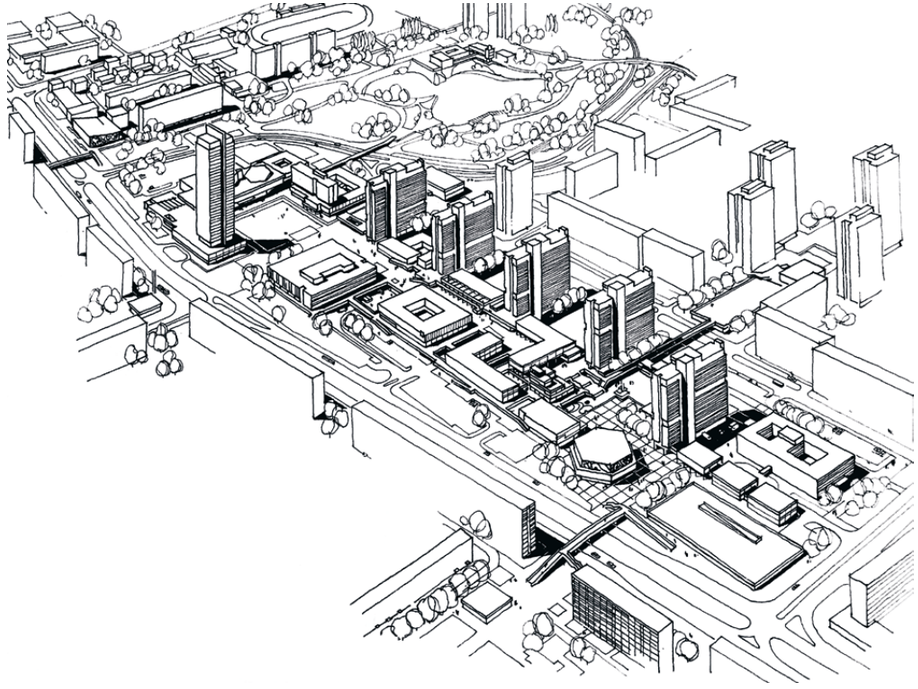


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Fig. 13
Halle-Neustadt Centre.
Photo by Dorenkamp 1972

◀
Fig. 11
Vertical accents to mark the centre:
the Hochhausscheiben in
their early planning (late 1960s)

◀
Fig. 12
Bird's eye view of the planned
city centre. Schlesier et al. 1972, 11

In the GDR, workers' dormitories were boarding school-like accommodation for single working people who were either working temporarily (on assembly) at another place of work or hadn't yet got their own flat due to the general housing shortage. They were also used to house foreign contract workers and were usually attached to a company. Building E included three-, two- and one-bed rooms of different sizes (between 11 and almost 20 square metres), organised in groups with six or ten people sharing sanitary facilities. Mini flats with two bed rooms were also integrated. In total, there was space for fifty-two people per floor (VE (B) Wohnungsbaukombinat Halle 1970, 5). Each floor included a kitchenette equipped with electric cookers, refrigerators and food cupboards. Functional rooms such as laundry rooms, offices, infirmary, recreation rooms for craftsmen, cleaning staff and the office of the dorm's director were located on the first floor (VE (B) Wohnungsbaukombinat Halle 1970, 5–6).

In 1971, Scheibe E was proudly opened in a public ceremony. A newspaper article reports: 'The 18 storeys will house 840 Buna workers and apprentices. The building, constructed by Wohnungsbaukombinat Halle, has a self-service laundry and sports facilities on the roof garden as special features' (Liberal-Demokratische Zeitung 1971). Within the next two years, Scheiben A, B, C and D were completed and put into use.

Losing Control, Losing the Future

The political upheavals of the early 1990s had a radical impact on the purpose and use of the buildings. In the wake of German reunification, far-reaching transformations reshaped the organisation of Halle-Neustadt and raised fundamental questions about ownership and the right to maintain, use and decide the future of the built environment. In 1993, researchers analysed the economic, social, spatial and political reorganisation of the city and identified serious issues 'in functional, technical and aesthetic areas and in the lack of employment and social infrastructure'. At the same time, they highlighted the advantages of 'a good supply of public transport, open spaces and kindergartens, the vicinity of the centre of Halle and the good mixture of social classes.' They saw potential in the 'well-defined ownership, in the possibility of densification and in the inhabitants' basically positive attitude towards their estate' (Projektgesellschaft mbH Dessau 1993).[1]

1 Between 1991 and 1996, a research project entitled 'Urban development of large new housing estates' included a study on Halle-Neustadt, in the framework of which urban development concepts were developed for prefabricated housing estates in the new federal states and East Berlin (BBSR, Städtebauliche Entwicklung großer Neubaugebiete, n.d.). The reports quoted here are part of a folder with reports and collected documents, including newspaper articles in the archive of the city planning office of the City of Halle, that I intensely draw on in my analysis.

In the years that followed, Halle-Neustadt's population declined dramatically. Originally providing housing for almost 90,000 inhabitants at its peak, Halle-Neustadt was facing an outflow of inhabitants, leaving up to 22 per cent of the housing stock vacant (Fachbereich Einwohnerwesen, Fachbereich Planen 2018; Stadt Halle (Saale) 2017, 324).[2]

Under socialism, housing construction and management had been controlled by the state. After 1990, the housing stock of Halle-Neustadt was 'marketized' in several stages (Bernt et al. 2017, 560). First, it was transferred to the ownership of municipal housing companies and cooperatives – commercial entities still closely linked to the city in terms of personnel and management. In a second phase, these companies were forced by law to sell about one-sixth of their stock to private so-called 'in-between-purchasers' in order to 'diversify' ownership structures in the large housing estates. Commercially, this was not a success: 'much of the stock ended up in insolvencies and under the control of the creditor banks' (Bernt et al. 2017, 560). In the following years, new globally acting financial owners 'acquired large chunks of insolvent or cut-price properties, using "leverage effects" to achieve quick profits' (Bernt et al. 2017, 560). According to the authors, this marks a third privatisation phase around the year 2000 that is linked to the liberalisation of property rights and low interest rates. The new owners' 'business involved funnelling capital into undervalued assets. For them, property acquisitions were not seen as a long-term business activity, but as part of a portfolio striving for maximizing revenue in the short to medium term.' (560)

The Hochhausscheiben were not all immediately privatised after the so-called 'Wende' – literally 'turn' – which refers to the collapse of the GDR and German reunification. None of the buildings were transferred to municipal housing companies. Scheiben E and D changed hands as early as 1991, while Scheiben A and B were auctioned off at the end of the 1990s. Scheibe C remained under state ownership until 2015, when Saxony-Anhalt sold it to a private owner. By 1999, three of the five buildings were in private hands, largely vacant, and – as a city alderman wrote to the state government – 'there is no prospect of redevelopment. One is already in receivership by a bank, another is currently being offered for sale on the property market.' (letter to the Ministry of Finance, 14.09.1999) According to one city planner from Halle, German reunification 'twisted all the economic conditions' for them as planners and turned the Hochhausscheiben into obsolete buildings. 'What would a university that had to manage numerous student dorms be doing with high-rise buildings in Halle-Neustadt? Why would chemical

2 At the peak of the population loss between 1996 and 2001, Neustadt lost 28 per cent of its residents. Since the end of the 1990s, the population losses have been accompanied by rapidly increasing housing vacancies, with a peak rate of 22 per cent (7,500 units) by mid-2003. The rates varied in different parts of Neustadt, ranging between almost 19 and 28 per cent (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2017, 324).

plants, which are being “shrunk healthy” from 32,000 to 3,000 employees, need apprentice dormitories?’, they asked. ‘Sell it! Get rid of it!’ was their own answer (interview, 02.10.2018). Except for building D, which was renovated by a private investor in the 1990s as an office tower, all buildings lost their initial use around the year 2000 and became objects of speculation, resales, mortgages and foreclosures (VI/2015/01130, 2015).

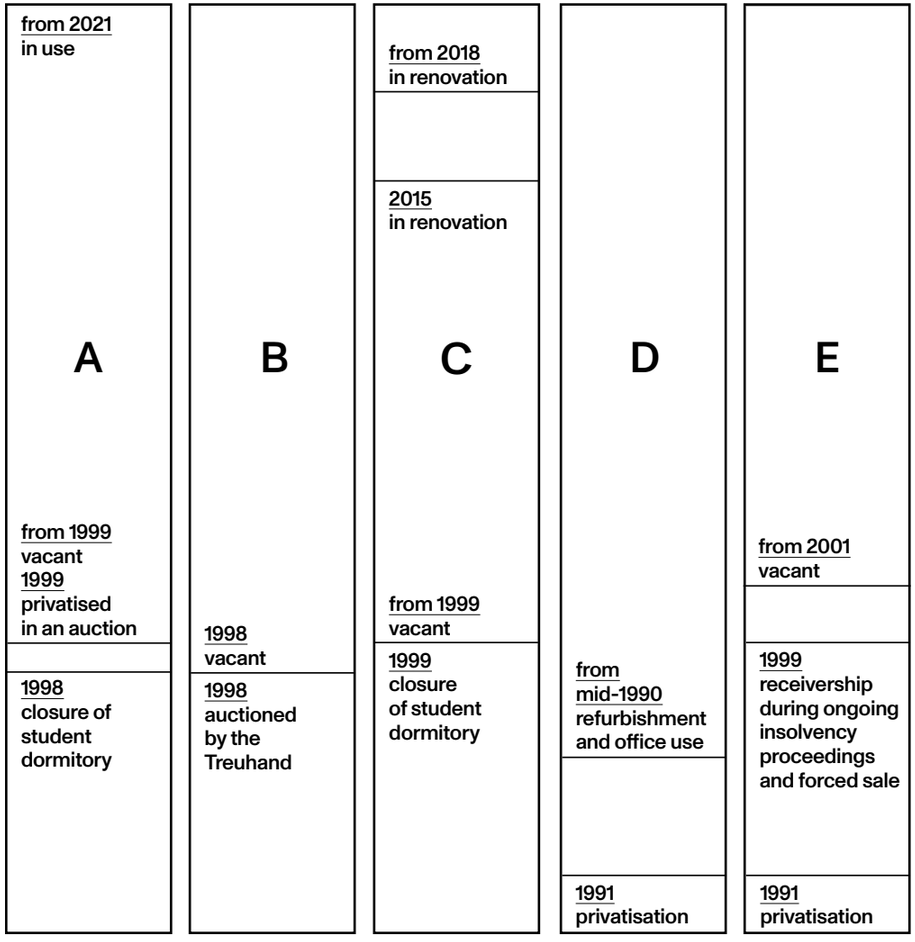

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Fig. 14
Overview of the buildings with dates of their privatisation, vacancies and current situations. The author

There seemed to be little time to find a future for Halle-Neustadt and the Hochhausscheiben in the early 1990s. Researchers who accompanied urban transformation in Halle-Neustadt wrote that the mayor of Halle ‘has no time to look for the old new city, the lost one, since [they have] very little time left to find the new city’ (‘The search for the new city’, ARGOS 3/93, as cited in Projektgesellschaft mbH Dessau 1993). The future was widely discussed, but no clear direction emerged. Notably, scientists called for the search for ‘the new city’ instead of the ‘old new city’. In their view, the only way to cope with the speed of change was to move forward and not hold on to the past. Yet, according to one researcher, local politicians and administrative offices did not grasp the severity of the situation: ‘There is a social bomb ticking over there [i.e. Halle-Neustadt]. They are helpless in the face of the problems.’ (ARGOS 3/93, 11)

Since the late 1990s, efforts were made to improve Neustadt’s centre – multi-storey car parks and a shopping centre were built, and a tram line connected Neustadt with the old town. Interestingly, both the shopping centre and the tram link had already been part of GDR-era plans and were now realised in the 1990s; the town hall of Neustadt, half-built in 1990, was completed. However, as one planner noted, the shopping centre ‘accelerated the decline of the actual passage’, and the situation soon ‘went out of our hands’. The shops at the foot of the Hochhausscheiben lost footfall, and the centre faced decline. In response, the city renovated the passage and redesigned public spaces in the early 2000s, using urban redevelopment funds. The planner reflected: ‘We invested many millions into this inner part. That hasn’t necessarily turned out badly, but it doesn’t reverse other trends in any way.’ (interview, 02.10.2018)

When it comes to the Hochhausscheiben, Halle’s city planners initially contested the all-encompassing transformation processes. They insisted on the preservation of the buildings’ residential use and opposed the transformation of their form. For example, they rejected the conversion of Building E into an office building and a postmodern design of D’s façade. Yet despite these efforts to maintain continuity and control, they could not secure a future for the buildings – and may have missed opportunities for alternative uses.

By the end of the 1990s, the chances of reusing the Hochhausscheiben, especially for housing, had become slim. There was not only a lack of demand, but it was also unclear who the owners were and what intentions they had for the buildings. In 1998, a local newspaper reported:

> The high-rise building in Halle-Neustadt known as ‘Scheibe B’ has a new owner. A buyer from southern Germany acquired the nineteen-storey building yesterday evening for 1,050,000 marks, a spokesperson for the

> Treuhand-Liegenschaftsgesellschaft (TLG)[3] told the MZ [...] It was not possible to find out last night what the new owner plans to do with 'Scheibe B'. (MZ, 25.06.1998)

The city had lost track of who owned the buildings and failed to contact the increasingly elusive owners of buildings that, as planners noted, had become speculative objects. At an auction in 2000, Building E, only 40 per cent occupied by students and businesses at the time, failed to attract a buyer. The city's alderman noted in an internal letter that they were not surprised, since there was practically no demand. They proposed applying for funding to demolish the building (letter, 09.10.2001). In 2004, a city planner described Scheibe E as a 'speculative object' that 'constantly changes hands and is mostly bought out in foreclosure sales'. The surrounding open space belonged to a dubious private company that could not be reached. The administration was overwhelmed by the number of transactions – 30,000 annually, comprising sales and communications – and the planner's request to investigate buyers' intentions was ignored.[4] 'What can we do here?' the planner asked colleagues. 'Who is inviting the buyer to get a picture of the current situation?' (email, 08.06.2004)

It became clear to the city administration in the early 2000s that the market would not provide a future for the buildings. One planner remembered:

> At the very beginning, people thought in such a friendly way that it would sort itself out, the market would sort itself out, and the market is a good thing. When we realised that things had come to a dead end, it was too late – that was the end of the 90s, beginning of the 2000s. So if I get into trouble because I have a product that is not in demand – too bad! [...] Housing shortages like in the West are years away; there's no pressure on the housing market, it will still take years. Now I can say, 'OK, this is a societal problem, I'll pour real funding into it.' Unfortunately, the funding for such projects has slowly been running down from its peak. (interview, 02.10.2018)

Around the year 2000, as high-rises A, B, C and E fell vacant – and only building D had been renovated by a private investor and was used as an office tower, though not without difficulties of attracting tenants – the future of the buildings had become deeply uncertain. At the same time, the city had effectively lost control over their future. A newspaper article reported in 1999:

> The head of the planning department is sounding the alarm. [They] see a wasteland emerging in the heart of Neustadt in the near future. Even worse: 'If nothing happens here, the centre of the district will be dead.' The reason for the 'cries of great distress' is the desolate condition of the so-called Scheiben. The five high-rise buildings are largely vacant, and there are currently no feasible concepts for their use. (Saale-Kurier, 01.12.1999)

In light of these examples, the buildings' vacancy needs to be understood as embedded in complex processes of reconfiguration and neoliberal reorganisation that involve not only a lack of decisions or direction, but also the 'thinning of social and material relations' (Dzenovska 2020, 19) – a gradual unravelling of once-dense networks of purpose, meaning and responsibility. Dzenovska and Knight (2020) see what they describe as 'emptiness' and of which the thinning of relations is a constitutive part, as 'a spatial-temporal coordinate of suspension indexing disruptive transition toward indeterminate futures'. Pelkmans (2003) similarly situates 'emptiness' in the uncertainty of the post-socialist condition that is characterised by ambiguity, by struggles but also by an uncomfortable drifting apart between reality and imagination. As Pelkmans notes for buildings in Adjaria, Georgia, their emptiness is difficult to explain because '[t]heir status or ownership is as unclear as the politico-economic context is, or as the direction of the transition' (127). He turns to the contradictions of post-socialist transformation and notes that '[w]hat is called transition is actually a process in which the space between images and realities is reconfigured. This uncomfortable space, and the many links that connect the two, need to be explored to grasp the processes of change taking place in post-Soviet countries.' (132) Frederiksen and Knudsen (2015, 9) suggest 'the grey zone' as an analytical concept to capture this 'permanent state of being with no end point in sight', which is fuelled by 'various forms of uncertainty, ambiguity and turbidity' and 'characteristic of many Eastern European contexts'. It is within such grey

3 Treuhand was the institution that organised the privatisation of state-owned companies and combines after German reunification in 1990. The subsidiary responsible for real estate was founded in 1991. The mandate of the federally owned real estate company was to reorganise land ownership in the new German federal states in accordance with social market economy principles. It was responsible for the 'privatisation, utilisation, management and development of real estate and former public properties' (Oschmann & Raab 2002, 463).

4 As Kuhlmann and Bogumil (2019) observe, East German municipalities experienced dramatic structural shifts after reunification. The number of municipal employees dropped by a third between 1991 and 1995, and the 'municipal employee density' fell from 42 to 28 per 1,000 inhabitants. Considering the administrative workload created by post-1990 transformations, including privatisation, this is remarkable.

zones that the vacant buildings in Halle-Neustadt must be situated: not just as relics of a past system, but as active sites where meaning and direction of urban transformation remain unsettled and are continually contested.

Buildings on Standby

The prolonged and ambiguous in-between state in which the Hochhausscheiben remain is best described by the concept of standby. It captures both the buildings' condition and offers a lens through which to examine the temporal, material and political entanglements of post-socialist urban transformation in which the buildings' status is embedded.

Standby is commonly known from technology, describing an 'operating state in which energy continues to flow despite an apparent shutdown, thus allowing for sudden reactivation' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 1). Besides technological devices, a range of professions, such as the fire brigade or the rescue service, also refer to standby. And standby seems to be expanding to other and new areas today, for example to suppliers of food or groceries in cities who are waiting on their bicycles, with their smartphones ready to take the next order. 'If we mobilize the concept as a lens through which to observe social phenomena', Kemmer et al. (2021, 1) note, 'standby can be understood as a state of "in|activity" that indicates readiness without immediate engagement, but that nevertheless requires and generates energy, resources, and relations'. Standby draws our attention to the energy that flows in such a mode – the practices and processes that sustain the in-between, and I consider the orientation of 'standing by' to what comes next (15) as particularly important for the understanding of the Hochhausscheiben's in-between.

The notion of standby allows to capture a mode of being, in which buildings remain suspended between possible futures and their non-realisation in uncertain presents. The possible futures planned and designed for the buildings in Halle-Neustadt range from their complete demolition, different forms of their transformation and adaptation, partial demolition to conservation. Demolition on the one hand and preservation on the other span a tense in-between, in which the high-rise buildings move with the ideas and plans for their future. Possible futures in-the-making contribute to the fact that the buildings are still there and render an in-between of the buildings legitimate, as it indicates that there is a future for the buildings. Possible futures are, however, '[s]ituated in a "not yet,"' and 'sometimes they are (re)assembled despite better knowledge, that is, "nonetheless"' (Färber 2019, 267). We therefore need to understand the Hochhausscheiben through expectations of redevelopment and postponed promises of redevelopment, through a living sequence of successful and failed concepts and designs (Latour & Yaneva 2008, 8).

The buildings are in between, neither on nor off, not-yet, stable and unstable at the same time. They are in fact 'on standby' – that is, in a mode in which 'on' and 'off' are 'merged into a simultaneous on-offness' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 1). Understanding the buildings' in-betweenness as standby implies moving the focus to the coordinates, modalities, practices and processes of and sustaining the in-between. Furthermore, the notion of standby allows to understand the buildings' in-betweenness not just as the status of the buildings, but rather as an 'operating state' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 1) in networks within which the buildings form a 'network node' (Jenkins 2002, 230). While stabilising networks of human and non-human actors, which ensured their use, fell apart and collectives disintegrated in the aftermath of the dismantling of the GDR, the buildings are 'not fully disconnected' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 6). With the help of the notion of standby, we can understand that they are only seemingly 'switched off'. It makes us look for people and things, practices and processes that are standing by them. Since the buildings have become vacant, they have been an enduring 'problem' for which finding a 'solution' remains pending, especially for the people at the heart of this research – the planners in Halle's city administration. The buildings are matter that resists and must be taken care of, a symbol that provokes controversy. If there were no more controversy, no more expectations, no more struggles, the buildings would become ruins that could not be reactivated but would need to be reconnected entirely if anyone wanted to reuse them.

'Ah, here she is again'

In this book, I explore how possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben have been and continue to be made, what has contributed to the fact that they are still vacant and still standing, and what characterises this mode of standby when it comes to buildings.

My analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2021. I completed two internships, one for three weeks, the other for three months, at the urban planning office, which formed the core of my ethnographic research. I observed meetings, participated in the day-to-day routines and engaged in practical tasks such as writing a historical overview of Neustadt's centre and researching the under-documented becoming of Scheibe E. The main task, however, was to help them look through and sort all archival documents in their offices in preparation for the planning office's move into Scheibe A after its refurbishment, scheduled for summer 2021.

In fall 2017, citizens in Halle had voted in a referendum that Halle's city administration itself should move into one of the five towers to secure its future. Great hopes were attached to the planned move into Scheibe A to spark momentum for the revitalisation of the whole ensemble and even the district. And indeed, a private investor was about to start renovating building C. At the beginning of this research in 2018, staff at the History Workshop of Halle-Neustadt described only buildings B and E as still 'hanging completely in the air'. According to them, 'something is happening now', and they expressed satisfaction that the current mayor, unlike their predecessors, appeared to take an interest in Neustadt and the buildings (field notes, 23. 07.2018).

Discovering these new dynamics, it seemed worthwhile to examine efforts of the past and explore the impossibilities and possibilities of preserving and transforming the Hochhausscheiben in the present. Discovering the archives at Halle's city administration led me to focus on how possible building futures are made and unmade at this specific site – that is, at Halle's city planning office. Here, I found the traces of possible futures and of processes of un/making possible futures in the form of plans, concepts, protocols and letters. While the processes involved many different and ever-changing actors, possible futures from the past seem to have found a place here where they came together and are kept. Numerous documents and statements examined in this study bear witness to a range of possible futures that have been imagined but never realised.

Urban planners in Halle are involved in making the future for the Hochhausscheiben – it is their job to work on the future of the city. But while administrative practice shapes the trajectories of possible futures in interesting ways, planners do not, of course, make futures in isolation; rather, they themselves are one group of actors among many involved in the process, and their own aspirations may change with changing relations. I complemented participant observation and archival research in the planning office's internal archive but also at the city archive and the History Workshop Halle-Neustadt with semi-structured interviews with former and current planners, architects, local politicians and other stakeholders.

Halle's Urban Planning Office has experience with people who complete internships or make enquiries for research purposes. Generally, they are interested in interactions with researchers, also hoping that the research could be useful to them for their own work. Furthermore, they see it as their duty as a public administration to respond to enquiries and make archival material and information available for scientific purposes. They generally seemed happy to engage with me and reflect on their everyday work, discussing the 'bigger' questions, as they often called the questions I was asking. Sometimes, they told me that particular things should remain among us and not leave the administration's offices, or that something was their personal opinion and should not be passed on. Such moments were mostly linked to relationship issues in the field – that is, within the city of Halle but also between the city and other actors, such as private investors. During the research process, the awareness of the fact that people in the field were interacting not only with me as a person, but also with scientific representation and that they could still reject it (Potthast 2017, 92), was an important insight and also the subject of discussions I had with the planners. We agreed that they would get the chance to read my thesis prior to submission, although in the end they couldn't find the time. Throughout the research process and the writing of this book, I have made every effort to keep the balance between ensuring informants' anonymity and confidentiality and studying the ways in which the Hochhausscheiben were kept on standby.

My access to the planning office was facilitated by a moment of transition – both generational and institutional. 'At the moment, there is a lot going on in the area of the centre and the Hochhausscheiben', they wrote to me in our first email exchange (email, 13.09.2018). The centre of Neustadt gained a new place in the organisation of the city administration as they established a redevelopment zone and initiated renovation projects for Scheibe A and Scheibe C were taking on form. In addition, a generational change and a restructuring of the planning department were being prepared in the city administration. Since I started my research at Halle's city administration, many of the people I spoke to have left for retirement or other jobs in administrations in other cities. This temporality of institutional change made room for curiosity, openness and reflection, as the following situation illustrates. One day, I was sitting in the office surrounded by documents and plans that I was sorting and photographing or summarising for them and for my own research purposes. One of the planners came in, wondering:

Planner 1:	Ah, here she is again. Does she also have time to write her thesis?
Planner 2:	She is digging up treasures here.
Planner 1:	Rather an unbelievable chaos.
Me:	Traces of careful administration.
Planner 1:	From July on, you won't find anything here anymore.
Planner 2:	Hendrikje records everything before it ends up in the containers; you know all this from your own experience, but for us it's treasures and some surprises that she finds … (field notes, 05.05.2021)

The project pursued precise description and conceptualisation of observations as a basis for generating more general arguments. Furthermore, it was guided by the consideration that things could be otherwise. Applying such deliberation implied a kind of wonder or curiosity from afar that is typical for ethnography. My question of why the buildings were neither demolished nor renovated may tempt some readers, especially those familiar with the site,

to suggest: because nothing else was possible. However, if we follow the assumption 'it could be otherwise', then it seems necessary to look at the temporal, material and political aspects of standby from a perspective from 'within' (Färber 2014, 120) – that is, how they 'are locally relevanced and locally contested' (Lynch 2013, 456). My research sought to understand the ongoing, uneven processes by which the buildings were and are kept on standby. This included unearthing how knowledge is archived or forgotten, how possible futures emerge and dissolve, and how specific planning practices as well associal and material relations sustain this standby mode.

Temporal, Material, Political Matters

Standby is a temporal condition that challenges conventional understandings of linear progress, development and closure. It is marked by an ambiguous temporality shaped by repetition, disruption and suspension. What matters to standby is how time is experienced and made, and in particular how actors relate to and act on an uncertain future. In recent years, time and especially the future have gained new attention across disciplines, including anthropology, human geography, sociology and history. This is because it has long been neglected in the study of the social, but it is also linked to a sense of uncertainty that is reinforced with today's crises (Alexander & Sanchez 2018b, 4). Addressed are, for example, the ways of relating to the future, acting to or reacting on it in the present and practices of crafting, enabling and reclaiming time and the future (Ringel 2014, 68). As geographer Anderson (2010, 793) notes for our times, the present is often associated with the fact that the future is not only unknown but also 'unknowable'. Anderson shows how this unknowability is today part of the practices of anticipation and preparedness. Yet despite the high level of uncertainty and indeterminacy of both the present and the future, 'temporal agency' is found to be encouraged rather than suppressed (Ringel 2018b, 71). However, these practices seem to have moved away from modern ways of knowing and acting on the future, in which the future did not necessarily turn out as expected, while people still believed that it could be planned. In the mode of standby, temporal agency takes on more tentative and recursive forms. The condition of 'ongoingness' – of moving on nonetheless and actively waiting accompanied by a sense of 'alternativelessness' while feeling stuck (Berlant 2011; Hage 2009) – captures this paradox well. Moreover, standby unfolds through particular rhythms: temporal patterns formed by the repeated appearance, circulation, dissolution and occasional re-emergence of possible futures. The in-between life of the Hochhausscheiben is structured by the trajectories possible futures take in non-linear processes of future-making, revealing complex relations between events and processes and between networks and projects. The mode of standby finally involves a form of time-making, where actors harmonise the past and render the present indeterminate in order to navigate and negotiate uncertain conditions. The guiding question of how possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben were and are made directs the focus to the role of the future for the being and becoming of buildings on the one hand, and on the other to the conditions of possibility as they are shaped in the interplay between a number of people and things and in the work of relating.

Thinking standby through material matters invites a focus on the Hochhausscheiben as concrete, imposing and socially embedded material entities. Understanding their mode of being on standby requires analytical tools that grasp materiality as actively shaping possible futures through both stability and fragility. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) helps to understand buildings on standby as 'challenging objects' that are imposing action, which distinguishes them from ruins. It foregrounds the agency of non-human actors (Latour 2005), conceptualises in/stability as an effect of heterogeneous networks (Law & Mol 1995) and sensitises us to the material limits of the possible (Hommels 2005). In the urban context, this is particularly relevant: attempts to intervene in the built environment must contend with 'obduracy' (Hommels 2005; Law 2003; Rees 2013), which manifests not only in material resistance but also in ways of calculating profitability and symbolic attachment. Wiedemann (2021, 32) conceptualises standby as a socio-technical mode that demands 'continuous vigilance and readiness'. Indeed, buildings on standby are not only stable and obdurate, their fragility requires maintenance and forms of standing by as the increasingly decaying structures risk becoming a material threat. Maintaining standby, however, means to maintain the potentiality of reactivation. In this sense, standby does not aim to resolve indeterminacy but to sustain it. Central to the question of maintenance is whether a building is found *worth* preserving. Performing buildings as success or failure has considerable effects for their future (Jacobs et al. 2007, 613). In recent years, valuation studies have emerged as a vibrant interdisciplinary field, emphasising the processual nature of values and conceptualising value as a verb (Kjellberg & Mallard 2013, 15). This conception of valuation 'draws attention to the fact that value is non-intrinsic to the object but produced in the relationship between the object and the person who considers it valuable, and results from practical valuation activities' (Chiapello 2015, 16). The Hochhausscheiben are performed simultaneously as problem and value by urban planners: they are often framed as the most pressing problem due to their emptiness and centrality, but equally valuable because their form and origins are 'significant'. More precisely, buildings on standby are performed as problematic but not problematic enough and valuable but not valuable enough (cf. DeSilvey & Edensor 2013) through (e)valuations that emerge from negotiations among actors, tools, materialities and representations.

The conditions under which buildings' futures can/not materialise are shaped in power relations and networks that span the Hochhausscheiben and render them what they are – 'buildings on standby'. These conditions of (im)possibility are not pre-given but enacted through situated relations, as ANT reminds us: 'conditions of possibility are not given' (Mol 1999, 75) but un/made. In standby, actors withdraw or delegate responsibility, and planned alignments fall short – a pattern that is consistent with Kemmer et al.'s (2021, 14) identification of 'looseness' as an organising principle in standby. In addition to Callon's (1984) suggestions for an investigation of power in processes of network building, conceptions of detachment are important for the analysis (Candea et al. 2015). The city, while rhetorically committed to mediation, actively maintains a distance – detaching itself from the buildings as a way of managing uncertainty and complexity. In this landscape of looseness, in which actors struggle for agency and responsibility, things like funding regulations, donations and regulations play a central role. They appear as dis/connectors as they 'help bring actants into association with each other' (Rydin & Tate 2016, 8) across gaps but are at the same time able to keep actors at a distance. Each of these enable and/or delimit forms of engagement and agency (Gomart & Hajer 2003, 36; 47) and thus play an important role for a possible alignment of the actors that would enable either demolition or renovation of the Hochhausscheiben. At the same time, buildings on standby are objects of public debate, as doubts and questions of accountability are articulated and negotiated in relation to them (Woolgar & Neyland 2013, 14). Doubt, as Pelkmans (2013, 2) puts it, 'points [...] to pragmatic referents, to the question "what to do?" Questions of being, of truth and of action should always be seen in relation to each other.' In Halle, citizens' doubts about revitalisation plans turned into expectations and demands, forcing the city to explain its aspirations and challenging its role in the search for a future for the high-rises. Citizens' doubts directed towards commissioned concepts – seen as proof for the city's in/activity – intensified political pressure, particularly on the mayor who had promised a solution. In 2017, this culminated in a referendum, by passing the City Council and directly calling for the relocation of the administration into Scheibe A – transforming the material impasse into a political event and securing the building's future for the time being.

The analysis of the Hochhausscheiben on standby offers a lens into the broader transformation processes in Halle and the contested terrain of post-socialist urbanism. Once icons of the socialist city, these buildings now embody both inertia and the pressures of urban change, foregrounding the im/possibilities of the (capitalist) present. The book traces how possible futures for the high-rises were and are un/made, revealing not only the socio-material challenges faced by the city administration but also the ideological and practical shifts as urban planners navigate urban transformation. It reveals how power operates within the neoliberal city, highlighting the complexities of transforming the building stock and urban governance after socialism. The book sheds light on the subtle, often invisible forces that shape urban landscapes composed of realised, half-built and unrealised futures, producing a multi-layered narrative where possible futures are constantly negotiated in the light of present constraints. It highlights the enduring tension between vision and reality and the uneven processes through which urban futures are negotiated.

Part I
Temporal Matters

Stuck in Time?

In November 2015, the City Council of Halle passed a resolution entitled 'Decision in Principle to Preserve the Scheiben Ensemble in the Centre of the Neustadt District'. This decision intended to replace what is described as 'years of decay and stagnant development', during which 'no long-term uses could be found' for the buildings by way of 'planned development' (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 3–4). In framing the preceding fifteen years, the resolution invoked the term 'status quo' to characterise this period as one of stagnation that the resolution now sought to overcome. While 'status quo' commonly refers to the current state of affairs, historically it also denotes a condition of standstill preceding rupture or transformation. Its use here signals a 'dissatisfaction with the present that implies the negation of the present, and the propensity to work is its supersession' (Bourdieu 2000, 209). What is striking here is that a whole period of fifteen years figures as the status quo – a time in which, as the resolution emphasised, no long-term perspectives for the high-rises had emerged. Indeed, one might suggest that change did not occur because no future for the buildings materialised.

The 'status quo' in the resolution can be read as if there was a 'shrinkage of existential time' that is reduced to 'a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place' (Jameson 2003, 708). It seems as if temporality was replaced by an ongoing present, as no destiny, no future could be determined for the buildings. The 'status quo' is framed as a state that transcends the past, present and possibly also – if no change occurs (and fulfils the purpose of the resolution) – the future. Framing the last fifteen years as status quo suggests that things remained the same over a longer period; it highlights both the ongoing and the remaining, both of which appear timeless, unchanging. The resolution frames the past and projects a future state by envisioning the changes it proclaims to bring. It seems as if time was linked to visible outcomes, such as new uses and that, without any actions or outcomes, everything were to remain the same, status quo, timeless.

I argue that if the last fifteen years are seen as a period during which nothing really happened, when time did not go anywhere, all these years are devalued and subsumed into one block of time because they are premised against a linear 'going somewhere' (Vignehsa 2014, 3; see also Jeffrey 2008, 956) that has not yet come about. As no direction had been determined so far, however, time was now framed as ending (Jameson 2003, 710). The reference to the past and the present as 'status quo' in the resolution thus serves as a 'signal for change' (Vignehsa 2014, 4) that would reinsert historicity back into the present.

Standby time can be described as suspended time. As Carse and Kneas (2019, 18) understand and apply it in their study of half-built and

unfinished infrastructures, a 'suspended' present's heuristic 'is concerned with the varied social experiences and affective states associated with infrastructural delay, from hope and anxiety to waiting and disillusionment'. According to the authors (19), '[s]uspension can mean delay or hangover. Both characterise a temporal orientation defined, on the one hand, by uncertain horizons of project initiation, renewal, or closure and, on the other, the experience of deferral.'

Gupta (2018, 69–70) finds that infrastructures turning into ruins after their construction – he calls them 'ruins of the future' – are 'occupying a temporal zone between the start of projects and their completion [...], between potential and actualization'. He finds that the hopes these infrastructures embody are suspended as they remain half-built (for similar observations see also Ssorin-Chaikov 2003 and Weszkalnys 2007, 222). 'To label them "incomplete"' would reinforce a linear narrative of progress and completion. Instead, their suspension and ruination becomes a condition in its own right, 'its own end' (Gupta 2018, 70). Likewise, standby carries temporalities of its own.

Stagnant Time: Between Despair and Hope

At the beginning of the 2000s, planners in the city administration had lost the prospect of a future and felt somewhat paralysed:

> At that time, this 'shrinking' [note: in terms of inhabitants and economic decline] was like a paralysing lid on everything, and it was very difficult to develop any prospects at all that involved buildings and, I don't want to say growth, because I think that's a critical term and our societies would actually be well advised to finally put an end to this growth. Nevertheless, we're dealing with the case in which a city, just like a person, somehow needs a positive perspective in order to be able to develop ideas and to have the courage to implement ideas. And Halle didn't have that ten years ago. (interview, 25.10. 2018)

The planner stressed the necessity of a prospect, of possibility and a future to come. In Halle, as they described it, this outlook consisted of two aspects: a depressing present marked by the city's shrinkage that would provoke a perception of a missing prospect of possibility, a lacking future. On another occasion, they spoke of shrinking as 'a Damocles's sword' (field notes, 14.04.2021). That the city could not find a future for the buildings also had to do with the fact that 'no one really knew what to do' with the Hochhausscheiben (interview, 28.05.2021). In order to shape change and make the future, ideas were needed, as planners from Halle were convinced. Yet they were missing precisely such ideas, they didn't see any prospect for the future. In Halle, the lack of ideas was perceived as lacking agency to actually realise any ideas:

> In contrast to the 2000s, when we didn't even have an idea and no implementation, in the 2010s to mid-2010s you already have ideas, but implementation continued to falter. [...] Credo: we have come much further than we had been in the very sad 2000s and in the 2010s, which were obsessed with ideas but little with realisation; it could actually work out [today], but the cow isn't off the ice at all.[5] (interview, 02.10.2018)

The planner associated the transformation from one planning system (socialist top-down) to another (which they didn't specify) with the disappearance of ideas for the future. Today, the future has disappeared from their everyday practice, as there is no idea of the future that could be guiding their action (group discussion, 06.02.2020). Ringel's (2018a, 92) ethnographic material from the East German city of Hoyerswerda similarly shows how city officials 'failed to provide Hoyerswerda's inhabitants with a convincing idea of the near future'.

Guyer (2007, 410; cf. Ringel 2018a, 97) denotes an evacuation of the near future (and the recent past) as the 'postmodern condition'. Yet this does not imply the absence of ideals for distant futures; rather 'very short- and long-sightedness' exist alongside this evacuation. In the case of the high-rises in Halle-Neustadt, such distant hopes – particularly those tied to growth – created a sense of stagnation. When hope is directed towards futures that remain out of reach, it can generate a sense of temporal suspension. Planners in Halle hoped that the market, imagineered as a 'wonder weapon' (interview, 02.10.2018), would hold a future for the buildings. However, they reported that the very moment the buildings became vacant, they had to realise that the market would not bring a future. While some planners, in retrospect, acknowledged that hoping for market-driven solutions in the early 2000s was unjustified, standby itself seems defined by the ongoing hope that private investment would eventually secure a future for the buildings.

Standby, in the case of the Hochhausscheiben, is in part to be understood in relation to a 'regime of hope' (Moreira & Palladino 2005) for the 'better futures' that capitalism promises to deliver. Employees of Halle's administration recalled that after 1990 the expectation took hold that the market, and no longer the state, would be the main agent of change (interview, 02.10.2018). Such an expectation entails a turning away from

5 This is the literal translation of a German proverb that expresses uncertainty and actual danger ('Die Kuh ist noch nicht vom Eis').

the idea of a future that *can* actually be planned (see Seefried 2017). This has to do with the fact that they had no possibility to implement their own plans and were relying on the agreement of private investors. Bernt et al. (2017, 566) find that a 'huge gap [emerged] between the municipal plan to demolish a large share of housing stock' in one of Neustadt's neighbourhoods called Am Südpark and 'realities on the ground', for example. The authors state: 'Indeed, while the strategic goals of the 2002 Masterplan remain officially in place, none has been implemented in the last fifteen years. Even worse, the very existence of this plan has practically excluded the neighbourhood from all existing public subsidy programmes for urban development projects.' This situation, they argue, is to be understood as 'a state of limbo in which public planning remains theoretically in place, but its implementation is impossible' (567). They suggest what I have equally observed above, that not only the buildings but also the people engaging with them seemed to remain in an in-between. The gap described here, as other authors show, was often filled with hope. In Hoyerswerda, Ringel (2018a, 97) finds, it was predominantly the Lord Mayor who referred to the future in terms of hope. Instead of making promises that they might not be able to see fulfilled (as had often happened in the past), the Lord Mayor very vaguely promised a good future that the city could hope for, as it would always be a lovable and liveable city. While Ringel points to the vagueness of the future in terms of hope, Metzger (2018) argues that hope can serve to stabilise present conditions. Metzger (2018, 118) refers here to urban planning, stating that

> many articulations of hope in contemporary planning endeavours in practice more or less function as mechanisms of cooptation of more radical transformative impulses, harnessing the mobilizing potential of hope and enrolling 'progressive' planning idealism in a way that it comes to serve as a system-stabilizer rather than the system-transforming force many proponents perhaps would like to see it be.

In addition to the planners' lack of agency and ideas, which was intertwined with the absence of viable prospects for their realisation, the planner mentioned this holding on to a future that seemed unattainable and yet the aspiration: growth. Despite this clinging to growth, the planner problematised this dominant ideal.

Interestingly, East German shrinkage policies of the early 2000s were initially often analysed as policies beyond the growth mindset. East German post-socialist transformation has gained broad attention and has been described as 'political and planning agendas that are aimed more at adjustment than at growth' (Bernt 2009, 755). Some even interpreted these policies 'as a sign of a new openness on the part of decision-makers to urban development without growth'. As Bernt (2017, 42) notes, however, 'there are currently more and more voices (also against the backdrop of the once more growing population) that criticise demolition as a policy of interests guided by neoliberal concepts, in favour of the housing companies'. In fact, even in the early 2000s shrinking programmes primarily served to save the budgets of housing companies, and in practice the growth paradigm persisted well beyond its supposed end (Nelle 2015, 53; 58). Economic policy, even in shrinking municipalities, was never designed to preclude growth. Instead, growth and shrinkage often coexisted 'even after the supposed "end of the growth paradigm"' (Altrock 2005, as cited in Nelle 2015, 58).

One of my informants from Halle's administration recalled how, despite national attention for their policies, they could not identify with urban agendas beyond growth:

> Even with nationwide attention, people dealt intensively and creatively with how to shrink a city healthy, to shut it down in every respect. And I think this 'shrinking healthy' had a similar psychological effect as saying to someone, 'you can be saved, but unfortunately we have to amputate both your legs now'. I would say that the joy of surviving outweighs the pain, but you still have to fight for the rest of your life. That's perhaps a harsh comparison, but I think it went in that direction. (interview, 25.10.2018)

My informants perceived the early 2000s as a 'midway place between hell and heaven' (Otto & Strauß 2019, 1806), as they received support for their policies through national restructuring programmes (that drove their actions in the first place). However, 'shrinking healthy' would still not feel satisfying, as unmaking was psychologically difficult to accept. Shrinkage and demolition had been 'a taboo for a long time' and were not politically opportune – even the Minister of Construction insisted they were 'not a demolition minister', as another informant told me (interview, 26.10.2018). Sticking to the ideal of growth can be understood as creating an 'impasse' in Berlant's (2011) terms, as growth is unattainable.[6] This can result in an optimism attached to promises that cannot, however, be realised (Otto & Strauß 2019, 1808). Berlant (2011, 1) explains how a

> relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. [...]. These kinds of optimistic relation aren't inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.

6 The fact that, ironically, 'shrinking healthy' has led to financial consolidation or even growth for some is not considered here and did not play a role in the perception at the time from the perspective of the city planners.

Growth as well as linearity and change can be understood as ideals that create a sense of lagging behind and having an effect on temporal experience. Today's compulsion to change can lead to violence against all those people and places that are not able to embrace change and actively shape it (Adam & Groves 2007, 1). Others have shown that both change and visions of linear time can exert violence, as they create a perception of failure or of being left behind among those whose lives are not 'going somewhere' (Jeffrey 2008, 955).

Hoping for the market as a 'wonder weapon' in times of economic decline takes the form of 'mere' waiting. Gasparini (1995, 30) defines this as waiting without expecting something concrete to happen and contrasts this form of waiting with anticipative waiting, where an actor consciously expects that an event is going to take place at a given time and exerts certain control over a situation. It is a form of waiting 'when one's lived experience is that *nothing at all is changing*' (Baraitser 2017, 13, original emphasis). The planner from Halle was questioning growth as an (achievable) ideal, but there was obviously also a lack of other ideals that could have replaced it and would inform a way out of the impasse.[7] Standby in terms of time that is lacking both agency to develop ideals and implementation was perceived as stagnation.

Circular Time: Stuckness

Studying temporal experience among planners further, it turns out that time is also experienced as circular and therefore not passing. This sense of time is linked to a sense of stuckness.

Kemmer et al. (2021, 2) ask: '[i]s standby a form of "stuckness"? What is the difference between standby and "waiting"?' The authors conclude that standby is not a form of stuckness when understood as a verb. In the verb's present progressive form, 'standing by', as Kemmer and Simone (2021) note in regards to standing by promises, can entail a kind of emancipatory turn. In the act of standing by, people stick to promises, 'hold the promisors accountable and [...] keep the very objects and aspirations connected to their promises in play' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 4–5).

The material from Halle shows that planners 'on the ground' indeed share a sense of stuckness in their engagement with the Hochhausscheiben. This sense of being stuck here refers to the impossibilities and difficulties that planners experience in their everyday work, which is characterised by processes of making possible futures vis-à-vis the many constraints that their realisation faces. Their way of dealing with stuckness, as I will show with respect to ongoingness below, is to take care of other places in the meantime. Because no alternatives are seen, the planners (are forced to) normalise stuckness.

Stuckness occurs not only or primarily if one remains in an unwanted state but often also when finding oneself in an in-between state, a space 'between a rock and a hard place'. A range of scholarship has described how people perceived a state of limbo, as they lost their jobs due to rapid economic liberalisation or were unable to find a job at all, or how they got stuck in refugee camps and 'an exceptional but enduring present' that excludes both the past and the future (Alexander & Sanchez 2018b, 11). In a study on long-term unemployment, Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich (2016) found that participants experienced a tension between being activated through governmental programmes and, at the same time, being stuck, unable to find a job. Stuckness has mainly been observed in contexts of great uncertainty linked to precarious living and working conditions. According to Otto and Strauß (2019, 1806), 'uncertainty has become an experiential norm, if not an existential threat, for people across professions, localities and milieus'. Besides feelings of stress and anxiety, experiences of precarity and uncertainty may be linked 'to sensations emanating from feelings of being trapped, stuck, in limbo, or permanently liminal' (1806). Studies on stuckness share the sense of in-betweenness, experienced as remaining between 'on' and 'off'. Equally, repeated attempts at exiting this state apparently do not free people from the feeling of being held in the same place.

Participants in Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich's (2016) study on long-term unemployment have described how, with feelings of stuckness, life did not move forward but sometimes backward (7) or in a 'vicious cycle' (8). My informants from Halle shared similar experiences with me, as they perceived time as stagnant (as per the city's resolution) and circular:

> On a Thursday morning in February 2020, some of the employees of the city administration in Halle (Saale) are laughing as I present some findings of my research on past planning for the empty high-rise buildings A—E post-1990. From the corner of my eye, I see the team leader making circling movements with their hand holding a pencil.
> For a moment, the laughs and the circling confuse me: was what I was saying boring or repetitive? After I had finished my presentation, one of the planners says:
> 'I find it interesting [...] but also depressing how it all repeats

7 To what extent an unreachable ideal might still guide one in meaningful ways and whether an expansion of thinking precedes the opening up of possible actions in reality or only in scientists' wishful thinking, is controversially discussed in the literature on, among other things, utopia, hope, dreams and wishes (Levitas 2000; Levitas 2010; Ringel 2014).

> itself [several people laugh] – well (loudly) – it's still always the same when you see that the topics have actually been discussed for thirty years [...] – so somehow that is totally interesting and somehow, the point we're at today is similar to perhaps twenty years ago [...].'
> And another participant adds: 'Indeed, it's now almost another step in the circle, since we met the last time. In fact, the developments actually indicate at the moment that we will at least make the next round.' (group discussion 06.02.2020)

It was not the repetitiveness of my talk but the perceived repetitiveness and circularity of time that made them laugh. To the planners listening to my presentation, time appeared to be circular, as they felt that it was not only the buildings but they themselves who remained in an ongoing, never completed process of searching for a future for the towers. As I presented plans and processes around finding a future for the Hochhausscheiben on that day in February 2020, the sensation emerged that they were moving in circles, that things were repeating themselves. On the one hand, they felt that the same issues and problems they had been discussing for twenty or thirty years were obstructing a future for the buildings. These issues included, according to one of the planners, the condition of the buildings, their significance as built heritage and vertical accent, alternating good and bad relationships between the city of Halle and other involved actors, above all, the state of Saxony-Anhalt, but also differing ideas about possible uses (field notes, 06.02.2020). On the other hand, repeated but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to define a viable future had formed small cycles of effort that always seemed to push the planners back to where they had started. The planners experienced time as not passing, it just went by in a 'circular rhythm' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 14–15).

In her book *Enduring Time*, Baraitser (2017) assembles various such modes, including 'waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining'. What they share is that they 'produce felt experiences of time *not passing*' (2, original emphasis). Based on the situation described above and other instances where planners complained that 'nothing moves forward' (field notes, 20.04.2021; 27.05.2021), I suggest that time is experienced as circular and as 'suspended time', without (linear) flow in a mode of standby (Baraitser 2017, 1; Kemmer et al. 2021, 14–15). Suspended time doesn't mean that time is stopped, rather it becomes a 'viscous fluid' and is 'no longer a line with direction or purpose but a pool, the welling up of present time that will not pass and has no rim. [...] It pools, like a great pocket of blood, that both holds and suspends time as motion.' (Baraitser 2017, 1) For such temporal experience, when activities in the present and the known future break down or cease, 'the present can come to weigh on the minds of the individual subject as a type of "curse" or "burden"' (Jeffrey 2008, 955). Bourdieu (2000, 210) describes how moments can become 'critical moments, when the forthcoming does not come but is suspended, in question, objectively or subjectively'. Time stagnates in a mode of standby as it requires 'constant negotiations with a lasting experience of ambiguity, in-betweenness, placelessness (Ybema et al. 2011), a condition that has in fact become an (undesirable) status quo' (Otto & Strauß 2019, 1808). Although much has happened and the city administration has repeatedly problematised the high-rise buildings and got involved in negotiations for their future, the goal to put them into use has not been achieved. The negotiations therefore seem to go around in endless circles.

Ongoingness

In reality, planners were not constantly working on possible futures. Their engagement was continuous, but not constant. Over time, they focused on demolitions and constructions in other places, while maintaining an attitude of active waiting, underpinned by the conviction that there was no alternative. In doing so, they contributed to normalising stuckness with regard to the Hochhausscheiben insofar as the absence of alternatives became a widely accepted condition. In the literature waiting and especially 'permanent waiting' (Bear 2017, 147), 'prolonged waiting' or even 'chronic waiting' (Jeffrey 2008, 954) are described in connection to a similar sense I have described above: that time does not pass. For the planners from Halle, waiting is rather a form of freeing oneself from the feeling of being stuck. What is tangible here is standby's 'ongoingness'. The term 'ongoingness' is used in the conception of the production, circulation and consumption of products. Here, scholars use the term to refer to the non-linearity of the paths products take and their continued existence after consumption (Herod et al. 2014; Lepawsky & Mather 2011). It seems apt to describe the 'post-use' mode of buildings' lives. In addition, 'ongoingness' is used by feminist cultural theorist Berlant (2011, 99), together with forms of 'getting by, and living on' and the experience of 'crisis-shaped subjectivity'. Berlant points here to the 'adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation' (2011, 54) within people's everyday lives. Such an understanding of 'ongoingness' again suits my concern here – namely, the temporal experience of the planners involved in the search for possible futures for the buildings.

Focusing on demolitions and taking care of other areas became meaningful actions for planners during the early 2000s. These nationally funded efforts influenced the relationship between supply and demand and helped stabilise the housing companies' finances. Yet for the Hochhausscheiben, nothing changed: residents continued to move either to the old

town or into newly built single-family homes on the city's outskirts (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2020, 58). One planner recalled that, at the time, demolition was seen as the only solution, and there was little consideration of the need to simultaneously take care of the existing building stock. This oversight, they suggested, resulted in a 'senseless' loss of ten years before a broader realisation emerged – not only among technical experts but also within the wider public – that the vacant high-rises were 'of great importance but equally absolutely problematic' (interview, 02.10.2018). Urban planners continued working on other projects, leaving decisions on the Hochhausscheiben pending while waiting and partially engaging in searching for their future.

The planner saw waiting and suspended time as 'alternativeless', because alternatives to waiting were not considered reasonable. Asked whether there had been alternatives to waiting with regard to the high-rises, one of the planners said:

> What alternatives are there for municipalities other than waiting and seeing? There are none. We aren't owners, today's urban planning is a pastoral task, you have to convince; the chances of success are not necessarily a given; we are only attached to the money; if I put in subsidies, then the question is whether that is sustainable;[8] there is no alternative to waiting. (interview, 02.10.2018)

The head of the planning department saw themselves as an optimist, believing that where there is a goal, there is a way. But then they added: 'Of course, it has to be said that the situation in the previous years arose during an economic downturn, where you can't work magic. You can then [only] put an infinite amount of public money into it.' (interview, 08.07.2020)

Hage (2009, 1) argues that being stuck is perceived as something 'which has to be endured' rather than something 'one needs to get out of at any cost'. In the testimonies from Halle, there is an indication that a perceived need for '*waiting out* of the crisis' (original emphasis) prevented calling for change. Or, as Kemmer et al. (2021, 4) note, 'the ordinariness of such affective unease can also function as a soothing rhythm, constantly lulling people into "a thick moment of ongoingness" (Berlant 2011), of transitions and adjustments to the current state'.

In Halle, waiting and adjusting to the current state meant postponement. In 2014 – one year prior to the resolution of 2015 and the year of Halle-Neustadt's 50th anniversary – the mayor surprisingly brought into play the demolition of the four empty high-rises, if no long-term use would be found by 2015. A media article cites them as follows: 'We are now waiting for another year and then a solution must be found. The ultima ratio [last resort] is demolition.' (MZ, 25.02.2014) They announced that, by summer 2015, the planning office was to develop ideas and use concepts for the four high-rises: 'The decision has been postponed for years; now we need an end point'. They added that none of the owners were taking care of the buildings and that 'security costs for the city of Halle were high' (MZ, 25.02.2014). Their statement that the future for the Hochhausscheiben had been postponed throughout recent decades reflected a will for activity and reactivation of the buildings. Postponement itself also suggests that the long period of waiting was intentional, i.e. a form of active waiting. However, as mentioned above, from the planning point of view, there was no alternative. Not only were there no prospects in times of urban shrinkage, but according to planners, there were also no alternatives to waiting, leading to a mode of 'ongoingness', in the sense of getting by. Here, the tension between stagnant and circular time in standby comes together. While standby can both lead to a sense of stuckness and render time circular and stagnant, time is passed with substitutive practices and modes of reasoning.

8 The planner questions the sustainability of public investment in the buildings, as a large sum of public money would be needed to maintain the Hochhausscheiben and yet one could not be sure that long-term uses and economic viability would be achieved.

Ruptures and Continuity

If we understand time not as a simple succession of events on a string towards progress and a chain of cause-effect reasoning (Benjamin 1986), we ask about its rhythm: how it flows, what forms and directions it takes and what makes it turn, slow down or pause. Lefebvre (2004, 15) assumes that '[e]verywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm'. His 'rhythmanalysis' has inspired much of the scholarship on rhythm, especially in geography. It provided, for example, the starting point for *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies* (Edensor 2010) and equally serves as motif here. As Edensor (2010, 3) writes, 'rhythmanalysis can help explore notions that places are always in a process of becoming, seething with emergent properties, but usually stabilised by regular patterns of flow that possess particular rhythmic qualities whether steady, intermittent, volatile or surging'.

Paying attention to what standby does to time, this section explores temporal matters as rhythms and builds on repetitious and circular experiences of time described above. Standby emerges as a non-linear process, 'associated with distinct temporal frames, rhythms, and conditions of possibility' (Carse & Kneas 2019, 18). The case of the Hochhausscheiben resonates with Kemmer et al.'s (2021, 14–15) observation that '[t]he repeated duration of standby indicates how despite having a temporal quality of being-in-the-present, standby always also refers to that which comes next'. Standby's rhythm is, in the case of the high-rises, to be found in repetitive processes of making and unmaking possible futures, whereby these processes refer to both repetition of the same and repetition entailing difference (see Bryant 2016, 25).

Possible futures for the high-rises usually contain use-related, form-related or management-related visions for one or more of the high-rises. Not all of them address these aspects and/or treat these aspects equally. The visions are related to anticipated potentialities with regard to monetary or symbolic rewards for the neighbourhood, the district of Halle-Neustadt or Halle (Saale). Possible futures thus relate concrete visions for one or more of the buildings to diverse and bigger anticipated futures such as demographic or economic change.[9] Possible futures are thus related to a diversity of futures on both tighter and broader spatio-temporal horizons. An example is the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, when more than a million people came to Germany. Anticipated demand and the expectation of ad hoc government funding for renovations to accommodate people motivated the development

9 The term 'big futures' has been used to describe large-scale and substantial changes and to study how these are related to small-scale changes emerging in the unfolding of the everyday (Michael 2017, 510). While big futures are enacted in everyday practices, scholarship using this term equally highlights how everyday practices may shape and inform big futures. The aim of this distinction is to elaborate the multiplicity of references to different futures in everyday practices, e.g. in relation to socio-technical change (Michael 2017).

of possible futures for the high-rises in Halle-Neustadt. Controversies surrounding these anticipated futures united multiple scales of possible futures: national discussions, neighbourhood-level concerns and the concrete material fate of the buildings.[10]

Trajectories of possible futures for the high-rises are at the heart of standby, as they hold the potential of switching between on-ness and off-ness in the event of their being realised but also the recurring actualisation of standby if they are not realised. In a mode of standby, the potential is nurturing the process without imposing directions. The intermediary stage is thus not a static position, rather standby is constantly 're-examined, renegotiated and/or re-established' (Sormani et al. 2019, 4) through the examination, negotiation and non-realisation of possible futures for the buildings. Looking for the rhythm of standby, I follow trajectories of their possible futures. I draw inspiration from the literature on design processes and 'doing architecture' where temporal aspects of processes and rhythms have received attention, as in the work of Mommersteeg (2018, 223): 'Following the trajectory [...] will require us to pay attention to these "intervals", to everything that happens in between, in specific moments and sites, and to the experiences that constitute detours and bifurcations'. Scholarship that recollects trajectories (Yaneva 2009) not only considers the non-linear becoming of, in this case, an architectural design, but also pays attention to forms of such non-linearity. In order to be able 'to capture a rhythm', Lefebvre (1996, 219) writes,

> one needs to have been *captured* by it. One has to *let go*, give and abandon oneself to its duration. Just as in music or when learning a language, one only really understands meanings and sequences by *producing* them. [...] Therefore, in order to *hold* this fleeting object, which is not exactly an *object*, one must be at the same time both inside and out. (original emphasis)

The documents that form the basis for such an experiential encounter produce a fractured landscape (DeSilvey 2012, 36) that we can read along and through. To a certain extent, this project will always remain incomplete; things that appear here as chronological or even causal sequences may not have been (intended to be) so. Furthermore, working with historical documents allows to get to know things – for example, how events unfolded and what things remain or re-emerge after longer breaks that those un/making possible futures in the past did not necessarily know (Plourde 2018, 175).

10 As in other cities in Germany, the 'refugee crisis' led to a reassessment of buildings in Halle that were previously destined for demolition. Ringel (2018b, 69) notes for a similar case in Bremerhaven: '[s]uch practices of revaluation helped to reconsider the temporal properties of postindustrial excess, whose future had until recently been avoided, forgotten, or forfeited'.

The following observations originate in the trajectory of one possible future – that of 'governmental use and revitalisation'. This possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' is just one of many possible futures we are able to follow along non-linear trajectories. It is one of many potentialities that 'never saw the light of day', that were thought, planned and decided 'but stopped before they led to a more formal commitment' (Plourde 2018, 184). They emerge in one moment in time and disappear in another, are forgotten for some time and re-emerge again. Other possible futures were discussed in parallel, such as residential use or demolition. Not all possible futures for the high-rises have such a long trajectory, and there are possible futures that do not refer specifically to one building but to any or even several of the buildings. These possible futures exist simultaneously; their trajectories meet, coexist or compete with each other.

Emergence, Gathering and Rupture

Building C was used as a student dormitory in GDR times and was owned by the state of Saxony-Anhalt. As early as 1993, the Studentenwerk, which managed the dormitory on behalf of the university and the state as owner, reported that the number of students was decreasing due to the poor condition of the dormitories. The renovation effort was estimated to be too high, the building assessed as 'unfavourable' for accommodating students. No further investment should therefore be made in this location. The phasing out of both Scheibe A and C as student dorms was planned from 1993 on (Consultation minutes of a meeting between the Studentenwerk and representatives of the city administration in 1993). However, the dormitory was not closed until the end of 1999.

In 1999, before the final closure of the dormitory was imminent, the city of Halle's alderman, responsible for city development and planning, decided to initiate a round table[11] over the building's future to prevent its vacancy. They wrote in a letter to the Ministry of Finance:

> Since I am not willing to accept the vacancy of building C without comment, I would like to use this letter to inform

11 The round table was an institution in East Germany that started on 7 December 1989 in East Berlin. Between 1989 and 1990, the round tables, where the future of the GDR was negotiated with representatives of parties and citizens' movements, met almost weekly. They were supposed to accompany the transformation, promote democratisation and control the administration (Petschow, 2016).

> you that I will invite representatives of the City Council, the press and also the affected neighbours of Neustadt centre (the merchants have joined together to form a community of interests in the Halle-Neustadt-Verein) to a round table discussion. (letter, 14.09.1999)

The round table discussion was held on 29 November 1999, with various actors concerned about the future of building C (and in fact of all Scheiben), among them representatives of the state. It took place in the face of the imminent rupture. The city sought to link the building's future to other futures across different scales and get the greatest possible number of actors involved in the 'gathering' (Latour 2003, 235) to back the future proposed at the meeting – that is, to house government agencies in the building and thus continue to use the building and through this use secure its future. This becomes clear from the letter excerpt quoted above, where the alderman of the city announced they would involve representatives of the City Council, the press and neighbours in the discussions, and this is echoed in another excerpt from the letter written by the alderman to the state:

> After the failures of the past months, this seems to us to be the last remaining opportunity to get back into conversation. [...] Despite the overall difficult situation in the economy and thus in the labour market and the resulting increase in vacant flats due to fluctuation, I appeal to everyone's responsibility to look intensively for ways and possible solutions to avert the further threat of vacancies and to find a reasonable use for them. I hope that the round table will bring the hoped-for movement into the discussion, and above all I hope for your understanding for the situation and for the approach. (letter, 14.09.1999)

The round table and the possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' proposed here appear in a situation of perceived urgency and extreme uncertainty. It is to be seen as a last-resort attempt to prevent the building from falling vacant. Heading straight for this perceived dead end, the city tried to turn the impossibility resulting from the failed bilateral negotiations around. They furthermore tried to prevent what would have irreversible effects not only for building C but also for the other high-rises and the district as a whole. One of the planners from Halle explained in an interview how the city – in view of the vacancy or imminent vacancy of *all* Hochhausscheiben (except for building D) – tried to call on the state to at least take responsibility for the buildings. They said: 'after we realised at some point [...] that the self-regulating market was probably not going to help us, we tried to "torture" the state a bit and put a tax office there' (interview, 02.10. 2018).

Interestingly, in the view of the imminent rupture, which the city wanted to prevent (last minute), the vacancy of the high rises becomes, or is made, a 'matter of concern' (Latour 2003, 235) through the round table. The municipality took a deliberate step to expand the range of possible futures and thus find a future where there seemed to be none. First, the issue is made a problem that affects a whole range of actors and is embedded across multiple scales. The letter cited above clearly shows that the economic situation and the labour market situation, associated migration and the vacancy rate in Neustadt in general are linked to the fate of building C. Getting more actors involved and linking the building's future to bigger futures, the city hoped, could avert sole responsibility on the part of the city, circumvent the impasse towards which the Hochhausscheiben were heading and stimulate the development of future perspectives. The effect of the dead end was a movement towards opening the future. Following the round table, a newspaper article recalled that the discussion was intended as an impulse to open up 'perspectives':

> The five high-rise buildings are largely empty, and there are currently no feasible concepts for their use. A round table, which took place on Monday evening in the Steigenberger Hotel, should nevertheless give an impulse to think about perspectives. (Saale-Kurier, 1.12.1999)

After predominantly bi- and trilateral negotiations over the continuation of using building C as a student dormitory, the number of involved actors increased, and they were coming together to discuss different options or, as the article says, 'perspectives'.

As the newspaper article reports from the round table event, different possible futures, among them the tax authority use, were discussed and negotiated, and 'options [were] calculated' and evaluated according to various criteria, such as the accessibility of the buildings (Saale-Kurier, 1.12.1999). At the meeting, the alderman proposed and underlined the possibility of using one of the high-rises to house the tax authorities, presenting this as a way to enable its preservation and renovation. This vision quickly emerged as the only possible future in the eyes of the city administration, given the generally bleak outlook for Halle-Neustadt. As one planner explained, it was common in such cases for the administration itself to move into buildings to provide them with a function when no other use seemed possible (field notes, 28.05.2021). The round table was thus initiated primarily to align actors behind this plan and persuade the state to adopt it. In Latour's (2003, 235) terms, the city attempted to 'gather' as many supporters as possible to increase the chances of success. The event formed part of a broader effort within the future-making process to synchronise

visions, rhythms and actions, both internally and externally. As Plourde (2018, 179) notes, such processes involve convincing internal actors

> to espouse one vision of the future and to decide on a path that could make it a reality. Externally, it requires conducting actions that have the potential to alter others' view of reality, to favour one future over alternative possibilities. In doing so, an organisation is likely to elicit resistance, as altering others' view of reality implies changing beliefs and taken-for-granted behaviours. In this process, a focal organisation will have to adapt to others' enactment.

Convincing the state seemed only possible by first making the building and its uncertain future a 'matter of concern' for a whole range of actors and then by stabilising the possible future 'governmental use' as the only possibility. This resonates with Latour's (2003, 235, original emphasis) proposition, namely that 'matters of fact emerge out of matters of concern. In both cases, we were offered a unique window into the number of *things* that have to participate in the gathering of an *object*'. The process towards realising this future was stabilised by the 'Study on the accommodation of the Halle-West and Halle-South tax offices in the Neustädter Passage 10 (building "C")' that was subsequently commissioned. The commissioned architects estimated the remaining useful life for the building, which was erected in 1974, at approximately 75 years, and the costs for a refurbishment as an office tower at 15,415,000 Deutsche Mark (Morgner und Partner 1999). They demonstrated a general feasibility of transforming the building to accommodate the authorities, although renovation and modernisation measures were needed.

Several months after the discussion at the round table, a representative of the Ministry of Finance wrote in a letter that the Ministry had studied the proposal considering structural and use-related aspects but had then decided to move the tax authorities into another public building. Instead of using building C, the state would seek the sale of the high-rise (letter, 19.04.2000). What we observe here is a rejection of one possible future (although only temporary, as we know in retrospect) and by deciding to sell the building, the decision on the future of the building was postponed and left to others. With this letter, the process of considering 'governmental use and revitalisation' as a possible future for building C – introduced by the alderman, discussed in different formats and on different occasions, evaluated through a study checking on both structural and financial aspects – comes to an end. The door to this specific possible future 'revitalisation and use by governmental units' was shut for the time being. But the city of Halle nevertheless tried to change the course. It was anticipating a 'long vacancy for years', as their hope of finding possible futures after privatisation was low. The only possible future the city administration then considered as an alternative was demolition. This 'not-yet' they anticipated, however, led them to act in the present to prevent the anticipated future.[12]

A sticky note on the Ministry's letter from a city planner spells: 'for your information: B. [the alderman] is working with H. [the mayor] to correct the course. Hopes low.' In the letter that followed, the city kept trying to change the state's decision, pointing to the non-existence of alternatives to state use:

> I am aware that all the necessary resolutions for the accommodation of both projects have been passed after some lengthy discussions. However, I have come to the firm conclusion that these were wrong decisions, which run counter not only to the interests of the city, but also to the economic interests of the state. [...] In coordination with the city of Halle and the urban development goals for Halle-Neustadt, the state had previously assumed that high-rise C would be preserved and, after it was no longer feasible to continue using the student union, marketed for this purpose. In the meantime, however, it has become clear that it is no longer possible to market the approx. 20-storey high-rise in Halle-Neustadt for residential use, at least not without substantial state funding. Of a total of five high-rise buildings, four are now as good as empty. [...] Sooner or later, the alternative will be to demolish Scheibe C and other high-rises. [...] What is particularly important to me here is the fact that a de facto almost hopeless marketing of Scheibe C or a longstanding acceptance of housing vacancy in the middle of the largest large housing estate in our federal state would stand in stark contradiction to the declared urban development goals of the state. (letter, 13.06.2000)

Several times in the letter, the mayor mentions the long and complex discussions and the common main goal – that is, the preservation of building C. Past negotiation processes and agreements as well as the past's goals for the future played a major role in the perception of the rupture, as continuity was no longer ensured, which caused a sense of betrayal. We observe 'a present saturated with pasts that are not over' (Gordon 2008; Barad 2017, as cited in Lapiņa 2021, 241), while at the same time the future seems unattainable. The rupture that results from the rejection of the building's use by the state breaks not only with past continuities but also and especially with an assumed future continuity, as the city is anticipating vacancy for many years.

With this rupture, working towards a future for building C seems to have come full circle. The possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' that emerged in 1999 was introduced at the round table event, mobilising a

12 Weszkalnys (2014, 213) observes similar phenomena in her studies on the politics of the 'not-yet' disaster.

whole range of actors, and took on potentiality through negotiations and the architectural study following the discussions. Then this future lost its potentiality and was rejected by the state. These movements taken by the trajectory of the possible future depend both on changing configurations and specific events. As I have highlighted above, referring to Latour (and this is a widespread argument in ANT and post-ANT more generally, see Mol 2010), the possible future and its potentiality increases with the mobilisation of different actors, with relating the fate of the building to larger futures and the architectural study. Latour (1996, 81), in his study of the unrealised Paris transport project Aramis, suggested following the project along events and both the 'narrative program and the degree of "realization" of each of the actions'. '*Depending on events*, the same project goes back into the heaven of ideas or takes on more and more down-to-earth reality.' (68, emphasis added) Latour (67) notes how, for projects,

> by going from what is less real to what is more real, you often divide up projects into so-called phases: the conceptual phase, the feasibility phase, the scale-model phase, the full-system site study phase, the commercial-demonstration phase, the acceptance phase, the phases of qualification, manufacturing, and homologation. [...] Unfortunately, not only are the phases ill-defined, but they may not come in order at all.

Latour shows that a project or a process may not be linear but can consist of the unexpected, of interdependencies and uncertainty. He highlights that the process is turning in unexpected ways, depending on events. Contrary to their stabilisation through networks that the city tried to achieve in events such as the round table discussion, one could assume that possible futures lose their potential when they fall out of these stabilising networks in disruptive events that punctuate the flow of time (see Edensor 2005b, who explains the ruination in terms of dropping stabilising networks). At such a moment, continuities seem to be torn apart, and hopes on the part of the municipality for a common path into the future fade away.

However, as the trajectory unfolded, something else seemed to equally fade away: the eventfulness of the disruptive event that appeared to have made the possible future disappear, in Latour's words, into 'the heaven of ideas'. The heaven of ideas does not necessarily mean complete disappearance. Rather, it can mean for an idea to be moving out of sight into a hiding place from which it can lurk and crawl back out again when the opportunity arises.

In fact, the possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' did not disappear over the next years and indeed re-emerged and regained momentum in 2006. Possible futures can outlast networks, and we should be careful not to overrate individual events but see them in relation to other events and the process as a whole. Before delving further into the argument, I will present the observations on which it is based.

(Seeming) Pause: Networks and Change

As announced, the state of Saxony-Anhalt tried to sell Scheibe C after deciding not to use the building. This decision was a disruptive event: by rejecting to use the building for its own purposes, the state withdrew from the networks that could have carried the possible future of 'governmental use and revitalisation' further. The city administration, together with neighbours of the building, however, formed new networks that kept this possible future alive. As long as attempts to sell the building remained unsuccessful, the possible future of 'governmental use and revitalisation' persisted in the realm of potentiality, albeit in changed configurations. With no other possible futures in sight, it was impossibility rather than possibility that made this future endure.

Parallel to the attempts to sell the building, negotiations continued, as neighbouring owners were worried about the anticipated vacancy of building C and potentially negative impacts on their own properties. The owners of building D – the only renovated high-rise at that time – suggested buying the building C for one symbolic Deutsche Mark, developing it and renting it to state authorities. Furthermore, the city administration urged for new cost calculations that would include the costs needed for demolition should the state not be able to sell the building (memorandum, 28.06.01).

In fact, the networks changed after the disruptive event described above. However, if we keep following the possible future buried deep in the documents, it becomes apparent that it can outlast the individual event in other networks. Enduring elements across individual events are, besides the building itself that remains empty on its site, neighbours and the municipality. Among these elements, new formations were formed that carried on the possible future. Following the possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation', I suggest we need to think beyond the changing networks to recognise its continuity alongside the ruptures. With Rankin (2017, 357–358), I came to understand that, in addition to networks, I need to pay attention to projects in my analysis of rhythm. Rankin observes that projects can develop their own momentum. We cannot assume that changing networks alone will bring about a change in a project or that networks that fall apart will provoke failure once and for all. The author insists on paying attention to the project and not only networks changing over time, as he realised that projects like the cartographic projects he was investigating

(the creation of an International Map of the World (IMW)) could 'endure relatively unchanged even as its original creators lose interest or control' (357). Seeing that projects and networks are not always related as we think, he studied 'how projects and networks interact and what happens when they diverge' (357).

In our case, the possible future of 'governmental use and revitalisation' endured an apparent pause. Between 2000 and 2006, there is little documented evidence referring to this possible future.[13] Even though the city kept the future alive, there was no prospect of realising it. Nevertheless, it survived due to the strong connection between the building and Halle's city planners, and not least because other futures remained impossible. The municipal planners are professionally obliged to engage with possible futures for the buildings, as long as the buildings are there and they are not in use. They viewed the ongoing vacancy as a threat to the image and the future of Halle-Neustadt. Moreover, in the absence of other actors taking care of what remained possible within the gap created by impossibility (see Stengers 2015), the planners felt compelled to step in. In a 2005 email, a planner from the city of Halle responded to the state's question 'Are there alternatives to governmental use?', with a clear 'No. Without major conversion measures, there would be no other economically profitable use.' (email, 19.10.2005) In 2000, the city administration saw no other future than governmental use to secure the building's future.

Standby, I suggest, is shaped by how possible futures are enacted in everyday practice (Ingold 1993, 161). Enactment, understood as a 'process of undertaking actions to shape the future', means that 'by acting, individuals and organizations create structures, constraints, and opportunities that did not exist or were not necessarily noticeable, before their actions' (Plourde 2018, 178–179). Without any alternatives envisioned by the city, this future – governmental use – remained the only conceivable option and endured until its re-emergence in 2006. Returning to Rankin (2017, 372–373), networks and possible futures

> diverge, reassemble, and diverge again, and we should be ready to analyze constantly shifting overlaps of collaboration, production, indifference, anti-networking, after-networking, and undead creation. [...] collaborative projects, continually reimagined, can end up persisting long after cooperation has ceased.

13 Within the archives of the city administration, there is little documentation on building C and the possible future of 'governmental use' for the years around the millennium. During these years, however, the documents also show action that happened elsewhere or in relation to other high-rises, in different configurations and in different rhythms. One of the reasons that this specific possible future remained in the 'heaven of ideas' is certainly the fact that in 2002, the dedicated alderman had left the city of Halle. Another reason is that the early 2000s were characterised by waiting associated with hope for an abstract future. As I found out later, government investment flowed into the building that the tax offices occupied provisionally in the early 2000s. This investment would later, in 2009, be used as an argument against moving into building C.

Re-emergence and Repetition: Events and Process

A new cycle began when in 2006 the possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' re-emerged. The 'new' question was (still): will Scheibe C become an administrative site?

In 2006, the state cabinet of Saxony-Anhalt put the decision whether to use Scheibe C or another building in Halle for the tax authorities on their agenda. A letter from March 2006 stated that 'the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Construction and Transport have been instructed to create the necessary conditions for the relocation of the tax offices into building C, Halle-Neustadt' (07.03.2006). Follow-up letters even spoke of preparations for the move.

The letters travelled through various departments within the city administration, each of which signed and dated them; the first letter was even classified as 'urgent'. The re-emergence of the idea 'governmental use and revitalisation' opened a door for the city of Halle in 2006. After all, members of a citizens' association from Halle-Neustadt had appealed to the state, highlighting positive developments in the centre of Halle-Neustadt in the last years and warning the state that if they did not use the building now, it would be abandoned for further decay, its future once more open (letter, 31 January 2006, from the Halle-Neustadt Association to Saxony-Anhalt's state premier).

As Baraitser (2022, 1) notes, 'one hope, in the act of repetition, is that to return and go over the same ground may allow a small degree of difference, an opening for something new to emerge'. And indeed, fuelled by new hope and momentum, the city administration also contacted the owners of the other Hochhausscheiben to initiate a transformation of the whole ensemble. A planner wrote to one of the owners in 2007:

> It's been a long time since we last discussed the development of the vacant tower block. A lot has changed in the meantime. The city has refurbished the Neustädter Passage, i.e. the gallery and the pedestrian level. [...] Our biggest headache are still [...] the vacant Hochhausscheiben. [...] there have been developments with the state-owned Scheibe C that give reason to hope for a renewal in the foreseeable future. (email, 04.07.2007)

The re-emergence and repetition of practices such as the mobilisation of several actors and processes emerged in a context of enduring efforts rather than a completely new situation. A whole series of elements had led to the revival of the possible future. The building was not sold and remained empty. Buildings on standby become resistant objects producing repetitious practices while being stabilised through repeated practices (Schäfer 2013, 354). Furthermore, during the interim years, the city of Halle used public funding, approved by the state, to strengthen Neustadt's centre and to ensure and/or broaden possibilities – on the one hand on a symbolic level,[14] on the other hand on a structural level – through the redesign of the surrounding area. From 2002 onwards, the city administration had pushed ahead with the conversion and redevelopment of the surrounding area – a process that continues to this day. In addition, city and state jointly developed an urban development concept aimed at guiding future decisions regarding the use of state-owned properties. As part of this agreement, the state committed to considering more than just economic factors when determining locations for public institutions:

> The state government and the city of Halle (Saale) want to cooperate more closely in the future use of state properties. [A representative of the state] emphasised: 'Urban development aspects must be given greater consideration in the future when selecting locations for public authorities, science and research institutions.' (press release, 12.08.2005)

While the buildings challenge recurrent and new processes of making and unmaking possible futures, here the repetition of this specific possible future coming full circle seems possible because continuous actions and several elements, including the city and the state, have persisted. The possible future did not only outlast networks but survived as (im)possibility.

The buildings were not entirely disconnected (Kemmer et al. 2021, 6), and people still engaged with their possible futures. The re-emergence of the idea as an event is embedded within a larger process. Had I looked at the situation in 2006 alone, I would not have seen all those undertakings above that seem important to understand the repetitious movement of the possible future. Standby's rhythm is, after all, characterised by a lot of continuity – not in the sense of a 'regular flow' but rather an 'uneven flow' of repetitive non-linearity (Dodgshon 2008, 10). Whereas repetition is enabled through irregular but continuous engagement with the buildings' future, my empirical material supports Deleuze's finding – that repetition always entails difference. For Deleuze, novelty and difference lie precisely also in repetition (Dodgshon 2008, 9), and an event of actuality is 'a mixture of the dependent and the aleatory' (Deleuze 1988, as cited in Dewsbury 2000, 490). Crang (2001, 187–188) has noted that becoming includes a 'sense of temporality as action, as performance and practice, of difference as well as repetition; the possibility, as Grosz (1999) argues, for not merely the novel, but the unforeseen'. In fact, the possible future's trajectory takes different turns in its iteration(s).

The second cycle within the trajectory of the possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' closed in 2009. This possible future finally disappeared, as unexpected events and turns interrupted serious attempts to realise 'governmental use and revitalisation'.

Following elections in Saxony-Anhalt in April 2006, a restructuring process within state authorities and a reform of the management of state-owned property began. While attempts to use building C continued, changing personnel and priorities created doubts regarding the high-rise's suitability in the following years. The responsible person within the Ministry of Finance was moved to another position. The press release stated that this decision was part of a comprehensive process of restructuring the property management of governmental buildings in terms of personnel and content (Press release of the Ministry of Finance from 04.07.2006). After the elections, the state government decided in view of the demographic development and the reorganisation of the state to also restructure the fiscal administration and reduce the number of fiscal offices in Saxony-Anhalt from twenty-one to fourteen (HalleForum, n. d. [2009]).

The restructuring and new agendas led to major conflicts between different ministries over competencies and responsibilities. The new commissioner in the Finance Ministry didn't approve of the agreement with the city to include other than economic factors in the decision. Various ministries then accused one another of setting the cost for revitalising building C too high or too low and of failing to clearly define responsibilities. An article from January 2009 entitled 'Trouble over "Scheibe C": Costs explode for the redevelopment of a new official seat in Halle-Neustadt' stated:

> The transformation of the high-rise building 'Scheibe C' in the centre of Halle-Neustadt into the central tax office [...] could be significantly more expensive than previously calculated and thus falls into disarray. [...] A bill to deal with this issue was submitted by the Ministry of

14 One example is the image campaign 'double city' ('Balanceakt Doppelstadt') that was launched in 2003. It aimed to develop Neustadt as a complementary part to the old town of Halle (Stadt Halle (Saale), n.d.). In this context, it was also argued that the centre of Neustadt and the Hochhausscheiben should be preserved. Symbolically, the doubling of five towers was established as the core of the double city; five church towers in the old city corresponded with the five Hochhausscheiben in Neustadt.

> Construction at very short notice and on a holiday. This caused irritation in the Ministry of Finance, which therefore did not co-sign this bill [...]. The State Finance Secretary was upset about the short deadline for the submission and refused to sign. 'The paper had been received on December 12 – a Friday – and was to be signed as early as the following Monday.' [...] [The] written reply [...] accordingly stated unanimously: 'The time needed for a final evaluation of the documents is not possible to find within one working day.' Then [they] became more explicit: 'Even after a rough examination, there are serious doubts about the seriousness of the cost determination.' (MZ, 05.01.2009)

What happened here was that the two ministries were working on different projects in parallel: one ministry commissioned an economic feasibility study, while the other commissioned an architect's office with the preliminary planning and announced that construction was scheduled to begin in 2009. We observe how events and processes unfolding at different sites 'at the same time, in parallel, do not follow the same rhythms or fit into the same narratives' (Jordheim 2017, 65). We are dealing with non-synchronicity among mundane forms of duration and institutional practice – for example, when the bill is introduced on a Friday and the ministry refuses to review and sign the bill within the short period of time given. Disputes between the ministries and their doubts do not, however, stop the examination and the work towards the relocation of the tax offices for the time being. As I noted over a longer period of time, it was possible for actions to run in parallel and for this possible future to continue to exist as a possibility.

Non-synchronicity yet again takes on a different dimension following the dispute, with far-reaching consequences for the possible future. Increasingly, different voices got out of sync; speaking with Ingold (1993, 161), there wasn't one but several rhythms. In fact, it is impossible to speak of *a* rhythm, as there were different rhythms 'associated with different people, activities, tasks, and interactions that collectively form[ed] a complex temporal fabric' (Reddy et al. 2006, 41). In the case of the trajectory of this specific possible future, arguments increasingly ran against each other after running in parallel strands in the years before. Whereas the state of Saxony-Anhalt had decided against using building C for their own purposes without informing other actors, Halle's city administration supported the possible future of 'governmental use and revitalisation' (letter, 18.04.2009).

Non-synchronicity is equally reflected in contradictory newspaper articles throughout 2009 and requests within Halle's City Council as to whether the city had any reliable information and what the city administration was going to do (City Council question, 05.08.2009; published on 26.08. 2009). For example, one journalist addressed the following question in an email to the city:

> According to my information, an internal decision on Scheibe C's future has already been made at the state level. Namely, Scheibe C won't become the location of the tax offices after all. Accordingly, the planned renovation of the high-rise building will not take place for the time being. Instead, the current location of the tax offices in Blücherstraße is to be retained and modernised.
> — Is this decision status also known to the city?
> — If Scheibe C were indeed not to be redeveloped and become the location of the tax offices – how would the city assess this, what possibilities would there still be to upgrade the high-rises and thus Neustadt centre (are there possibly already joint considerations with the state on this?)? (email attachment, n.d. [2009])

The city administration actually did not have any information on the status of decision-making within the state by this time and there were no joint considerations between the city of Halle and the state of Saxony-Anhalt (letter, 20.07.2009). In 2009, non-simultaneities, disjointed processes and practices caused disruptions in the relationships between the city and the state, disappointment among citizens and great attention in the media. Unlike in previous years when activities around building C were not synchronous but shared the possible future, increasing non-coordination amounted to a dead end and the disappearance of the possible future of 'governmental use'.

The decisive factor for possible futures to come closer to realisation is whether different strands of action and the projects of different actors in the networks run synchronously, in parallel, with or against each other. In fact, possible futures remain pending when action happens in parallel, at other sites and in other rhythms, and they will disappear when voices are running against each other. It seems that harmony between their rhythms more strongly determines the course of events than the actual actors who participate in a respective situation. Carse and Kneas (2019, 11) observe 'how multiple temporalities can coalesce as planners, builders, politicians, potential users, and opponents negotiate with a project and each another *[sic]*. In this sense, infrastructures, whether unbuilt or unfinished, are sites where temporalities emerge in dialectical relation.' The same can be said for buildings on standby. If there is a rupture characterised by non-synchronicity, the possible future is lost and standby is actualised. Such rupture opens up the future once more. (Non-)synchronicity distinguishes the disruptive event of 2009 from the one in the year 2000.

Dead End and Actualisation of Standby

During a meeting of planners within the city administration in January 2009, the head of the department announced (importantly, before the final decision of the state) to reconsider the high-rise buildings in Halle-Neustadt from a planning point of view. Reconsideration, they explained, should, in particular, include the possibility of demolishing the buildings and evaluating the conditions under which this might be feasible. They also stated that contact should be established with all owners (email, 13.01.2009). This implies that the modalities of impossibility are questioned and, if possible, shifted to clear the way to a future. The planners received the instruction to freely search for any possible thinkable futures; they were asked to design scenarios and check their feasibility. In order to do so, they started researching the current owners of the high-rises and contacted different departments within the city administration, e.g. the department of finance, as the following email from an employee of the planning department to a financial officer in search of further information on the ownership of the buildings shows:

> Dear Mr ——,
> We are once again dealing with the high-rise buildings in Halle-Neustadt. (email, 26.01.2009)

What is particularly interesting here is the 'once again', as it indicates the repetitive temporal movement of standby. The dead end within building C's process of becoming had led to a new sequence and once more opened the future, which obliged planners to consider each and any possibility. My informants were apparently aware that this was potentially going to be a long and complex process, as a letter from 2010 states: 'Over the next few years, there will be intense debate about the future of the district centre and the high-rises' (letter, city administration, 2010).

The rupture of 2009 and the disappearance of the possible future actualises and stabilises standby. New and open searches begin, yet neither will be realised nor end standby. Rather, even if the second iteration of the possible future is quite different from the first – which allows the possible future to persist, while the second makes it disappear – both events must be seen in relation to standby as a process at large. Turning points in the process do bring about change, yet they provoke impossibilities rather than possibilities. I agree with Dodgshon (2008, 10) that 'the sustained flow of time and these disjunctive moments need not be exclusive but juxtaposed, as with the interplay of Braudel's *longue durée* with his moments of change, or *événementielle*' (original emphasis). Crucial for our understanding of the rhythm of standby – understood as a non-linear process – is to develop a sense of how events relate to process.

Within poststructuralist and non-representational literatures on process – among them Latour's proposal that helped me to understand rhythms within a circle – rhythm has been described as 'emerging from the incessant unfolding of events and entwining of self and world' (Merriman 2012, 20). In contrast, 'the unfolding of events is characterised by a prepositioning and turbulence, and by material, experiential and relational effects of spacing, timing, movement, sensation, energy, affect, rhythm and force' (Merriman 2012, 21). The merit of these approaches is that they have questioned ontologies of time, space and objects and instead focus on actual processes of becoming. From this perspective, specific places are composed of specific rhythms that can change and may be 'polyrhythmic', composed of interwoven rhythmic processes, of 'temporal events of varying regularity' (Edensor 2010, 3). While some underline the importance of events, others have criticised work that predominantly draws on Deleuze 'for always wanting to go at the ever new' (Simpson 2008, 810). Studying the rhythm of standby, I equally see a risk of overemphasising the effects of events on process and especially the underlying assumption of change that often comes with such emphasising. It is only within bigger ruptures that 'possible futures are being shut down whilst equally new possibilities open up' (Dewsbury 2000, 479). Drawing on the trajectory of this specific possible future here, standby isn't a static state, but a non-linear process driven by the prospective making of possible futures, their unmaking and non-realisation.

Analysing one cycle in the trajectory of the possible future 'governmental use and revitalisation' reveals the contingent temporal patterns of becoming in/determinate (Barad 2010, 254) within standby. Within one such iteration, the potential is nurturing the emergence of a possible future, but there is no conductor, no 'central controlling or decision-making unit' (Latham & McCormack 2004, 707) that would synchronise voices. Rather, the trajectory appears as 'an ongoing outcome of the interaction between a myriad of small-scale self-organizing processes that are not determined'. Life in standby mode is indeed moving, but 'dis/oriented', 'dis/jointed' (Barad 2010, 244). Ruptures, pauses and non-synchrony, throughout the process of (un)making possible building futures, shape the rhythm of standby. Now, of course, we have to imagine for standby more generally that many such paths exist simultaneously and cross unevenly, complementing or excluding one another. The relation between possible futures made in non-linear processes and their non-realisation characterises 'being on standby', punctuated by ruptures and often out of sync. Even without their materialisation, the possible futures have effects on the present and thus on networks in the present, and they eventually actualise and stabilise standby through their repeated occurrences.

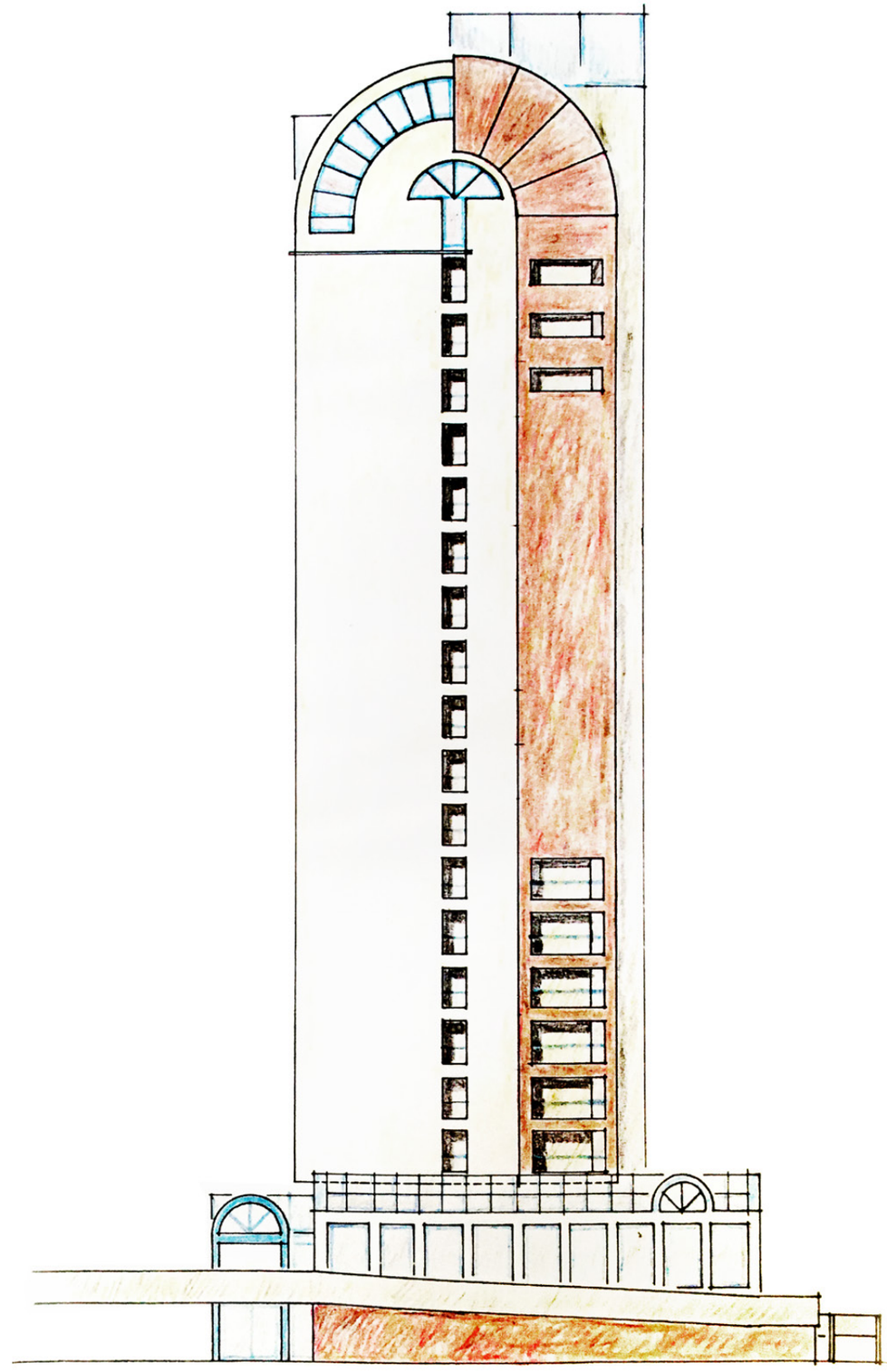

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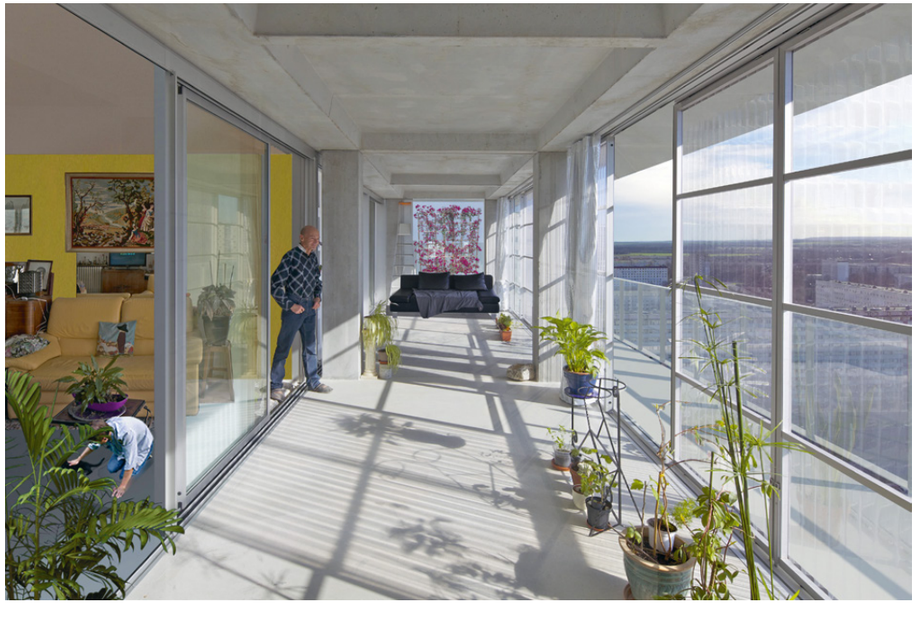
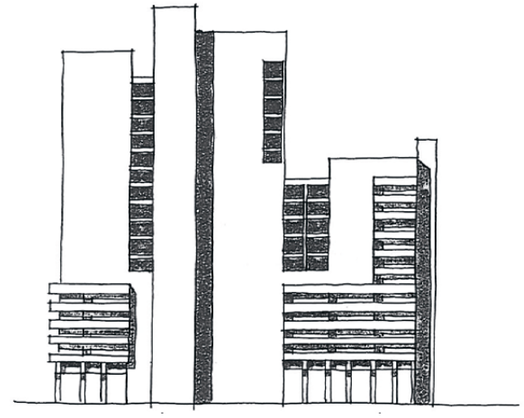
Fig. 15
A postmodern possible future:
Front elevation, façade of Scheibe D.
Draft by Bayer, Morgner & Partner 1991





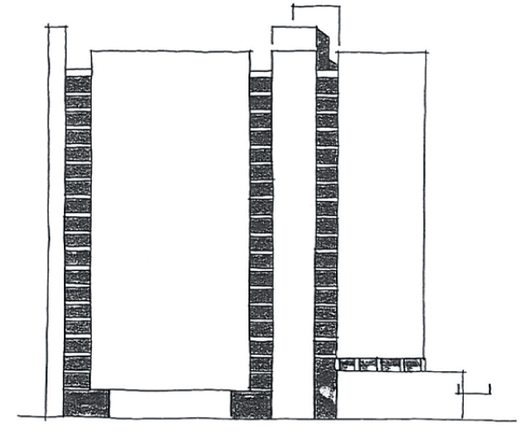


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Fig. 20/21
Possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben.
Uwe Graul, Hermann & Valentiny and Partners,
Morgner & Partner 2001

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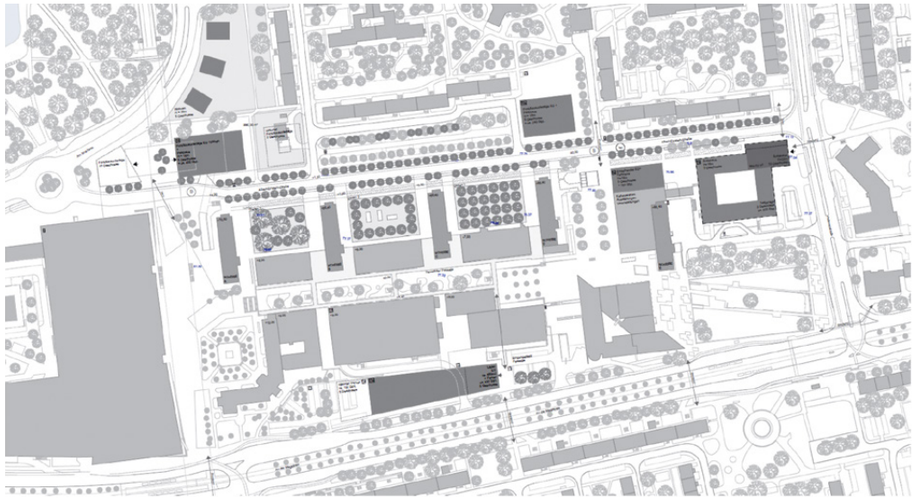
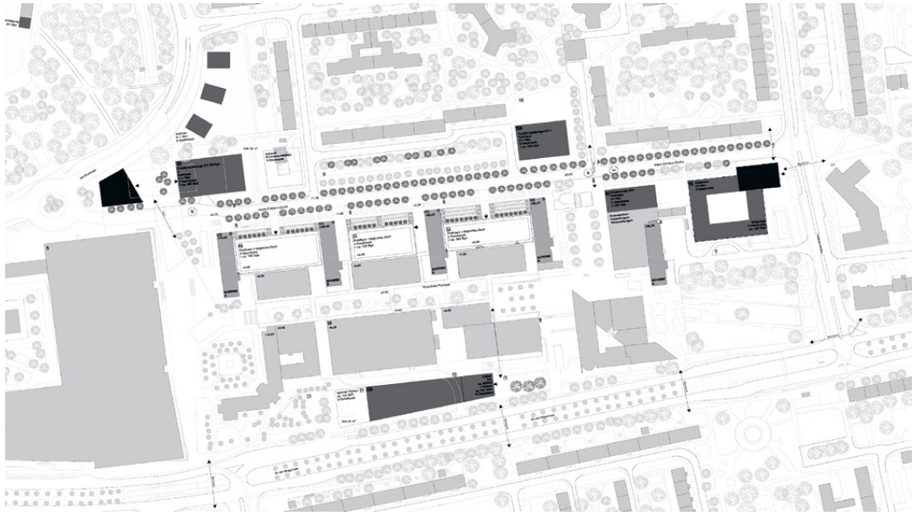
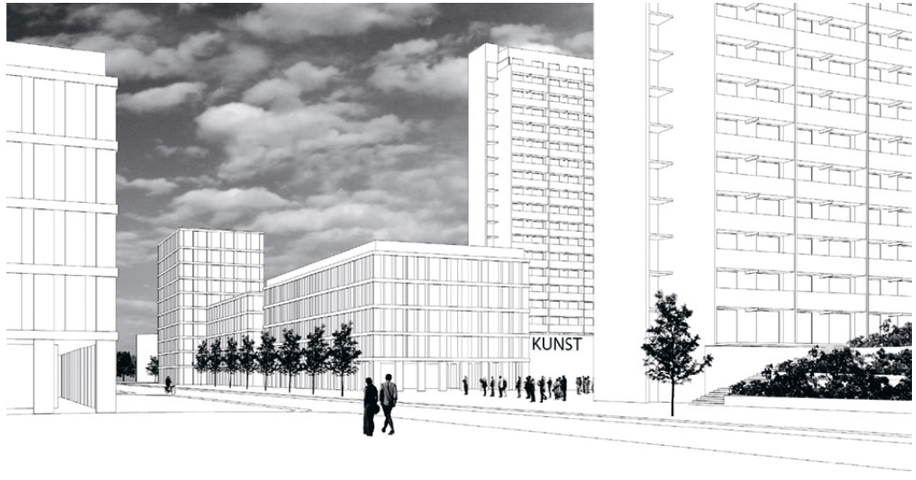
Fig. 16–19
Towards an economic and sustainable development of
Hochhausscheibe C. Preliminary Study.
Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer 2015







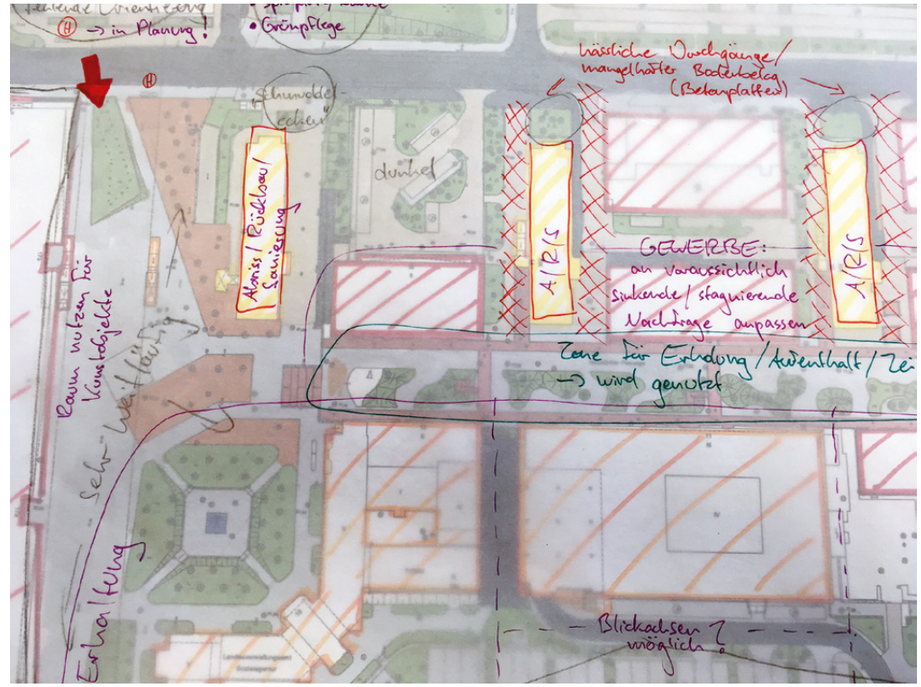


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Fig. 25/26
Scenarios for the Hochhausscheiben: demolition, deconstruction, renovation. Halle City Administration n.d. (early 2000s; 2009)

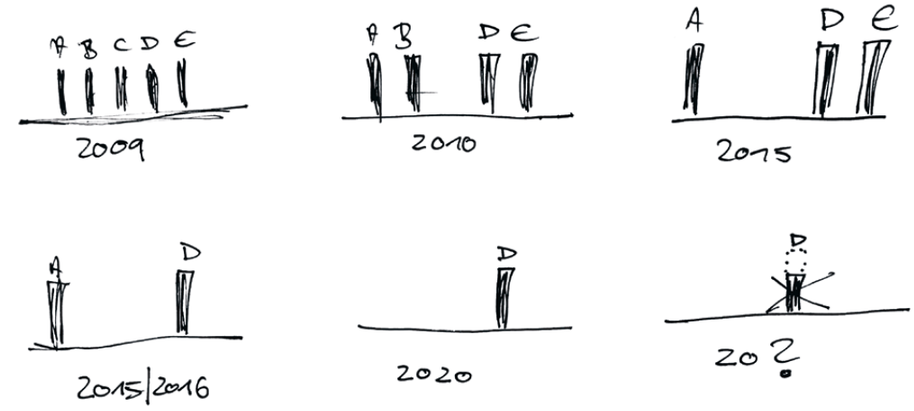

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Fig. 22—24
Structural Concept Neustadt District Centre. Step I, II and Albert-Einstein-Straße. Schönborn Schmitz Architekten 2018

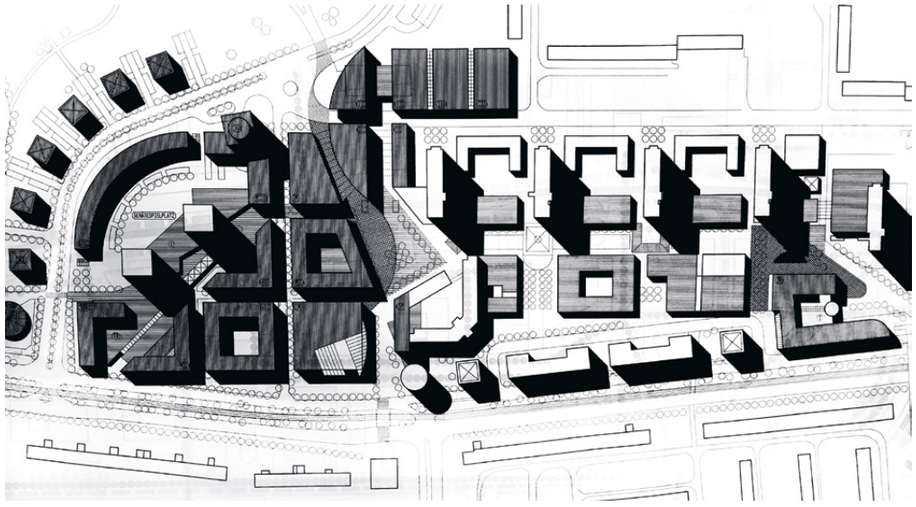

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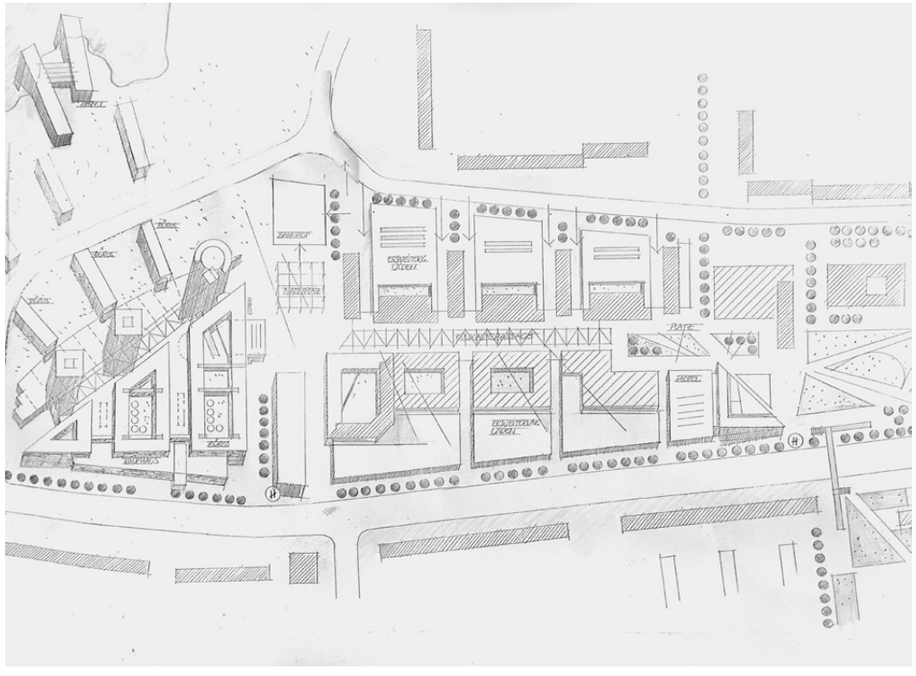
Fig. 27
City centre design draft.
KNY + Weber, Wörle and Partner 1992



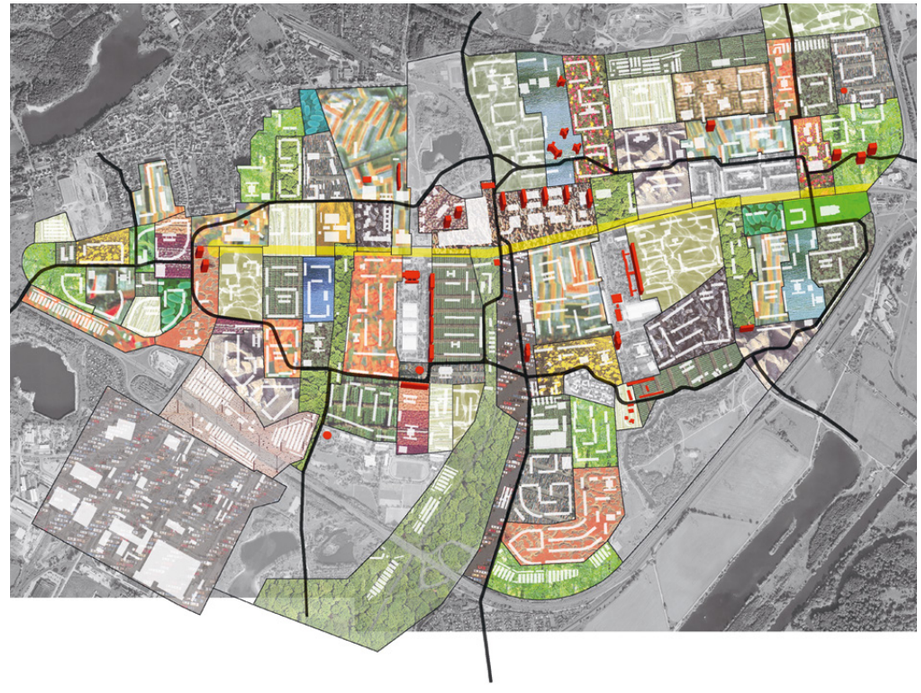


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Fig. 28
Examination of the entrances to the Passage. The northern access routes run through narrow spaces alongside the Hochhausscheiben.
KNY + Weber, Wörle and Partner n.d. (ca. 1992)

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Fig. 29
Visions for Halle-Neustadt: Kolorado.
raumlaborberlin 2004

The expression of *making time* highlights agency with regard to time (Flaherty 2003, 2010), which points to the relationship between human practices and non-human rhythms (Bear 2016). Especially anthropological writing has long been interested in the connections of time, action, space and actors (Gell 1992; Munn 1992; Rabinow 2008). Several authors have addressed the activities related to time, among them Munn (1992, 94), who writes: 'we make, through our acts, the time we are in'. Bear (2016, 489–490) uses the term '*techniques* of time' (emphasis added) to demonstrate that the skilful making of time will 'intersect and affect social and non-human rhythms'. These techniques cover 'all forms of skillful making enacted within timescapes, which bring social worlds into being and link them to nonhuman processes'. In recent years, a number of scholars have underlined agency in relation to time and the future specifically. Ringel (2016, 24–25) suggests the notion of 'temporal agency' to study how actors are able to (counter-)act time, and especially the future. He differentiates between two different ways of 'time-tricking': one on an epistemic level concerning 'practices that manipulate, coordinate, structure or reorder knowledge about temporal processes, the other concerning practices that act on 'the contents of time'. Ringel states that we trick the past when past time is selected and (re-)constructed from the perspective of a present. We trick time on an epistemic level in this case. The second mode of time-tricking includes practices that – through specific imagined futures – will have transformative effects on time itself, e.g. the acceleration or deceleration of processes. Ringel (2016, 26) notes for 'future-tricking':

> By predicting, forecasting, prophesying, conjuring, evoking or provoking, by dreading, hoping, planning, projecting or envisioning, and by arranging, intending, designing, budgeting, aligning, organizing or coordinating, we attempt to subject the future content of the progression of time to our agency. Much human practice is directed at making one's desired outcomes more probable, and like the conservator or the instructors, we might actually accelerate, decelerate, interrupt or delay some particular future content of time.

Oomen et al. (2022, 254, original emphasis) have suggested the notion of 'techniques of futuring' to link the realm of representation and imagination with practice in order to study how the future is made in '*imaginative work and practices*'. The authors define '*futuring*' as 'the identification, creation and dissemination of images of the future shaping the possibility space for action, thus enacting relationships between past, present and future' (253–254, original emphasis).

The aim of Halle's planners is to find a future for the Hochhausscheiben, to prevent unwanted futures and to navigate towards desired ones. This endeavour first involves knowing the past and aligning past events into a narrative that forms the basis for working towards the future. They share a set of knowledge of past processes and events, including the 'correct order of events' (Abram 2014, 135). Secondly, it implies acting on the future within a present that my informants perceive 'as contingent upon an ever-changing astral future that may or may not be known for certain, but still must be acted on nonetheless' (Adams et al. 2009, 247).

Harmonising the Past

Archives are the only materialised form of past futures, for they remained unrealised and unmaterialised 'out there'. It is one of the main characteristics of standby as a mode of in-betweenness that possible futures remain possibilities of the not-yet. In an archive, however, former possible futures do materialise, if on paper alone. They are safely stored in the office of the urban planning department. Located next to the city administration, the History Workshop of Halle-Neustadt and the city archive of Halle (Saale) host folders that document past processes related to the buildings.[15] This materialisation of past, unrealised possible futures in the form of archival documents led to my understanding of the buildings as being on standby. These documents show that buildings on standby are not simply characterised by inactivity; rather, they are spaces where 'activity and inactivity are fused into a single space' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 12). They show that the buildings are not entirely dropped by all networks (in contrast to ruins, Edensor 2005b, 313), and that a myriad of possible futures is constantly made and unmade.

The city administration's archives of Halle-Neustadt's centre with its high-rises comprise several metres of shelves in the urban planning department's archive rooms and a number of plan cabinets. It is a special archive in that it is internal, containing protocols, letters and emails, newspaper articles as well as plans and concepts that members of staff have filed throughout the unfolding process of looking for possible futures for the Scheiben. The documents have been filed from the perspective of the city administration with a focus on their own everyday engagement with the buildings. They are materialisations of the administrative everyday practices and are intended for internal use and accountability. In the words of Harper (1998, 13), they are 'mundane' documents – 'just these very ordinary things – the bits of paper, the memos, the reports that are fundamental to organisations'. They are thus 'sources that are close in time, internal and written with only immediate uses in mind' (Decker 2013, 166). These documents give an account of past practices and activities and are, in Yaneva's (2020, 131–132) words, archives *of*, in our case, this specific site and practices related to it (original emphasis). The archives are, however, also archives *for*, in this case, planners who can go back to them and use the documents as an important source for their everyday work on possible futures. With Potthast (2017, 1), we could call the archive a 'possibility space':

> Architectural offices are storage spaces in which, compressed in various ways, unrealised projects are stored. Taken together, the storage spaces of all architectural offices would result in a gigantic collection, in a central archive, which could be called a possibility space. Entire alternative cities could be assembled from the design material.

In contrast to architectural designs, the administrative files document the processes within which the architectural designs are embedded and with which they are in dialogue. Architectural concepts have to pass administrative procedures that often transform the former (Potthast 2017, 1). This is also true the other way round, namely when concepts entice administrations to take new directions. The collection in the offices assembles both: architectural designs that visualise and calculate possible futures, and administrative practices that both interact with these designs and are part of enactments of larger possible futures – with implications for the possible futures of the buildings. Furthermore, the archive of unrealised possible futures also reveals something about the conditions of (im)possibility.

The archive in the premises of the city administration bears witness to the years of city planners' engagement with the Scheiben. I hoped to learn something about the everyday processes of making and unmaking the possible futures for the buildings. Moreover, my informants themselves were interested in the evolution of planning since the 1990s (field notes, 17.06.2019) and in the 'processes in these files that actually show how things happened' (field notes, 28.05.2021). As they didn't have time to look through the folders in their daily work, we agreed that I would look through the documents as an intern. My internship contract listed my tasks, one of them being 'research and evaluation of historical planning documents and concepts concerning the redevelopment area Stadtteilzentrum Neustadt

15 Halle-Neustadt's Geschichtswerkstatt is an association committed to researching and presenting the history of buildings from below. There, a member of staff had collected the newspaper articles published on the Hochhausscheiben in the local newspapers since 2004 – a treasure and an indication that the life of the buildings is being vigilantly followed, especially by residents. I will return to the residents later.

[Neustadt District Centre]'. Ideally, we thought, this would be a win-win situation: they hoped to learn from past processes to develop strategies for a successful revitalisation of the district centre and the high-rises in the present (field notes, 18.03.2021) so as to avoid repeating mistakes of the past (field notes, 21.04.2021); and I was able to undertake archival ethnography of the buildings' possible futures and iterations of standby.

The shelves in the offices of the planning unit form what my informants call the 'Handapparat' (hand apparatus), i.e. archives to which they potentially need access in their everyday work (field notes, 22.04.2021; 27.04.2021). Other folders of the team and the department are stored on another floor of the building; they contain completed processes. And there is of course the municipal archive, to which, in theory, all completed administrative processes and projects are transferred. Theoretically, the employees explain to me, because this transfer is complicated and they don't have time for it (field notes, 28.05.2021). At the same time, keeping the folders close to them in their offices is a sign of the temporal incompleteness of standby. The engagement with the high-rises is more than a project for the city planners. It is an ongoing process with many ends and no end until today. And the attempts, unfinished paths, revisions and reinterpretations of what has been believed to be completed or achieved will continue.

The shelves and the plan cabinets mainly contain documents that cover the years from 1990 to 2015, in some cases to 2017. They store documents in folders for the individual buildings, the ensemble of high-rises and for the district centre of Halle-Neustadt as a whole. There are also folders for special projects like the revitalisation of public spaces or government programmes such as Urban 21, a Saxony-Anhalt state initiative for urban development, with whose help some projects were realised in the centre of Halle-Neustadt in the beginning of the 2000s. Within both types of folders – those categorised according to objects and those according to projects – documents are ordered with a clear intention to file them chronologically, with the latest record on top. Confusion over where processes start and end is typical for a mode of standby, which is characterised by dis/continuity. Despite the visible concern for chronological order, chronology often gets lost within the folders as processes multiply or run out of sync. Going through the documents, connections between events and effects are often not clear; processes are started and then get lost and dissolve.

Sorting Out Pasts

In 2021, the planning department was going to move into Scheibe A. As the new offices were going to be smaller, archiving became a particular concern as they would have to rearrange their archives to fit into the building and the new organisational structure of the city administration. Moving into building A was not only a change of location, it also came with a restructuring process of the administration (equally finding its spatial expression in a changing office composition) and, as said, a rearrangement of the archives.

In preparation for moving into building A, the objective was to record the folders and documents more systematically and, above all, to sort and reorganise them. This became my main task during a second internship as listed in the contract from 2021: 'exploration of the existing file situation in relation to archiving ability; creation of a file list'. Working together with them allowed me to observe how the employees ordered the past.

During the three months that I spent with the city administration in 2021, the focus was on the move and, in this context, on present and future archives. It was also the topic of conversations in the corridors: how were different departments approaching this task? Were they sorting before measuring the metres of shelves they would need for archiving? Some did, while others measured the current status without considering the growth of the archive in the future. Within the planning department, findings were re-ordered and exchanged between departments, and piles of files in the corridors throughout the building testified to sorting processes. Of course, the effort of sorting out was also based on the space available in the future (field notes, 21.04.2021). Ironically, the high-rise itself, in its finite capacity to host archival shelves would in 2021 have an impact on considerations of what to keep from the archived engagement with the high-rises.

The question of document classification, sorting and archiving depended on the question which of the documents were considered 'worth keeping'. The planners had to decide which documents they might need in the future and think about an order that would be most helpful for their future tasks. They took as much time as they could for this task, and fortunately for me, there were many opportunities to talk while sorting.

> We go through documents from one of the cupboards together. Planner 1 (P1) says that only historic things should be kept as well as things like 'Hotel Neustadt'; actually, just things that are current or 'nice' or that are historic [...]. What can go: printed-out basic plans, on whose basis something was once planned or considered.
> Planner 2 (P2) joins us. P2 had already started sorting out everything; today P2 also says 'if there are "historic" photos, I keep them' [...]. I ask: 'until when is historic?' P2 laughs, 'good question [...]'.
> 'I am not sentimental about such things, at the beginning I wanted to keep everything, but then we don't need to sort', says P2 and laughs.
> 'This here, this is from the "Kolorado" project' [...].
> 'Kolorado', says P2, 'that was one of the things that were thought more long-term'; P1 looks at P2, surprised;

> P2: 'at least that's how it was perceived… historic, one could say'– they pick this up again and again, jokingly. (field notes, 28.04.2021)

The planners seemed to agree without much discussion on what can go and what should be kept. They had gone through a process of socialisation in which they learned which events and processes were and are relevant and important for the administration. As the notes make clear, one colleague who has been working here a little longer explains to the other what the 'Kolorado' project was and why it was important. And why it is therefore important to keep the documentation of this project. Their reasoning for the project to be historic originates in the attention that the project garnered at the time and that it was perceived as a sustainable concept. Besides what clearly were important things and events to them, such as posters for the anniversary celebration '40 years of Halle-Neustadt' or famous concepts like Lacaton and Vassal's for the revitalisation of Scheibe C from 2015, and duplicates of emails that were likely to go, there is a range of documents whose classification wasn't easy for me nor for them. Something can be historic because of a change associated with it, or if it attracted attention and interest either in the past or because it should be awarded attention in the present due to its former importance, or its relevance today. Often, my informants justified keeping something 'for historical purposes only'– that is, whenever there is an epistemological interest in the past. While we were sorting out together, one of the planners said one day:

> We only work with probabilities; how high is the probability that someone will come and want to do research on it? That you are here with your interest, that is already really extraordinary. Of course, if someone wants to know how it was with the citizens at that time, then you might need it again; but in this case … we keep it because it interests you and me, but it wouldn't be necessary for the administrative work. (field notes, 29.04.2021)

As the number of events without an eventful character is high, the number of documents that do not fit is high too (Bowker & Star 1999, 9). It turned out that different colleagues had different strategies for sorting things out and that we first had to develop a strategy for collective sorting. We usually proceeded as follows: I would go through the folders, putting sticky notes on the files to document their content. When I came across duplicates of emails or letters, I would sort them out immediately and put them on a pile on the floor in the office. I also went through many folders at home and then showed what I had found the next morning. Likewise, the employee showed me their findings from the afternoon. We exchanged ideas and decided together what could be thrown away and how we should reorganise folders, if necessary. Often, the task seemed overwhelming for both them and me, as we were not only dealing with masses of documents that were not easy to classify and relate to one another, but also because the usefulness of our work was not always evident. In the end, we had gone through many folders several times (field notes, 21.04.2021; 28.04.2021). Sorting the documents belonging to events whose chronology was difficult to discern was not an easy task in a context in which all events risk losing their 'eventfulness', as scales and reasons and effects of events blur.

Two reasons – the recognition of historical value and the recognition of a possible use in the future – crystallised in the sorting process (field notes, 26.04.2021). Interestingly, this distinction resonates with the two modalities of archives that Yaneva (2020, 131–132, original emphasis) distinguishes and that I have mentioned earlier: 'the archive *of*', containing specific events, plans and concepts from the past that my informants value as 'historic' and therefore worth keeping, and 'the archive *for*', containing things that may be useful for (historical) purposes in the future.

This distinction between documents that could be used in the future – for example, for an exhibition, a brochure or the like – and documents that would not be used again but still have historical value because they document an event or a process that was important for the city's or buildings' history, crystallised but was not easy to determine in relation to each document. Which documents, processes and events from the past were to be considered 'historic' remained unclear and had to be reconsidered for each folder and even individual documents.

Besides 'historic' documents, there are, as my informants say, 'timeless' documents that should be kept. These include, for instance, contracts, details of money spent and measures implemented. One of my informants commented them: 'contracts, etc., that's important, that's timeless; there may be times when someone will come and want to know something' (field notes, 28.04.2021). Here, too, the criterion is the probability of future use, traceability and accountability. Even if the circumstances within which these documents were embedded and created no longer exist, these documents have a stabilising effect, as they ensure traceability and allow for accountability. Among the timeless documents are mostly documents with numbers (costs, prices, measurements, etc.). These are important pasts in the administration's eyes, as they show the state's commitment towards the area. Furthermore, they are important from today's perspective because they include funding commitments which were not to be called into question within the commitment period (field notes, 18.05.2021). Among them are plans that note the measures undertaken, including the date of the final invoice and the commitment period: for the Neustädter Passage, this is twenty-five years, and the renovation was completed in 2006. No public money is to be spent on this place for the next twenty-five years, which means that the planning decisions of these places must not be questioned.

For the Scheiben, however, as we realise while sorting and tracing, many events didn't bring change, and therefore some documents were difficult to link to others. Many of these traces of the past – resolutions, proposals, considerations, plans – have no date and are therefore not easy to sort (field notes, 13.04.2021). In a standby mode that is driven by active inactivity and where cause and effects are not easily discernible, chronology gets lost and is not easy to ascertain. The contracts, land register excerpts and owner plans continue to cause difficulties for us while sorting. Not only have house numbers changed in the centre of Halle-Neustadt, but the high-rises have been sold so many times that the land register entries seem to lag behind the sales. We throw away some old owner plans – contracts, however, have a different document status as they bear the stamp of a notary; they are dated but timeless, not because they would count as events and have effects on present action or allow for continuity but because of their intersubjective recognition as important documents. The same recognition pertains to floor plans (field notes, 26.04.2021). As one of the employees explained, they wanted to keep everything that has a 'public character' – decisions that are 'the results of an administrative act'. Similarly, building permits, grants, taxes, etc. – the results of administrative acts and decisions – are legally binding documents, which can, in case of doubt, be used in court. Documents that record these processes need to be kept as they assure accountability (field notes, 27.04.2021).

I sometimes had difficulty understanding the planners' way of un/making the past and the questions they asked or did not ask. The planners were mostly looking at the past historically, but not 'genealogically at the conditions of possibility of how and why things happened' (Hillier 2011, 31). While I was interested in why the high-rises had remained in place but vacant for over twenty years and to what extent this could be explained by administrative practice, my informants evaluated the past by its historicity or from its use for the present and the future. Processes from the past and unrealised futures were not of the same interest to them as to me. An example are the preparatory investigations for the redevelopment area in the early 2000s that the planners considered 'old' or outdated. My informant commented: 'the old stuff is not interesting, for example the VU [abbr. for German: 'Vorbereitende Untersuchungen', English: preparatory investigations] – we have a valid VU today, the old ones are really only kept for historical purposes' (field notes, 28.04.2021). For me, the documents on the preparatory investigations were a valuable discovery. Fourteen years lie between the attempts to establish a redevelopment area in the centre of Neustadt. In 2002, and again in 2016, investigations were carried out for this purpose, which identified an urban planning grievance with regard to the vacant high-rises. I wondered what role these 'things' from the past really played in my informants' present. As far as the preparatory investigations are concerned that were undertaken to evaluate whether the instrument of a redevelopment area was useful to initiate change, it seems they are more a repetition of administrative processes than a past that people relate to and can learn from. For my informants, caught up with new presents, these things were 'outdated'. As I came to understand, the past only matters when it still exerts agency over then present, or when it becomes valuable for the sake of remembering and a narrative that present action builds on.

In my interactions with them, I found myself questioning their apparent lack of interest in the past, and one such example were the 2002 preparatory investigations. I am convinced it would be possible to think differently about the future if one were to ask the question about the conditions of possibility (Hillier 2011, 31). In that sense, these investigations stabilise a form of practice rather than present knowledge on which future considerations could be built. My notes in my field diary testify to the fact that I was partly frustrated with how the planners un/made the past. I probably have to ask myself whether it is me who cannot bear to remain in the in-between and would like to see change. What do I expect from the unrealised futures of the past, and what can be learned from the impossibilities of the past? It was only when I reflected on my own frustration related to my impression they weren't interested in highlighting past impossibilities, that I was able to realise this was probably a core of standby in the sense of an in/active mode (see Kemmer et al. 2021). Standby in this sense nonetheless appears as a carrying on, sustained in part by the stabilisation of administrative practice and the selective production of the past.

My informants contrast 'historic' with 'old'. Old things are things that are no longer needed from the perspective of a current present. One day, one of the planners came in and asked me what I planned to do with the old plans. They asked me what time I was interested in and what was old for me. And when I told them that I was mainly interested in planning since 1990, they shrugged, saying dismissively: 'you will see, there were many plans, but the realisation was always lacking'. I noted this encounter in my field diary: 'I think they can't imagine what might be interesting about old, unrealised things' (field notes, 19.06.2019). As I understand them, 'old' and 'unrealised' are then not even worth a note. 'Historic', in contrast, even if equally unrealised, was considered worthy of being remembered as a past. Some colleagues were radical in treating the old and decided that, for example, everything older than twenty years could go (field notes, 21.04.2021). In this case, their criteria were not based on the significance of an event but on the accountability of administrative action, which fades with time.

Alignment: Reproducing the Past

An important part of the 'time work' (Flaherty 2003) related to buildings on standby – that is, efforts to actively shape how events unfold – involves aligning past events in a 'correct order' (Abram 2014, 135). This shared set of knowledge can then support the development of a common vision not only for the past but also for the future.

Writing the history of the centre of Neustadt within the administration means writing a history based on materialised 'facts', on (political) decisions taken and on what was realised. In addition to going through the documents, concepts and plans in the office, I thus researched all the City Council resolutions that had been passed regarding the site. Resolutions are the authoritative basis for all their work, as one informant explains (field notes, 02.03.2021), adding that the publication date in the official gazette (Amtsblatt) was important, as after publication, these are legally binding (field notes, 05.03.2021). Therefore, the record should note whether or not it was approved and the date of publication; it should also include the main content of decisions, estimated costs and funding, the amount actually used and the measures finally implemented with their final costs (field notes, 02.03.2021). What they were interested in was: which of the political decisions were ultimately implemented? By what means and at what cost? What they asked me to do was to assemble text modules summarising these decisions and events from the past for different occasions, occasions that cannot be fully known (field notes, 02.03.2021). Such an occasion could be a text they need to produce for the City Council and that must include the state of knowledge of the city administration (knowledge they have assembled and knowledge of their own past actions) (field notes, 02.03.2021). Or, someone might ask a specific question about the development of the centre and they would need to be able to find this information easily. The text modules on past events were thus produced for different possible occasions in the future.

Between 1990 and 2021, almost sixty political decisions and inquiries (mostly inquiries) on the centre of Halle-Neustadt were discussed within the City Council of Halle: nineteen treated the high-rises specifically (naming one high-rise or the ensemble in the title). Since the early 2000s, city planning documents – from the 2001 urban development concept to the 2017 redevelopment studies – have consistently identified the Hochhausscheiben and their vacancy as the central problem for Halle-Neustadt's development. The same wording can be found again and again in the resolutions with regard to the identified problems and formulated goals. The high-rises' vacancy as a problem for the centre and the entire district and, conversely, the elimination of deplorable conditions caused by their vacancy form the first elements of a shared body of knowledge within the city administration. Many administrative documents since the early 2000s clearly feature these two elements.

The problem at the core for the planners, however, is that none of the activities from the early 2000s onwards have provoked the intended end of standby by means of demolition or revitalisation of the high-rises. Past events are listed, but their effectiveness is questioned as they are measured by their effect in relation to the Hochhausscheiben. That all concepts mention the high-rises and formulate the end of standby or even revitalisation as an aim points more to the political obligation than to actually achieve this goal at all costs. This aim is stabilised by each new decision but not necessarily more likely to be achieved as long as waiting is a legitimate answer to the impossibilities of the present. Arguments that became common thinking in the public administration and weren't questioned support this reading, such as the impossibility of investing large amounts of public funds into the Hochhausscheiben. Once an aim is formulated, all measures are evaluated against it and are loosing their radiance if not being achieved.

In the early 2000s, the city of Halle redesigned and renovated the public spaces around the high-rises with funding from the state's Urban 21 programme. These measures were also intended to make revitalisation of the high-rises more likely. The documents always list the measures, showing the public investment in the area. Furthermore, private sector investments are listed, which have led to structural changes in the immediate surrounding of the Hochhausscheiben. The construction of a skate park is also mentioned, realised in the course of the International Building Exhibition (IBA 2010). This is finally followed by the statement that no longer-term use could be found for the high-rises themselves. A second element of the narrative of the past is thus the enumeration of activities that have not led to finding a long-term use for the high-rises themselves. The regret that no future could be determined for the Hochhausscheiben despite the steps taken, such as the revitalisation of the passage or the construction of the skate park, is a central part of the narrative of the past. However, the planners cannot give up the belief that they can bring about a future through upgrading measures in the surrounding area (field notes, 25.01.2023). Yet, their numerous additional efforts, negotiations and interactions with state and non-state actors to which the documents in the folders of the city administration bear witness are not recorded. They disappear in the public papers, as they have not led to any determination of the future and therefore remain unmentioned or are buried under the framing 'status quo'.

I found many documents from 2013 onwards, including the resolution papers but also brochures, concepts and studies that the city administration commissioned and that contain similar wording and the same past references. The wording concerns, among other things, the presentation of the origins and original use of Neustadt, its centre and the high-rises, as well as a description of the place. Working on a common narrative of the origins of the

buildings plays an important role in underlining the authenticity of the place and forms a third central element of a shared set of knowledge on the past that allows the city administration to work on the buildings' future. Since the 2015 decision to preserve the buildings, a recurring account of past events has become the fourth element of a stabilised narrative. This includes a fixed problem–goal formulation, the enumeration of activities that have failed to produce a long-term use for the buildings and a common narrative of the origins of the high-rises.

After the 2015 decision in principle, investigations began to define a redevelopment area, which in 2017 was officially designated as the 'Stadtteilzentrum Neustadt' (district centre Neustadt). The renovation of public spaces and private investment in the centre from the early 2000s would be included in the preparatory study from 2017 in what is called a phase of 'rehabilitation and stabilisation' that had started in 2000. Finally, a point of view has been found from which past events can be incorporated into a narrative that – at least according to the political will – has a goal. Linearity finally seems possible. And this is important for the accountability for the commitment that the city owes its citizens. The report distinguishes different phases: '1964–1990: construction and growth'; '1990–2000: fusion and shrinkage'; and then the aforementioned phase 'since 2000: reorganisation and stabilisation' with regard to the effects of these investments on Neustadt as a whole (Plan und Praxis 2017, 7). What we observe is how, depending on the present, different events from the past are selected and integrated into a narrative. This narrative can always change and be adapted to the situation, but since 2015 it has been increasingly harmonised in the light of greater hopes that a future for the buildings could actually be made and determined in the form of preservation and revitalisation. Bourdieu (2000, 210) once defined the present as 'the set of those things to which one is present, in other words, in which one is interested (as opposed to indifferent, or absent)'. For its relation to the past and the forthcoming, he notes that the present is not a single moment in time but that 'it encompasses the practical anticipations and retrospections that are inscribed as objective potentialities or traces in the immediate given'. Often, the past comes into the present through periodisation, just as one of the city administration's planners put it in the interview: 'we are clearly much further than we were in the quite sad 2000s and in the 2010s, which were obsessed with ideas but little with realisation, [but today] it could actually work out' (interview, 02.10.2018).

As a consequence of assumed changed conditions of possibility after 2015, not all of the possible futures from the past will henceforth be lined up as events in policy papers, but individual ones will be selected and highlighted. The report on the preparatory study for the establishment of a redevelopment zone states: 'A broad spectrum of options was examined by the city of Halle (Saale) or commissioned offices prior to the decision in principle to preserve the high-rises. Demolition, temporary covering and structural development options were all up for discussion.' (Plan und Praxis 2017, 23) In this context, it is particularly interesting that a concept developed in 2001–2003 by architects Graul et al. for the high-rises received renewed attention and was added to the alignment of past events. This urban design concept examined the removal of one building (building E) but then argued for the preservation of the ensemble and for the demolition of two surrounding buildings (Plan und Praxis 2017, 23–24). The architects were also mandated for the preparatory investigations evaluating the possibility and reasonability for the establishment of a redevelopment area (2002). In an interview I held in 2019 with representatives of a citizens' initiative that had fought for decades to preserve the Hochhausscheiben, they cited Graul's concept as a central reference. They believed that the city of Halle had ignored and lost the plans and only in recent times requested them again from the architects (field notes, 15.05.2019). Whether the concept was actually lost or not or (un)intentionally not mentioned until after 2015 cannot be verified. It is, however, clearly (re)evaluated and today part of the 'canon of events' because it harmonises with today's dominant narrative of the importance of the buildings and efforts to preserve them.

▲
Fig. 30
City centre design draft. KNY + Weber, Wörle and Partner 1992

▲
Fig. 31
Sorting things out

▲
Fig. 32
Archive in Hochhausscheibe A
(under construction)

▲
Fig. 33
Archives and archiving

Navigating and Being Prepared*

In 2012, a change in leadership at the urban planning office in Halle was accompanied by a renewed mandate: to develop a solution to the enduring problem of the vacant high-rises in Halle-Neustadt within a year. The Lord Mayor had set themselves the goal of finding a future for the buildings by 2014, the 50th anniversary of Halle-Neustadt, and this was to be prepared by the urban planning department (interview, 08.07.2020).

Scenario Building

The planners from Halle engage in different forms of future-making, of which scenario building stands out as a key practice. By planning scenarios for the vacant high-rises, urban planners assembled different possible futures, considering material form, ownership, cost, architectural value and so on. Over two decades of vacancy, the high-rises in Halle-Neustadt have been the subject of multiple, albeit finite, scenarios – usually three (demolition, status quo and preservation) and occasionally just two (demolition and preservation) – that coexist and compete, resulting in standby.

In 2013, for example, Halle's planning unit worked with Saxony-Anhalt's Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment on a brief for an external architecture firm to explore possible futures. A first draft proposed 'either preservation or demolition', with subdivisions under preservation such as 'securing', 'interim uses' and 'new uses', while demolition included 'reorganisation'. The study was to start from the current architectural structure (18 floors), with feasibility and demand parameters shaping each variant. However, if a future were identified that demanded an adaptation of the built form, this was also to be considered. The study finds that 'partial use of the building (e.g., the decommissioning of floors via high-rise guidelines) or partial deconstruction would also be conceivable, as would mixed-functional use. The costs for safeguarding measures, interim uses and possible new uses should be compared with the costs for demolition.' (draft, 03.05.2013) Here, the scenarios were closely linked to anticipated future uses based on demographic and housing market data in Halle. Notably, the 'securing' scenario was somewhat independent from an immediate future use, focusing on preservation despite a lack of current or foreseeable demand.

Scenario building as described in the example above serves as a way for planners to bring the future into the present (Adams et al. 2009, 249; Anderson 2010, 784–785) and constitutes an integral part of the (un)making of possible building futures. Scenarios are plausible descriptions of possible futures – of what '"could" and "might" happen' (Anderson 2010, 785), contrived or designed on the basis of the present as well as anticipated changes in the future. These expected changes are based on 'assumptions about key relationships and driving forces (e.g. new technological developments, CO2 emissions, prices)' that are plausible on the basis of a shared set of knowledge. Rather than being predictions of future events, they 'enable the exploration of possible, probable and preferable futures' (Adam & Groves 2007, 202) through 'a "what will happen if ..." query' (Yaneva 2009, 164). In contemporary planning theory, such inquiry is understood as a 'practical "thinking otherwise" in an experimental activation of potentiality. A "what might happen if ...?" approach, not so much to predict, but to be alert to as-yet unknown potentialities.' (Deleuze 1988, as cited in Hillier 2011, 32) Through these 'what if' stories, the unknowability of the future is confronted with several possible futures. Albrechts (2005, 255) clearly articulates this: '[t]he scenario derives from the observation that, given the impossibility of knowing precisely how the future will play out, a good decision or strategy to adopt is one that plays out well across several possible futures'.

The feasibility of the different variants outlined in the 2013 draft was intended to be evaluated in a subsequent architectural study. These variants for Scheibe C, which were supposed to be transferable to all Scheiben, were supposed to determine conclusions for further action. However, while working on the scenarios in 2013, tensions arose between the city and the state of Saxony-Anhalt over how to approach the future and how to connect it to the present.

In revisions of the draft by the state of Saxony-Anhalt, the scenarios pre-designed by the city planners were modified and the scheme deleted (Saxony-Anhalt State Office for Construction and Real Estate Management, 20.06.2013). The state was apparently more concerned with ruling out certain futures than with enlarging the scope of the possible, as 'fundamental options' were redacted into 'realisable options' according to economic assessment, pushing towards the best solution in economic terms (Saxony-Anhalt State Office for Construction and Real Estate Management, 20.06.2013). While the city argued that the future should determine the present, the state of Saxony-Anhalt posited that existing conditions in the present should dictate the impossibility and possibility of trajectories towards the future. These are, after all, very different approaches to time and the future. The city wants to illuminate the future, which is supposed to create an orientation in the present; an achievement of this ideal is supposed to be *made possible*; the state, conversely, relies on the *already possible* or impossible as an orientation within the process of future-making. Rather than being an 'open debate

* A version of this part has also been published under the title 'Future-making in a mode of standby' in *Contingencies in Urban Future-Making*, edited by Joachim Thiel, Monika Grubbauer and Lucas Pohl. transcript, 2025.

about future ideals', scenario planning as a collaborative act appears in this case more as 'a battle over the here and now, and between different continuities' (Abram 2017, 74) and discontinuities, respectively. Drawing on this situation, I concur with Abram (2017, 75) that within scenario building, coexisting futures 'are similarly scaled and contested, filled with competing notions of idealism and pragmatism'.

The city's aim of anticipating several futures is to open up the present for (new) possible 'courses of action in the face of ongoing contingency and ambiguity' (Adams et al. 2009, 255). Anticipating the future will, in the best cases, create possibilities in the present where previously impossibility prevailed. According to Adams et al. (2009, 258), this is a general characteristic of anticipatory practice today: 'anticipation brings in its wake new kinds of engagement with "possibility." Anticipation predicts where there is opportunity now for what was previously impossible.'

In our case, too, scenario building is about exploring new spaces of possibility. For a long time, my informants' search for potentiality in the present is linked to a present in which the high-rises are considered deficient and present a situation of impossibility rather than of possibility. Looking for possibilities thus becomes a necessity, and they hope to discover potentials that enable them to point out possible trajectories towards the future. The future for the high-rises will depend on new possibilities as, for example, only new uses and demand might be able to meet the oversupply in the housing market in the event of a renovation being realised. Alternatively, only new financing opportunities might be able to attract investors. What we observe here is similar to what Adams et al. (2009) describe – that is, the striving for opening up new spaces of possibility.

In line with the scenarios the city had considered in 2013, an international urban design student workshop was held, showing that a transformation of the buildings was generally possible (interview with the leading professor, 27.11.2018). Subsequently, studies were commissioned, investigating wrapping and rehabilitation as possible futures.

Scenarios were then drawn up again in 2015, from which 'possible solutions' and an 'overall concept', i.e. concrete action by the city, were to be derived (internal document, 14.01.2015). The scenarios were more closely tied to the present than in 2013, as they now included not only the identification and calculation of opportunities, risks and costs for each option, but also an evaluation of urban design and architectural parameters, along with the recognition of the need for coordinated action among all property owners. The city internally discussed 'demolition and reorganisation', 'preservation and development' and a so-called 'zero variant', concentrating on the 'day-to-day business of the administration' and on finding and supporting private investors in developing concepts. The chances for this scenario were assessed by the city planners as 'low'; costs for the city were predicted for securing and possibly demolishing the buildings (internal document, 14.01.2015). Some of the options, such as interim uses or partial use, but also partial demolition, were no longer considered viable options. At the very moment the scenarios were prepared for debate in the City Council, the 'zero variant' became the 'status quo' and all scenarios transformed and emerged as 'possibilities' (city administration, 31.03.2015).

The scenarios of 2015 served to prepare the political decision to keep the high-rise buildings. This implies that the city not only wanted to illuminate several possible futures but to determine a future. The 'status quo' was found to be the least favourable scenario overall, 'preservation and development' the most favourable, even though it might be the most cost-intensive scenario, as the presentation suggests. One slide contains a table that evaluates the three approaches according to the criteria 'urban design/architecture', 'necessity for unified action by all owners', 'opportunities', 'risks', 'costs' and finally a concrete value – 'the cost of one Scheibe'.

The resolution paper from 2015 opting for the preservation of the high-rises specifies the 'options for action' via three scenarios: 'demolition scenario', 'conservation scenario' and 'preservation and renovation scenario' (VI/2015/01130 2015, 5–6). Here, the conservation scenario would be the status quo that would, however, include the necessity to secure the buildings by (temporarily) covering them and thus conserving them.

It should be noted that, in parallel to the elaboration of the scenarios and the determination of preservation as the preferred scenario, the state of Saxony-Anhalt had sold Scheibe C. Interestingly, at the beginning of the marketing process in 2014 – initially an unsuccessful attempt – the state had already mentioned in the real estate offer that the city of Halle welcomed a revitalisation of the building (real estate offer by the state, 23.06.2014). Of course, this calls the significance of the scenarios somewhat into question, because it is not clear whether the scenarios were ever actually to be understood as multiple options. In fact, sources of internal communication and communication between the state and the city as well as the housing companies in Halle suggest that the scenarios of 2015 and the decision for preservation are characterised not only by potential, but also by impossibility. After marketing failed, the state initially preferred demolition and gave it top priority (email, 19.08.2014). As said, the building was then sold in 2015. The price the private company had to pay was one symbolic euro and the only obligation for the buyer was to prove that they were able to finance the purchase price and the transaction. There was, however, no obligation to actually realise the use concepts the investors had presented and discussed with both the state and the city administration (letter by the state, 11.05.2015). From the written communication between the state and the city administration, it is clear that the city administration was not sure the investors would actually be able to realise a revitalisation. As stated in an email by the city, 'a coordinated approach [...] is urgently needed here, as otherwise these concepts [meaning the revitalisation concepts by

investors that they presented to the city in order to receive state funding] will be neither economically viable nor sustainable and thus will not alleviate the problem situation' (email, 27.03.2015).

Even though both the present and the future of the high-rises are perceived as rather uncertain and ultimately unknowable, the planners (in collaboration with the mayor) believe that in 2015 a chance for a specific future – preservation – had arrived. A local newspaper writes in an article from 2015 that the 'time is better than ever before' (MZ, 08.04.2015). In such a context, scenario planning is to be understood as a conceptualisation of 'the possibilities that time offers space' (Abram & Weszkalnys 2013, 2). Planners thus self-identify as managers of change, having a relational understanding of the city as an 'interplay of economy, technology, society and politics. No longer the "big plan" but control, regulation and planning will be evaluated with success controls and monitoring.' (Schubert 2015, 145) In a liberal ontology of planning, 'the urban, which is understood here as a primarily privately managed and market-regulated process, thus forms an independent milieu that can only be indirectly steered in certain directions by the state through planning regulations' (Farías 2020, 177). In 2015, while different possible futures were sketched out in scenarios, the city administration proposed a way forward to the City Council – a way that seemed feasible given the conditions in the present. They thus wanted to make use of the momentum of the moment, acting towards what they considered a preferable future among the scenarios.

In 2015, it appeared that the city of Halle was going beyond what we would term anticipatory practice today. Anderson (2010, 780) noted that the ways the future comes to be known in anticipatory practices are interwoven with the 'spatial-temporal imaginary of life as contingency' prominent in contemporary liberal democracies. He (2010, 782) argues that it is within this contingent present that anticipatory action in the form of 'preemption, precaution and preparedness' emerged. The contingency of life within anticipatory action is 'the occasion of threat and opportunity, danger and profit.' I understand the 2015 moment somewhat differently: motivated by the need to take advantage of the opportunities that, although largely unpredictable and beyond direct influence, demanded responsive action when they emerged. The city of Halle not only wanted to be prepared for the future but also to determine it – in line with the opportunities they thought to see coming. In fact, 2015 seems to be a special moment when the future, while remaining uncertain, was meant to be determined in the form of a political goal. However, this is nota contradiction but inscribes itself in 'a particular self-evident "futurism" in which our "presents" are necessarily understood as contingent upon an ever-changing astral future that may or may not be known for certain, but still must be acted on nonetheless' (Adams et al. 2009, 247).

After 2015, the possibility of preserving the Hochhausscheiben through renovation once more became increasingly uncertain. While the anticipated future continued to legitimise urban planning actions (since political decisions are binding), doubts and critique grew among planners (see Abram 2017, 78).

The designation of the redevelopment zone was seen as a suitable instrument to attract investors at the time, because it included easier tax depreciation. From the alderman's point of view, it was meant to 'somehow fuel the whole thing', yet they noted that the construction boom in Germany was still a bit slow in Halle. 'We got our foot in the door in time – I wouldn't say investors are knocking down our doors right now, but it worked then.' (interview, 28.05.2021) The statement reflects cautious optimism, coupled with recognition of the inherent uncertainty. Only a future evaluation of steps taken will be able to show whether the way they chose to go was right. As of 2025 it is possible that preserving the entire ensemble remains an officially upheld but ultimately unattainable goal. The renovation of building A in 2021 has not dispelled this uncertainty. However, planners acknowledge this risk as they confirmed in discussions with me. Whether this goal becomes a political promise that cannot be fulfilled – thereby enabling private actors to challenge public planning – cannot be fully assessed. Bear has shown that speculative plans, drawing on temporal logics of the not-yet, may also disappear. As she (2013, 176) notes concerning planning projects in India, their realisation remains impossible 'as long as extreme budgetary restrictions, resource grabs by other predatory bureaucracies and outsourcing to networks of informality continue'. The preservation of the high-rises in Halle-Neustadt does not seem to be a speculative future at first but one that focuses on endurance and continuity between the present and the future. However, the possible future preservation, anticipated in 2015 and politically determined, relies on the speculative futures of investors. In 2021, under pressure from the administration and the mayor, the City Council halted state funding for the redevelopment of Scheibe C, citing concerns about the public sector yielding to private investor demands (VII/2021/03346, 2021).

Interestingly, with growing uncertainty that preservation through renovation was an actually achievable goal, the role of scenario building in planning also changed. New scenarios now took on the form of multiple 'alternative potential futures that may, or may not, be actualized' (Hillier 2011, 26). They point to possibilities in order to have a sense of being prepared for all contingencies. Today, anticipation is thus not necessarily a way of knowing or even determining the future, rather 'a strategy for avoidance of surprise, uncertainty and unpreparedness, but it is also a strategy that must continually keep uncertainty on the table' (Adams et al. 2009, 250). More than actual possibilities for action, the possible here is preserved by the fact that we get a 'palpable sense that things could be (all) right if only we anticipate them properly' (259).

Once the scenarios were built, the planners from Halle felt confident that they could respond to whatever would occur. Scenario building ensured there was a future. Asked about the role of designing possible futures, one of the planners answered: 'we have everything ready, we are prepared for every eventuality'. In their understanding, the development is not in their hands, but they can react to any change (field notes, 18.08.2020; 14.04.2021). They consider flexibility to be the only practical answer to the future (Pizzo 2015, 136). Flexibility characterises planning activities as a practical preparedness that sustains an open future, for it remains uncertain, impossible to fully be known and determine. Scenario building within urban planning has yet another 'function': being prepared and able to navigate the future.

Navigating Distant and Near Futures

Various concepts designed at the city-level formulate goals that affect Neustadt centre and more or less specifically the high-rises. One of these concepts is the so-called Strukturkonzept Zentrum Neustadt (Structural Concept Neustadt District Centre), developed by a Berlin-based architectural office on behalf of the city administration. In April 2019, the City Council adopted it to concretise the redevelopment goals for redevelopment area No. 3 'Neustadt District Centre' (VI/2018/04708, 2019). The concept is meant to fill with 'life' defined goals for the set redevelopment area (decided in 2017 for the centre of Neustadt) – that is, develop contrete ideas and forms.

Such concepts do not have an immediately binding character but provide orientation for action in the here and now. Which of the defined goals are achievable, which measures can be implemented depends on a specific moment – a future present, which can only be planned or foreseen to a limited extent. For my informants, coordination of long-term goals and short-term actions is desirable but challenging (field notes, 01.03.2021; 04.03.2021). Ultimately, both scenario building and navigating act on the relation between distant and close futures and objectives. However, as these steps depend on moments of possibility (the willingness to invest by private parties or subsidies available for certain measures), navigating is, above all, about unblocking the way for the defined long-term goals and keeping scenarios open.

The structural concept contains both broader visions, such as the adaptation to climate change, and variants and suggestions that planners distinguish into long- and short-term measures (field notes, 05.05.2021). It outlines the preservation and further development of the ensemble and the architectural heritage as future objectives; furthermore, the revitalisation of the high-rises, a revitalisation imagined as composed of repair, energetic refurbishment and adaptation to climate change. In a presentation to a larger group of administrative staff, the architects explained that the concept was designed to be implemented step by step. The concept is designed for year after year, decade after decade; it offers ideas for a long-term upgrading of the passage at the foot of the high-rises, divided into options (Schönborn Schmitz Architekten 2018). Listening to the architects' presentation, the city employees laugh but appreciate the ideas – ideas they think are dreams. As far away as this future seems, they nevertheless hope for a long-term development (field notes, 03.07.2019).

By 2021, planners are busy translating and working towards some of the desired futures set out in the concept. They divide them into different levels and phases in terms of both time and space (field notes, 07.06.2021). As they explain to me, they are now working one level 'below' the overall concept and on several first steps simultaneously. Together with landscape architects, they are developing ideas for the public spaces surrounding the high-rises, which they say can again be thought of as both steps at a time and spatial modules (field notes, 08.04.2021).

One of the elements from the concept with which they started was the reorganisation of the parking situation in the centre. According to the concept, optimising parking is crucial for revitalisation and adapting to the needs of future users (Schönborn Schmitz Architekten 2018, 6). Within the administration, there was disagreement over which measures should and could be realised first and which would ensue later. Representatives of other departments suggested to start with elements that were envisaged in the city planners' planning for the very end. Both could make sense: starting from the biggest and latest elements, they could make sure that intermediate steps taken do not lose sight of the goal, while starting with elements from the final goal entails the risk that the overall plan will fall apart, if intermediate steps cannot be realised (field notes, 08.04.2021). For my informants, aligning current measures with long-term goals was linked to issues of credibility, as I draw from discussions within the city administration. They discuss at another moment how shorter-term measures would indicate how serious the city is about the long-term goals and how much it believes in their achievability (field notes, 18.06.2019).

In practice, long-term and short-term futures are intertwined in intriguing ways. Distant futures often appear elusive, so short-term measures serve as a vehicle of hope – steps that might eventually enable the revitalisation of the Hochhausscheiben. For example, reorganising parking is seen as a necessary step to attract investment by making the area more appealing in the hope that this will eventually facilitate revitalisation. While the creation of housing and office space in the high-rises would require more parking, the reorganisation itself could increase the buildings' attractiveness and, ideally, attract investors. Interestingly, this measure is thus aligned with both the anticipated future of the Hochhausscheiben in use and the desired future of their revitalisation.

In the planners' everyday work, the question is always whether to act for the short or long term, one planner told me. This depends on whether they find the time for long-term thinking (field notes, 20.04.2021). Yet it also depends on the personalities and, especially, on future presents that they can only anticipate to a limited extent and that will determine the money available: for what kind of temporary, short- or long-term projects do grants exist? What are the terms of grants? (For example, the time horizon for planning grants is five years, divided into budget years, etc.) (field notes, 20.04.2021; 27.05.2021). The planners' challenge is thus to *navigate* between long-term and short-term planes, taking into consideration the multiple temporalities of the governance of the site.

The image of the planner as navigator began to take shape in planning theory in the late 1980s. Albrechts (2004, 750), drawing on Forester (1989) and his own earlier work (1999), argues that 'planners are not only instrumental, and their implicit responsibility can no longer simply be to "be efficient", to function smoothly as neutral means to given (and presumably well-defined) ends. Planners must be more than navigators who keep their ship on course.' As navigators, planners are called upon to actively shape the 'course' of change without misusing their power. Hillier draws on Foucault's (1982) 'metaphor of ships and navigation (pilotage)' describing strategic planning as a journey marked by unforeseen risks and dangers that require constant course adjustments. She (2011, 25) suggests, quoting Derrida, that there was a 'need for development of a new, more flexible, form of strategic planning which, "if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated" (Derrida 1994)'.

We have seen above how planners as navigators self-identify as 'managers of change', a change that is driven mainly by private investment (see Farías 2020, 177; Schubert 2015, 145). Such planning, according to Hillier (2011, 25), would be more concerned about trajectories than about outcomes; it becomes a site of experimentation. On that site, planners navigate between long-term and short-term 'planes', a term that Hillier (27) borrows from Deleuze and Guattari (1994). Whereas long-term strategic plans and trajectories contain 'multiplicities of ideas, many of which never come to actualization', short-term planning such as '[l]ocal area action plans, design briefs, detailed projects is acting on the local or micro-level and is content specific'. According to Hillier, such plans resonate with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) 'planes of organisation' and 'facilitate small movements or changes along the dynamic, open trajectories of planes of immanence'. These two planes of planning on which planners act simultaneously are interwoven, sometimes more harmoniously knit together, sometimes rather loose. In theory, long-term visions such as 'sustainability' or 'a good place to live' guide and legitimise 'short-term and medium-term substantive actions – such as major projects – which mark small movements and changes' (Hillier 2011, 27). As Abram (2017, 76) rightly points out, however, 'existential imagination is also neither linear nor consistent: changes can be traced in the concepts of future that emerge in planning over time'.

Indeed, the vision of Neustadt's centre as developed in the concept today is virtually diametrically opposed to the idea of the centre and Neustadt in its original modern conceptualisation. According to the architects responsible for the structural concept, their guiding idea is not the modern vision of 'buildings in flowing space', but 'buildings shaping the space' as in the European city (notes, 27.11.2018). In the committee meeting on the concept, they explained that a 'spatially defined public space, similar to that in Gründerzeit quarters', is to be created (notes, 22.11.2018). Working towards a realisation of this vision, planners in the city administration are looking for inspiration in books, Halle's old town or other European cities that suggest ways to move away from the modern city and towards a city of 'human scale' in the design of public spaces (field notes, 04.05.2021).

I understand these planes with Abram (2017, 73) as different forms of the future, taking the form of abstract visions 'around which to articulate hopes and fears for collective life, for ideals [...] and moral standpoints' and the form of comments 'on the world as it is today, and how we would prefer that it was'. In the latter case, the future figures as alternative to the present and, as such, comes into practice in the now, e.g. in design drafts. In practice, several gaps exist between the two. For visions to not 'just be words', links between the present and the future are indispensable (Vike 2013, as cited in Abram 2014, 130). Yet, a plan that 'operates as a kind of promise that requires validation [...] may live for a long while without being fulfilled, as long as their fulfilment can be imagined' (Abram 2017, 64). As Abram and Weszkalnys (2013, 3) note in their book *Elusive Promises*, '[t]he future promised in plans seems always slightly out of reach, the ideal outcome always slightly elusive, and the plan retrospectively always flawed'. In this context, monitoring 'that the longer-term vision remains relevant' (Hillier 2011, 35) and maintaining the status of a plan as a relevant 'statement about the future' with 'some credible chance of becoming' (Abram 2017, 66) become important tasks for planners. Planning is meant to secure and enable preferable futures, albeit, as I argue above, within the frame of their role as managers of change rather than change-makers.

Steering the right course between remaining flexible in facing the unknown and uncertain future while respecting the principles of public administration can at times be challenging. In Halle, the realisation of the different steps of the redevelopment concept depends on the willingness of private owners to cooperate, so the future is highly uncertain. Facing uncertainty, planners act on different short-term futures at the same time, while trying to keep the vision alive. In order to cope with the plans and related promises made in public-private negotiations, and with the need to respect budgetary constraints, planners often face dilemmas that reshape

or even dissolve original plans (cf. Bear 2013). As the alderman noted, the final outcome is unlikely to be fully in line with the concept, but these plans provide an essential starting point for dialogue and further development (interview, 28.05.2021). The concept suggests, for example, a redesign for the spaces between the high-rises in the form of green spaces after demolition of the existing parking garages as a first possible step and, as a second, the construction of terraces of the same height as the pedestrian passage connecting the high-rises (Schönborn Schmitz Architekten 2018, 21–22). Being aware that the suggested redesign will depend on the private owners' will to collaborate in the revitalisation of the centre and that the future remains very difficult to determine, the alderman told me that the question of the parking garages remains 'exciting'; they assumed that 'it won't look identical [to the concept], that's also clear, but that was just a clue, you have to get to the topic and think about it' (interview, 28.05. 2021). Furthermore, my informants know that they will not be able to turn their visions into action within the fifteen-year timeframe set for redevelopment areas – the planning horizon with which city planners in Halle are working (field notes, 08.04.2021; 27.05.2021). Nevertheless, longer-term visions provide them with some continuity, also beyond election periods (interview, 28.05.2021).[16]

As we have seen, the concept for Neustadt's centre develops a rather vague overall idea – a space defined by larger building volumes – and formulates longer-term goals as variants and possibilities. In the translation of the concept into everyday planning, my informants oscillate back and forth between the visions of the concept and different measures that need to be in line with the overall vision but always remain variable themselves. They are used to thinking in spatial and temporal modules. However, navigating between distant and near futures and with the gaps between vision and action becomes an important and at times challenging task. For my informants, the question was what promises planning could or should make, and whether the risk of planning is almost too high, given the uncertainties and unplannability of the high-rises' future. In theory, laws and regulations allow planners to tighten the frame for a course towards the future. Yet this comes with the risk that the frame might become an obstacle to the future rather than enabling it, as they fear (field notes, 28.06.2021).

16 During a visit to Halle in January 2023, one of the planners even doubted the usefulness of formulating long-term goals in general, because they would have to question the goals they had set themselves once again, as these proved to be unattainable. Here they explicitly refer to the reorganisation of parking spaces. While funds had already been made available for the demolition of the multi-storey car parks, realisation seemed impossible in 2023 because the owners did not consent (field notes, 25.01.2023).

Production of Indeterminacy

Part of navigating the future is the production of indeterminacy. The oscillation between the near and distant future is as crucial as the way the vision is translated to a broader public that needs to be convinced. In order to allow for a co-creation of the future, it is paramount to find the right balance between determining the future in the form of a concretisation of the vision while keeping it open. Planners do this, as we will see, through the production of an indeterminate present.

In 2021, I attended a discussion between a planner and a speaker of the mayor of Halle about a brochure that the city had developed based on the structural concept for Neustadt's district centre, adopted in 2019 (and discussed above). During the meeting, the speaker said:

> This is a brochure that shows someone wants to develop something here; and not: we have accompanied this for twenty-five years, as such brochures usually state; 'we have done this and that' and they start with: 'twenty-five years ago x and y met…' – no! this one shows a vision. (field notes, 12.05.2021)

As the quote shows, the brochure's intention is to show the potential facing the future. As much as the harmonisation of the past is important internally to make sure that one has been active and to ensure continuity, mobilising the future becomes a main objective here, addressing a broader public and especially potential investors.

Ringel (2018b, 69), in his study of Bremerhaven's urban infrastructure transformation, highlights moments when the present is re-evaluated and expectations for the future are recalibrated, involving the production of indeterminacy. For example, Columbusstraße, Bremerhaven's main street, lost its function and value after deindustrialisation, being even considered a 'material obstacle to the city's future' (75) and a failure of the promises of 1970s urban planning. Later, urban planning reconsidered its potential for new connections, revaluing Columbusstraße. In this moment of revaluation, Ringel argues, its existence was rendered indeterminate by 'referring its contemporary existence to the past while excluding its present from the future' (75). With the example of Columbusstraße, Ringel shows that indeterminacy is actively produced in the 'moment of (temporal) revaluation' (74). When dismissed infrastructures are reinvented, 'ideas of the future already roam the present' (86).

Taking Ringel's argument to Halle, I suggest that the city's brochure renders the centre of Neustadt and the high-rises indeterminate. I deliberately

exaggerate the message for investors that I see connected to the brochure for Neustadt: 'This is the site where you can realise all your dreams'. Importantly, and similar to Ringel's findings from Bremerhaven (2018b, 76), the buildings' (as well as the centre's as a whole) 'existence in time' is actively 'rendered indeterminate'. Through the brochure for Neustadt's district centre and the high-rises, indeterminacy is produced as 'an imaginary state that provides the precondition for certain value-creating interventions' (Alexander & Sanchez 2018, 2), at least that's the hope of the city administration.

In the brochure, making indeterminacy involves the inclusion of a narrative of the past highlighting the origins of the Hochhausscheiben and the exclusion of the recent past that the present is intended to cut off. In order to transform the present into an activating moment, directed towards the future, the recent past is largely flattened. The brochure aims to highlight the potential and refers to the future that is meant to be about to begin. Thus, the subheading reads: 'Redevelopment has begun', and the text finishes with current renovation projects on two of the four empty high-rises: '[i]n the meantime, changes of ownership have taken place in the four unrenovated Scheiben. Partial redevelopment has begun.' (City of Halle 2021, 6) Indeed, the city's alderman was very optimistic during our interview in 2021 that a future would actually be defined for all high-rise buildings within three years (interview, 28.05.2021).

Yet other actors must first be convinced of this potential – one goal of both concept and brochure. The brochure stresses potentiality and develops ideas for possible futures. Having developed visions and visualisations of these visions allows the city to enter conversations about the future, as the city planners explain. In addition to the elaborated vision, the city's aim today is to 'give an impetus' (interview architect, 27.11.2018). Subsequently, the brochure presents 'Impulses from the New Centre' ('Impulse aus der neuen Mitte'). One of these impulses is the relocation of the administration to building A. Shortly before the brochure's printing, photos were therefore quickly taken of the façade that had just been completed; as they agreed, it was to be a blue sky photo – one highlighting positivity, showing that the future had already begun (field notes, 12.04.2021; 12.05.2021; 17.05.2021).

Images are central to entering a discussion about a vision for the future, bringing future ideas into the present and making them available to start negotiations. Showing what it could look like can become an important part of showing potentiality. As the alderman told me, investors may initially find it difficult to imagine what is possible: 'I've also noticed that they [investors] can't imagine some things and when you've had the conversations and the examples and when you've tried it, there's a kind of "aha effect"' (interview, 28.05.2021).

To create these images, facing potentiality and the future, the city together with the state had commissioned studies in the years 2014 and 2015 to show that a transformation of the buildings was possible. The leading professor of the 2014 international urban design student workshop told me that the international students – unlike East Germans – saw only the (good) structural substance of the building. They saw the problem solely in the absence of people. And so, they said, it was possible to prove in the workshop – and that had also been the goal – that a conversion of the buildings was possible (field notes, 27.11.2018). With the visualisations created during the workshop, representatives of the State Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment then went to real estate fairs to find potential buyers. These show utopias (for example, the transformation of one tower into an urban farm), but the feasibility of these visions was not investigated. Based merely on the structure of the buildings, reducing the buildings' complexity, they are able to underline the flexibility of the structure that can provide the basis for all possible futures. What is produced here, as I see it, is indeterminacy. Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer (2015) in their commissioned study also saw potentiality and argued that the buildings' potential was their flexibility. However, their study also noted the necessity to work *with* the buildings and not against them, as Halle's city planners emphasised (field notes, 19.03.2021; 29.03.2021; 20.04.2021; 07.05.2021; 17.05.2021).

Embracing uncertainty and in order to work towards a securing of their future, the buildings themselves are given an indeterminate existence. While the towers' preservation has been defined as a political goal, the city administration stresses that the future's actual form remains open. In order to translate this message to potential investors, the present of the buildings is rendered indeterminate. The production of indeterminacy can be understood as a deliberate move to guarantee a possible future for the existing buildings. In order to do so, it is the future (albeit not fully determinable in its actual form) that is brought into the present to open the present to its potentiality. My informants are hoping for something *new*, for change, so as to be able to preserve the existing. They are thus pointing to the indeterminacy of the present structure of the buildings, their existence in time (cutting the present from the recent past and current conditions of impossibility) and the openness of their future.

Part II
Material Matters

> Scheibe A now stands there seemingly unnoticed:
> an uncanny emptiness that all have got used to. In the light of the day its wretched condition reveals itself, in rain looms a dull melancholy. At sunset it seems to glow, in the twilight it becomes grey, infirm, skeletal, and at night, contours and structures hardly discernible, it seems to want to fall, to bury me underneath it. [...] I enter the building through the main entrance. The row of windows in the porter's lodge in front of me are smashed, to my right I make out the entrance hall. This is actually fully glazed, but it is dark in the room, the windows boarded up from the outside. I feel my way past. [...] The whole area is covered with graffiti.
> I catch sight of the main stairwell. Wherever I look paint is crumbling away. Here and there on the steps lies a dead bird. Scheibe A is approximately 65 m long and 14 m wide. Its construction is based on a room size of 3.6 × 6 m. It consists of 16 crosswise sections and two outer lengthways segments, and one corridor that runs the length of the building. It has 18 floors and is 70 m high. A normal floor contains six four-room flats and four one-room flats, each with a bathroom. [...] I walk through the endlessly long corridors. [...] Balcony doors stand open, banging in the wind. Again and again I hear noises; I feel [observed] even though I am alone.
> (Rick 2004, 137)

This description – evoking decay, traces of past uses and a mix of fascination and unease, even creepiness – is in line with my own sensations and how ruins are often portrayed in both academic writing and fiction (cf. Edensor 2005a, 3). Buildings on standby share many characteristics with ruins. Most strikingly, they are – like ruins – without function or (human) use and are visibly subject to ruination and decay as the instances of graffiti, traces of vandalism and excrement (Coleman 1985) indicate, but have to this day somehow withstood or avoided demolition or renovation (Cairns & Jacobs 2014, 169). The above encounter, however, goes beyond the visitor's sensations and includes detailed observations about the building's material characteristics – information the explorer had obviously gathered in advance. It is in fact the description of an architect who was going to work with the building: 'One of my tasks', he subsequently writes, '[is] to reanimate Scheibe A and to obtain an impression of the resources and how they might be utilised. A seemingly impossible task lies before me.' (Rick 2004, 136) This engagement with the substance and its usability is necessary in order to be able to address the 'seemingly impossible task' of reusing the buildings.

The description above reflects the architect's perspective as he got involved with Scheibe A in preparation for a temporary use as part of a youth theatre project from 2003 called 'Hotel Neustadt'. This was the only instance in which the Hochhausscheiben underwent such temporary transformation and activation; the event thus represents the extraordinary. In contrast, ordinary engagement with the building's materiality and futures is characteristic for the mode of standby. As opposed to ruins, the Hochhausscheiben have not been dropped from stabilising networks (Edensor 2005b, 313). Instead, I observed multiple forms of engagement with the buildings – imagining, designing and negotiating possible futures for them. It is this continuous (however intermittent) engagement which is turning the Hochhausscheiben from waste material or obsolete buildings into sites on standby, facing uncertainty (see Beveridge et al. 2022, where the authors argue to understand urban voids in Berlin as waiting lands rather than wastelands). Even if ruins can remain stable for a long time 'between wholeness and complete dissolution' (Cairns & Jacobs 2014, 172), they face either their end (Cairns & Jacobs 2014, 167) or a (creative) conversion, a resurrection in a new form and different use. When we read about the reuse of ruins, it is usually about industrial ruins that are transformed into creative places or lofts (Göbel 2020; Lees 2001), or musealised if they are valued enough and embody a valued past (DeLyser 1999; DeSilvey 2006; Edensor 2005b; Landau & Pohl 2021). Often, it is the ruins' material that is going to be reused and reassembled in new forms (Gordillo 2014, 37–38). However, the situation is different here – the architect speaks of reactivation, and the Hochhausscheiben are more often described as dormant than as dead.

Buildings on standby, it seems, compare better to half-built or unfinished infrastructures (Carse & Kneas 2019), empty buildings (Batty 2016; Pelkmans 2003) or interstices (Tonnelat 2008). Scholarly discussions of such spaces share with ruin studies a concern with 'materials and time – with what was, what might be, and what might have been' (Carse & Kneas 2019, 12). Although qualities such as in-betweenness and potentiality have also been observed for ruins (DeSilvey & Edensor 2013; Gupta 2018), these material forms point more explicitly to what 'comes next' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 15). In contrast to unfinished infrastructures, however, the Hochhausscheiben are completed structures and were once in use. What they share with half-built or unfinished infrastructure is not the fact that they 'rise into ruin before they are built' (in contrast to buildings that fall into ruin after they are built and have been abandoned) (DeSilvey & Edensor 2013, 469) but the way they are encountered. Like ruins, buildings on standby are objects of ruination after construction. Yet what is at stake here is the coexistence of two opposing processes: on the one hand, ruination – neglect and decay preventing a potential 'on' mode; on the other, maintenance – including securing and standing by the buildings' potential, that stabilises the buildings' materiality and prevents an 'off' mode (that is, falling into ruin). This ambivalence echoes the question posed by Hell and Schönle (2010, 6): 'Where does the ruin start, and where does it end? Is a well-preserved but empty building already a ruin because it has lost its practical and social function?' Buildings on standby, whether well-preserved or visibly decaying, are objects of an ongoing search for a future. I propose distinguishing ruins as objects from ruination as a process (cf. the *making* of ruins, see Bennett 2021, 333). In this view, buildings on standby are affected by ruination without being ruins. The notion of standby helps us grasp both the processes of ruination and those that renew, prolong, reproduce a material in-between.

The Hochhausscheiben on standby are 'challenging objects.' Approaching them from an object-centred perspective reveals how their problematised materiality demands the engagement of diverse actors (in varying intensities) and specific forms of organisation. This conceptualisation is partly inspired by Schürkmann's (2021) notion of 'toxic objects': objects produced in the name of progress that later compel actors to develop regulatory strategies and ways of dealing with them. Schürkmann's (2021, 66) example is nuclear waste, which she describes as a 'critical toxic object' in the context of nuclear waste management – 'an object with an activity identified and problematized as toxic and with the potential to challenge human agency or human action'. As she notes, nuclear waste is not simply 'there', it 'rather appears as a critical and confrontational object' (76).

In the case of the Hochhausscheiben, asbestos is the only toxic element in the literal sense. While it played a role in considerations of possible futures, it did so to a lesser extent than in other cases where asbestos became a very powerful element in decisions to demolish – such as the Palace of the Republic in Berlin (Dellenbaugh-Losse 2020) or the Red Road High Rises in Glasgow (Jacobs et al. 2007, 619). Still, the high-rises on standby risk becoming threats and they impose action. They resemble what Latour and Yaneva (2017, 109) call a 'productive force in spacetime'. Objects on standby, even if they are not needed and can be ignored for some time, emerge as challenging objects through their materiality, which exerts a certain agency in stitching possible building futures.

Presence

During an online panel on GDR built heritage in April 2022, Florian Mausbach, former president of the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, remarked that we are *confronted with* heritage (Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung Brand 2022). The terminology of 'being confronted with' built heritage suggests that architecture is coming at us, that it consists of 'physically imposing structures' (Macmillen & Pinch 2018, 290) and that those responsible for urban development, planning and renovation have

to deal with them. Due to their obduracy and in contrast to other objects,

> buildings cannot be put away in a cupboard, easily binned, or taken to the charity shop. Obsolete architectures remain tenaciously present in the place they began, and because of that it is very hard to exercise the kind of amnesia, or 'economy of ignorance', with respect to them as we do with more transient objects in our lives.
> (Cairns & Jacobs 2014, 111)

The terminology of 'being confronted with' reflects the relationship Halle's city planners had with the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt quite well. In fact, one of my informants said during a discussion on the Hochhausscheiben that they had been 'an act of violence' right from their construction, as they were 'just oversized' and 'not human'. They perceived the buildings as 'a heavy legacy' and 'built ideology' with which they had to contend (field notes, 12.04.2021). Interestingly, here the size of the buildings was related to the perception of the buildings as built ideology. My informants saw ideology taking on form in the Hochhausscheiben; they perceived their size and massiveness as a 'socialist gesture' that their builders wanted to be eternal (interview, 25.10.2018).[17]

Buildings that are perceived as a 'heavy legacy' cause problems for the planners in the present. As DeSilvey and Edensor (2013, 471) note for ruins, they 'testify to what has been left behind by creative destruction and collapsed regimes with their unfulfilled dreams'. According to Stoler (2013, 10), imperial debris, because it remains, continues to have an impact in the present: 'Imperial effects occupy multiple historical tenses. They are at once products of the past imperfect that selectively permeate the present as they shape both the conditional subjunctive and uncertain futures.' Studies of ruination should, in her view, therefore pay attention to 'what people are *left with*: to what remains blocking livelihoods and health, to the aftershocks of imperial assault, to the social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things' (9, original emphasis).

Bennett notes that Soviet architecture is often equated with the political ideology and system that produced it, and its abandonment and neglect are also often associated with the disintegration of this past system. However, she (2021, 333–334) argues that such framing ignores processes of 'ongoing ruination' in the present. Such ruins are often seen as relics rather than as contemporary objects, even though 'they are very much woven into the fabric of the present' and 'often products of contemporary decisions, too'. Bennett (336–337) further suggests understanding ruins in contemporary Russia as matters of 'ongoing ruination', of decisions to not maintain and construct elsewhere, which results in neglecting certain infrastructures. This is a crucial point, as it encourages us to critically examine political decisions behind abandonment and ruination in the present. While Bennett focuses on the abandonment of infrastructure, I explore what happens *after* abandonment – specifically, why the Hochhausscheiben have remained in place and in an in-between state for over twenty years. To answer this question, we must view them not merely as remnants of the past, but as buildings on standby in the present – as 'objects of debate and consideration in the present' (Ringel 2018b, 70), with their material presence shaping and reinforcing such considerations.

The buildings 'have an active presence that shapes the configuration of the present' (Gordillo 2014, 32). The planners understand the Hochhausscheiben as 'remnants of earlier planning decisions, the logic of which is no longer applicable' (Hommels 2005, 324). Such urban forms may become obdurate, as Hommels notes, and 'prove to be annoying obstacles for those who aspire to bring about urban innovation'. For the planners from Halle, there is no alternative to engaging with the buildings as their presence necessitates their reaction (Beauregard 2015, 541). Rather than being able to choose *whether* one wants to deal with them, they have to define *how* to deal with them. As one of the planners said, 'the Scheiben will occupy future generations one way or another, simply because they are there, they have to be used and because it is a great effort to renovate or maintain these Scheiben [...] because they are just so massive' (field notes, 27.05.2021). The planners explained their massiveness with their concrete-steel construction. When I asked them for how long one could leave a building unused and whether they saw a risk that the buildings might collapse one day, they replied: '[t]here's no danger of that, the guys won't leave us, these monoliths; even if they were set on fire [...] they won't have much success. They're German bunker architecture, they'll hold.' (interview, 02.10.2018)

The fact that the planners considered the buildings' presence as materially stable seemed to inspire a kind of awe (both honour and fear) in them. Facing the buildings' presence, as one of them explained, they felt 'doomed to success' because 'we can't just let them vegetate there, we simply have to make them an integral part of the city at this point' (interview, 08.07.2020). Although the buildings seem 'too big to fail', they might become a risk of failure for the city planners. Engaging with the buildings was not a choice for the planners, it seemed, but rather a task that came to them – because the buildings exist. They are decaying and located in a prominent location in Halle; therefore, the planners said, 'we have to deal with them now somehow' (field notes, 12.04.2021). One of the planners drew my attention to the fact that their own success or failure as planners was also tied

17 Interestingly, an exhibition in Halle-Neustadt in 2016 was entitled 'BIG HERITAGE. Which monuments of which modernity?' and the catalogue of the exhibition shows the Hochhausscheiben on its cover (Hasche & Scheffler 2016). The perception of the Hochhausscheiben as primarily 'big' was shaped here.

to the size of the ensemble. In one of our conversations, they compared this redevelopment area to other areas they aimed to improve in Halle, explaining that renovating half of the units in one area meant completely different things in different parts of the city. While the buildings and ownership structures in Halle's old town are small-scale, the high-rise ensemble consists of five 18-storey buildings. These different material contexts create an unequal relation of risk and failure, as the planner explained: '[i]f there are thirty empty and unrenovated buildings [in the old town] and I manage to get fifteen of them renovated, then I have an incredible result', they said. 'In the case of the Scheiben, [...] 50 per cent refurbished means nothing' [laughs]. (interview, 03.06.2021) The buildings' size and massiveness *force* them to engage and, as the planner above said, to integrate them into the urban fabric.

Resistance

> Building data: 'Scheibe C' is a monolithic transverse structure with 18 storeys on a double ground floor and a basement. It is around 59 m long and 16 m wide. It has four lifts and two emergency staircases (east and north side). The system width is 3.40 m (between the transverse walls), the system length (between the outer walls) on both sides is approx. 8.00 m including approx. 1.70 m of central corridor and loggias.
> Year of construction: 1974
> Size of the plot: approx. 1,406 m² measured
> Use/residential area: main usable area approx. 9,526 m² (estimated)
> (Building and Property Management Saxony-Anhalt 2013, 2)

The material characteristics of the buildings are listed in building profiles such as this one, elaborated by the state of Saxony-Anhalt in preparation for a planned sale of Scheibe C. Some of these structural characteristics in particular, such as the monolithic construction, long corridors, the number of lifts and emergency staircases or simply their size, have been discussed, negotiated and problematised over the years, as possible futures for the high-rises have been made and unmade. The buildings' materiality plays a decisive role because it also materialises in the form of costs and discussed (im)possibilities.

The analysis of the role of material matters in standby draws on a relational understanding of obduracy as developed within the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor Network Theory (ANT). From such a perspective, obduracy 'is the resistance that humans and non-human things pose to each other. Something is obdurate when it is difficult to change or compel to act.' (Beauregard 2015, 541) While ANT explains obduracy merely through networks, others have highlighted how materiality takes on an obdurate form and agency as it becomes enacted in practice. As Woolgar and Lezaun (2013, 326) argue, 'the physical identity, durability, obduracy and recalcitrance of material objects – in short, all the traits that would qualify a certain entity as "material" – should in principle be treated as practical achievements, as qualities that are also "enacted in practices"'.

Svabo (2009, 368) points out that

> the relationships between materiality, doing, order and change are complex: [...] objects play crucial roles as 'stabilizers' – they stabilize action, give it something to evolve around, and to engage in activity with, and they give meaning to action. At the same time objects may 'destabilize'; they may break down, get lost and malfunction. Or they may even just be new and thus demand new forms of doing – new practices. Material artifacts may order and fixate action, but they may also make practice move in new ways.

Often, 'objects form the more resistant part of a chain of association' (Schäfer 2013, 354), imposing themselves, demanding, allowing or preventing certain actions. This resonates with Edensor's (2007, 225) argument that materialities of space should be understood as 'spatial potentialities, constraining and enabling a range of actions'. According to Hommels (2005, 329), 'if one characteristic of technology seems obvious, it is its obduracy and stability. [...] once a city's downtown area, including all its buildings, roads, and distribution networks, is there, it displays obduracy and offers resistance to change'. Together, these perspectives suggest that material objects actively shape the scope of possible futures through their agency, including their resistance to change. Beveridge et al. (2022, 284) show how urban 'waiting lands [...] can be seen as a condition of both possibility and impossibility: the possibility of space (Stavrides 2016) and the impossibility of realising innocent or conflictfree visions of it'. Buildings on standby share the ambivalences of material (im)possibilities. Material resistance, I argue, plays a key role in producing and extending the condition of standby as an in-between state.

Demolition Impossible?

'By the way', a planner from Halle wrote in 1999, 'the high-rises are not prefabricated buildings; the deconstruction of one Scheibe is estimated at 9 to 10 million Deutsche Mark' (draft for a letter to the Ministry, 09.09.1999). Large housing estates in East Germany were mainly built in prefabricated concrete slab construction and are therefore often referred to as 'Plattenbaugebiete' (prefabricated housing estates). And in Halle-Neustadt, too, most of the residential buildings were constructed this way. The Hochhausscheiben

in the centre are, however, an exception and in contrast to slab construction, the steel-concrete construction may even prevent demolition.

The remark in the letter that the buildings are not prefabricated constructions sounds like a threat. The sentence implicitly says: think twice – demolition is (almost) impossible. This warning was embedded in the process of planning for potential 'governmental use and revitalisation' which I traced in Part I. In 1999, when the state of Saxony-Anhalt as owner, and the Student Union (Studentenwerk) as operator, announced the closure of the dormitory in Scheibe C, the city of Halle responded by pushing for future governmental use as a way to secure the building's future. City planners argued that if the state failed to find a new use, the resulting vacancy would lead to deterioration and likely trigger a costly demolition – which the state would have to finance. In this way, the city effectively told the state: using the building is the better option because demolition would be extremely expensive due to its construction. The possibility that the state might simply abadon the building – doing neither – was something the city avoided addressing, at least publicly.

In fact, the design and structure of the buildings were repeatedly cited as reasons why demolition was not a real option. Technically, it wouldn't be easy to demolish them, as one planner explained to me in an interview: 'actually, you would have to blow them up – as I said, [it would have been] a spectacle' (interview, 25.10.2018). While prefabricated buildings can be demolished relatively easily, the Hochhausscheiben are concreted into place and reinforced with steel. This actually renders demolition a complex task and, above all, due to the construction method a very costly demolition. A letter to a citizen from 2002, for example, justifies the impossibility of demolition with their construction of 'Ortsbeton' (in situ concrete): 'Demolition of the Hochhausscheiben is not possible because they are structures made of in-situ concrete and the cost of demolition of one Hochhausscheibe is estimated at €5 million' (letter, 10.09.2002). As it turns out, cost calculations and the 'concrete threat' are each to be understood as embedded in specific relations and depending on how these articulate in an event. This becomes evident when looking at how demolition cost estimates vary considerably over the years and even within the same year:

1999:	DM 9–10 million
2002:	€ 5 million
2011:	€ 1.5–2 million
2013:	€ 2 million
2015:	approx. € 3.3 million
2015:	approx. € 4 million
2015:	€ 1–1.5 million[18]

18 Sources: Memo City Administration, 22.06.1999 and letter to the Ministry of Finance, 14.09.1999; letter to a citizen, 10.09.2002; concept Köck, 20.03.2010 and internal letter, 10.08.2011; answer to the press by the mayor, city administration, February 2013; scenarios city administration, 14.01.2015; study by Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer, 2015; concept by Frießleben Architekten, 2015.

The varying costs each accompany specific strategies and objectives pursued at different moments. I already mentioned the calculations from 1999. These, as well as the estimate from 2013, were issued by Halle's city administration and should be understood in the context of an effort to pressure other actors into considering revitalisation. The 2011 calculation (€1.5–2 million) was part of considerations of different planning alternatives and scenarios, as were those from January 2015 (approx. €3.3 million). The nearly 4 million estimate was produced by an architectural office evaluating a possible revitalisation in 2015 and the third estimate in 2015 (€1 – 1.5 million) came from a study by an architectural office investigating conservation through wrapping the building as a possible future. Clearly, the calculated costs must always be understood in relation to strategic aims and contexts. The varying cost estimations, depending on objectives and strategies, also underscore the relational nature of the buildings' materiality. What stands out is not the precise amount of the costs, but that – regardless of how high or low – they were deemed to be too high. No one, neither owner nor the city of Halle, was able or wanted to bear these costs.

Questioned about possible futures for the high-rises in 2013, the mayor of Halle told the press: 'After all, demolition also costs money, an estimated two million euros per Scheibe. Without a fundamental decision, however, no subsidies can be allocated for this.' They consequently resumed that 'revitalisation should be the goal' (email, 13.02.2013). In an internal letter, a planner had written to the alderman in 2011 that

> demolition of the Hochhausscheiben is certainly a planning alternative. After consultation with the State Ministry of Construction, subsidies from the Stadtumbau Ost programme (demolition subsidies) can be used for this. However, the demolition costs per Scheibe are estimated at approx. 1.5 to 2 million euros. This means that the subsidies are unlikely to be sufficient for the demolition, so that the respective remaining costs have to be borne by the owner. This seems hardly possible or realistic. (letter, 10.08.2011)

Apparently, revitalisation became the preferable future partly because demolition proved impossible to realise. The deconstruction of the massive steel-concrete buildings was simply too costly, demanding a sum that was politically unfeasible.

Besides the buildings' structure and sheer mass, I consider their height (18 storeys) and the small plots of land they occupy as further material elements that resist demolition. After 1990, the property boundaries were

redrawn to include a distance of about half a metre from the buildings. This circumstance, as a planner explained to a citizen in an email in 2008, contributes to the fact that no owner would have demolished the buildings. 'What can I tell you? No owner will demolish the Scheiben because they are built on such a small plot of land that the vacant lot does not allow for subsequent profitable use.' (email, 06.05.2008)

Since the plots are small and demolition is unprofitable for investors, the buildings' value lies in their height, as a planner explained. According to them, the usable space of the ensemble and the price for which the buildings were traded for many years were disproportionate. While there was theoretically great economic potential in the height of the buildings, their economic value plummeted in the early 2000s. The planner explained:

> in this respect, of course, existing properties like this, which have such an incredible density on such a small plot, are already valuable purely in terms of property value. And the fact that they were sold for a song and dance over the years was due to the lack of perspective. (interview, 03.06.2021)

In 2002, for example, the Treuhand that administered the building from the late 1990s presented Scheibe B at an auction in Leipzig. The minimum stated bid was 100,000 euros. At the time, only the ground floor was still occupied by commercial uses. A previous auction in Berlin in 1998, at which the Treuhand hoped for more than one million for Scheibe B, had failed. Another compulsory auction of Scheibe B followed in 2008. The market value fell from 360,000 to 1,00 euro (set symbolically) between the auction in 2002 and the forced sale in 2008.

Meanwhile, the buildings had become objects of property speculation and are sold today for around 7 million euros. Cycles of buying and selling that characterise private property speculation make demolition increasingly unattainable. The planners from Halle explained in 2021:

> Demolition, [...] – it's not an issue at the moment; if land prices are in the 7-figure range and then the demolition costs come on top – forget it. In the first round of the demolition discussion, the prices were in 5 figures [...] maybe in 10 years, [...] but now demolition is off the table. (field notes, group discussion, 29.03.2021)

The material gathered here reveals an ongoing and, at times, explicit debate over the practical and financial impossibility of demolition. The debates show how the Hochhausscheiben on standby present a challenge in their very materiality and resist demolition due to their size and massive construction, further driving up the cost of demolition. Furthermore, demolition is rendered unattainable as the plots are too small and the buildings' value lies in their height. Cairns and Jacobs (2014, 128) note that a decision for demolition 'is not made in isolation. A decision that appears to be the end of the story must also be stitched into a new story of redevelopment or regeneration.' Yet a possibility for redevelopment of the site was equally not in sight. Even though the city actually considered buying and demolishing one or several Hochhausscheiben (e.g. in 2000 and again in the 2010s), high costs and lacking political legitimacy hindered it from doing so. Instead, it was decided that 'the decision for renovation and classic re-use or final demolition is postponed to a later date and can then be decided under the framework conditions of urban development at that time' (internal letter, 10.08.2011). Today, however, demolition is becoming ever less feasible due to rising costs and reliance on credit (Bernt et al. 2017, 566).

As it turns out, the materiality of the buildings on standby resists demolition through the embeddedness of certain characteristics such as height, type of construction and plot within the urban fabric, agency of public actors and the logics of property speculation. Standby, the in-between state of buildings that are there but not needed, is stabilised through material resistance. In a mode of standby, the logics of 'property rights, market forces and state planning become loosened' (Beveridge et al. 2022, 285) and a gap emerges as with urban wastelands, for example. Unlike other cases where such a gap enables (temporary) alternative practices (Andres 2013; Beveridge et al. 2022; Tonnelat 2008) or allows people to stay (Ringel 2020), this case foregrounds material matters: the gap here ensures the material continuity of the buildings but also their in-betweenness.

Renovation Impossible?

> 'Swiss', the architect says to me and points to the scene upwards: the Swiss constructors of the wooden module, which is being introduced into building C on this sunny day in 2019 as a first test, hang from climbing ropes on the façade. We are all standing on the parking deck opposite building C, invited by the investor to be part of this great moment that is supposed to be a milestone in the course towards an innovative renovation of building C. However, the rails to slide the module were too narrow and had to be pushed apart with a steel pipe earlier, now they can't get the pipe out nor the module in – it's stuck. They try to pry it out, sawing and jiggling – it takes forever. Again and again, people start filming (me too), the module moves a bit and then comes to a halt again. Among the public, there is the investor, representatives of different funding ministries as well as the

> investment bank, the architects, engineers and representatives from the city administration in Halle. At some point, everyone starts to get nervous as the module isn't moving. The building seems to baulk and the nervousness visibly increases. (field notes, 26.06.2019)

In summer 2019, I had been invited by the investor of Scheibe C to attend the event of the so-called 'test module insertion'. The investor believed in the 'neutral structure' of the high-rise and had developed a revitalisation concept. Their plan was to remove all balconies and façade sections and insert micro-apartments as prefabricated modules into the basic structure that then emerged. The concept was considered innovative and received public funds for experimental construction in existing buildings. An accompanying research project investigated the (im)possibilities of developing the existing building stock. As of 2025, the construction site has not progressed much.[19] The scene above from Scheibe C's construction site in 2019 hints at how the building resisted and continues to resist the planned renovation.

Not everything is possible. On that day, the module didn't fit, and the leading architect standing next to me while we were watching the insertion of the module explained the misfit with the odd structure of the building. The building is not constructed as the drawings on the plans suggest, the investor explained at another meeting:

> My aspiration has always been to make something special, something unique, something sustainable, also ecologically sustainable, and also to show what you can really do with these Scheiben. So not just taking a bucket of paint and painting it, but something with all the challenges that I certainly didn't see in 2015 [when the company they worked for purchased the building] as they turned out at the end of the day, which is primarily due to the fact that at the time, one thing was planning and by that I mean at the time when the buildings were erected, and the other is what was actually built because the materials weren't there or for some other reason. So, we simply had to deal with a lot of things that we had planned and then had to adapt because we realised that in the end it was implemented differently when the building was constructed. (interview, 18.05.2020)

A year later, when estimated costs for the project had increased by several millions, they said they were now planning with four or five different sizes for the modules instead of the initially planned one-size-fits-all module (interview, 22.04.2021).

Such 'vagaries' of the Hochhausscheiben were also encountered by the investors who had purchased and renovated building D in the early 1990s. The renovation of the Hochhausscheiben, according to their experience with renovating building D, 'cannot be calculated exactly due to the peculiar nature of such objects and involves a considerable risk of cost overruns' (letter, 30.03.1999).

These examples confirm what Yaneva (2008, 16) states in relation to the renovation of the Alte Aula in Vienna, namely that certain structural elements 'imposed their specific material requirements over the renovation process'. These requirements made the renovation in the making a process of 'unpredictable turns, also because a building that undergoes renovation is not a fully masterable object: It often resists interventions and shows itself as a disobedient object' (16).

Neither the cost of demolition nor the cost of renovation had seemed to be reasonable investments for any of the actors for decades. In an interview, the alderman said:

> No one really knew what to do with this special topic of the Hochhausscheiben; the money that has to be put into them – that is, even if I do a normal renovation, fire protection, heat protection – I have to take all that into account; even if I don't even intend to make a profit – it was clear from the start that the renovation of one thing costs 30 million euros. Broken down to the square metre, there has to be a sum of x in the end as the rental price.[20] (interview, 28.05.2021)

19 During the construction process, the old building fabric proved to be increasingly challenging as the statics were not secure and individual solutions had to be developed time and again. The project was funded by the Federal Ministry of Housing, Urban Development and Building as a model project in its Zukunft Bau innovation programme. The programme aims to create 'Variowohnungen', adaptable, urban living space for an ageing society. In 2017, the Federal Ministry of Construction earmarked around four million euros for the revitalisation of Scheibe C; the city was to provide a further three million euros. The investor was given three years to realise the project until December 2020. However, when work came to a standstill due to structural problems, according to the investor, both federal government and the city withdrew their funding in 2023. Following the cancellation of the subsidy, the focus was no longer on affordable intergenerational housing. In 2025, construction continues at a very slow pace and at the investor's own expense. It is unclear whether the revitalisation will ever be completed (MZ, 02.02.2024; MZ, 23.06.2023; B_I Baumagazin 2023).

20 In 2014, economic considerations were made by the state of Saxony-Anhalt. According to the calculations, a rent of €7.31/m² would be economical with a net construction cost of €1,000/m²(including a profit of €200,000 per Scheibe). With construction costs of €1,500/m², the rent would be €9,73/m², with €2,000/m², the rent would be €11.25/m². In the northern Neustadt area, where the buildings are located, the average cold rent per square metre was €6.33 in February 2023 (Immobilienpreise Regional Analysiert n.d., Mietspiegel Halle Saale Noerdliche Neustadt Mietpreise Stand 03.02.2023).

Among city employees, 30 million euros seemed to be the anticipated sum needed for renovating one of the buildings. This figure circulated widely within the city administration in 2021, even if some planners believed that it could be possible to renovate one Scheibe with only 20 million (field notes, 19.06.2019).

The costs of revitalisation, like the costs of demolition, have been calculated many times, with different intentions and within all kinds of architectural studies and concepts. These concepts had also elaborated on the structural conditions of the buildings that were either favouring or opposing certain transformations. The basis of these calculations varies, but one figure is known: the sum the investors paid for the renovation of Scheibe D to simple office standards (completed in 1997) was approximately 19 million Deutsche Mark. An initial study for a transformation of Scheibe C into a high-rise office building from 2000 ('study commissioned by the Building Authority for the use of Scheibe "C" by state offices') calculated that about 22 million Deutsche Mark would have to be invested.

Whether renovation appears possible also depends on whether the buildings are found 'suitable' for certain uses or 'flexible enough' for any possible future uses. The easier it is to adapt the buildings to today's needs, the lower the construction costs, and a renovation project can increase its profitability and potentially also its attractiveness for future tenants. Planners and architects thus repeatedly and controversially evaluated and debated the structure's flexibility. In 2002, a group of architects who worked on a redevelopment concept for the centre of Halle-Neustadt and also studied the Hochhausscheiben specifically, found that

> If it is stripped clean and cleaned, skeletonised, so to speak, the naked structure of the stacked levels remains, it remains a usable cubature. It is existing capital that merely needs to be reinterpreted. The functionally neutral structure allows for various possible uses.
> (Graul et al. 2002, Preamble to Part 4 of the Concept)

The architects thus suggested that '[t]he volume [should be] "blown out"', the structure laid bare and the '"wounds" [...] filled with new content' (Graul et al. 2002). The flexibility or so-called redevelopment capacity of the high-rises would, of course, vary depending on different uses and the transformations that are envisioned. The architects thus calculated the necessary investment costs according to different uses, but also the costs for the demolition of individual parts to reduce the total surface.

In another concept from 2015, Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer (2015, 4) found that '[t]he Hochhausscheiben have a high degree of flexibility due to their monolithic construction. Additional openings in the walls and ceilings are therefore possible in principle'. The famous architectural firm, known for their successful renovations of modern housing, had been commissioned (here in collaboration with a Berlin-based colleague) to study the economic rehabilitation of Scheibe C with the option of transferring this model to the other buildings. The architects showed that an attractive and economically feasible transformation of the high-rises was indeed possible. However, the formulation 'in principle' in the quote above already suggests that they saw structural limits to flexibility. In particular, the bearing walls, long corridors and very small rooms were seen as structural limitations to revitalisation (Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer 2015, 15).

They noted, for example, that 'removing individual transverse walls to widen the living spaces is difficult and cost-intensive due to the horizontal forces that occur and the necessary load support during installation'. They also rated the installation of additional doors or wider doors (for example, for disabled access) as difficult. The study equally lists the limits of a transformation with regard to fire protection, statics and pollutants. Structural characteristics of the building, such as the bearing walls made of in-situ steel concrete, as mentioned above, are likely to engender not only increasing costs but static or other security-related issues (Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer 2015, 15).

With reference to this study, Halle's city planners were convinced that a revitalisation of the Hochhausscheiben was only possible if one worked with and not against the structure (field notes, 19.03.2021; 29.03.2021; 20.04.2021; 07.05.2021; 17.05.2021). The investor's interference with the building's structure became a central argument in the debate around the year 2020. Rather than the buildings, the investors and their project were 'blamed' (cf. Beauregard 2015) for skyrocketing costs of the renovation of building C. Several dilemmas arise in the case of the revitalisation of the Hochhausscheiben. High costs for renovation are an argument against extensive structural changes to the building. However, while renovation is only profitable if one works with the structure (avoiding to cut a lot of concrete, for example), there's the risk of the resulting spaces not being attractive. Such dilemmas that arise from material constraints had become a political issue for the renovation projects of Scheibe A and Scheibe C in 2021 and were rooted in earlier political decisions.

After confirmation by a referendum in 2017, the city and its mayor had decided to rent Scheibe A as a seat of administration. In 2018, a representative of an international investor, who had purchased the building and started the renovation, told a local newspaper that '[the] building is perfect. Everything is concrete, there is no mould [...] Redevelopment is not difficult because the city has planned only minor alterations to the building; anything else would be too expensive. It would cost too much money.' (MZ Saalekurier, 10/11.02.2018) The investor expressed a crucial aspect: the city wanted the building to be simply renovated, not so much changed. In addition to the long-term rental commitment by the city of Halle, this may have been a fact that

made the project interesting and relatively safe for an investor (at least before the actual renovation began – after all, the investor actually sold the building shortly afterwards, and a local bank together with a local engineering company completed the renovation). At the opening of the building in the summer of 2021, the lead engineer said that renovations were always more challenging and that the loggias were expecially challenging to handle (Du Bist Halle, 01.07.2021). What the city wanted to prove with the renovation of Scheibe A was that it was possible to turn the Hochhausscheiben around and to do so within a 'reasonable frame', economically speaking. From the city's point of view, they achieved exactly this (Halle (Saale) Händelstadt 2021, 69). Critical voices said that this was possible because only the most necessary changes had been made to the building, and they questioned its attractiveness (e.g. discussions in the online forum, Du Bist Halle, 01.07. 2021). A local politician called it a 'minimum variant' and emphasised that the renovation had to be completed, as the administration's move into Scheibe A had been decided in a citizen referendum and going back was therefore not an option (interview, 09.04.2021).

Yet the investor in Scheibe C did not have the same aspirations. They claimed to be realising an innovative project, a revitalisation of an existing built structure never undertaken before that might be able to attract new tenants for Neustadt. Their intention was to transform the building, not just paint it (interview, 18.05.2020). However, they were struggling and 'exploding' costs could eventually lead to the project failing.

In 2021, as renovation costs surged and the investor requested additional public funding, the renovation of Scheibe C became a 'Politikum' (political issue) (field notes, 02.03.2021; interview, 28.05.2021) with the buildings' statics turning into politicised technology. The minutes from a council meeting on 17 February 2021 document how the political debate centred on the material resistance of Scheibe C. One delegate asked whether similar structural problems had been encountered during the revitalisation of Scheibe A – seeking to determine whether the investors or the building were to blame for the increasing costs for Scheibe C's revitalisation. According to the alderman, the statics of Scheibe A 'were okay' after its renovation and suitable for its planned use as an office tower. In contrast, Scheibe C required 'massive interventions': 'taking out ceilings, adding additional loads and these boxes that are to be pushed in, and all that means that the entire statics of Scheibe C will have to be completely redone, resulting in these enormous additional costs' (Halle (Saale) Händelstadt 2021, 64–65).

This debate highlights how political support for renovation projects was also based on material arguments about the (in)flexibility of a building's structure. The issue of state funding compelled both City Council representatives and administrators to engage with the technical constraints and potentialities of the buildings' materiality. Representatives of the Left Party, which holds a significant electoral share in Halle-Neustadt, viewed the ongoing project as the only viable opportunity for Scheibe C's revitalisation and accepted the investor's claim that the cost explosion was due to the building's material unpredictability. According to one party member, the project had the potential to be attractive and a flagship project. The only alternative they saw was a minimal renovation like that of Scheibe A, with moderate satisfaction and public appeal (interview, 09.04.2021).[21]

The material presented here highlights the contested possibilities and impossibilities of future renovation. Like the debates on demolition, these are embedded in urban change and political will, with cost estimates and proposed variants reflecting specific contextual configurations. The materiality of buildings plays a crucial role in these debates, as certain material characteristics – from load-bearing walls to long corridors, from the size of the building to its site – influence feasibility, cost, profitability and attractiveness. Generally, the more concrete is cut, the more attractive the project may become – but this also drives up the costs. This relational material resistance has, for many years, rendered renovation seemingly impossible.

Such material resistance contributed to the prolongation of an in-between state. In contrast to the case of the American Folk Art Museum in New York (Beauregard 2015), Red Road in Glasgow (Jacobs et al. 2007) or Palast der Republik in Berlin (Bartmanski & Fuller 2018) (and this list could easily be continued), the 'incompatibility' (Beauregard 2015, 538) of the buildings' present with the transformations designed for them did not result in the buildings' demolition. In a mode of standby, possible futures – demolition included – are calculated, negotiated and discussed but not realised. Standby is remade in such moments and stabilised as certain material aspects, such as the price an investor pays for the plot but also processes of decay, might increase these impossibilities. As Beauregard (2015, 546) equally notes, the buildings' 'materiality limits how they can be used, adapted and even demolished; changing them poses technical challenges and imposes financial costs'. Certain material elements in conjunction with regulations, market mechanisms, investor and planning logics are able to prevent the materialisation of possible futures. These were negotiated against the background of achievable prices or against the background of urban development and development possibilities and always also in relation to the (in)flexibility of the buildings' materiality and structure. The buildings' materiality thus acted as a 'productive force' (Ringel 2020, 569), contributing to the stabilisation of standby.

21 After the City Council had decided to provide additional funding at the request of the Left Party on 17 February 2021, it was revoked nine months later on 24 November 2021.

Decay

Materiality in a mode of standby is marked by a tension between stability and fragility. Stability sustains the latent potential for reactivation – the 'on' – while fragility imposes threats of deterioration or erasure, potentially tipping the buildings into an irreversible 'off'. They morph into ruins if they are neglected or are, conversely, maintained as musealised versions of themselves (Dawdy 2010, 772). Unlike buildings that are preserved through active narratives or continuous use, those on standby persist in an in-between state, one that is constantly at risk of collapse. While the Hochhausscheiben have increasingly fallen into disrepair and possible futures have been repeatedly sought but not materialised, the city was often forced to intervene.

Beyond dichotomies of stability and fragility, the buildings on standby are challenging precisely due to their material resistance and fragility that become tangible in processes of decay. The buildings' increasing decay does not necessarily – and in contrast to ruins – lead to the objects' status as ruins. Reducing the Hochhausscheiben to processes of ruination would mean to neglect that the buildings are 'not disconnected' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 6). Seeing them as ruins were to ignore the processes of engagements with the buildings' possible futures and their material resistance. And while it remains unclear where decay and ruination will lead, the material dimensions of standby keep forcing people to engage with the buildings and their future.

On 31 July 2015, a local newspaper reported that extreme winds had caused parts of the façade of Scheibe C in Halle-Neustadt to crumble, with falling shards of glass injuring a passerby. According to residents, fragments had already been falling for several days. In response, emergency workers secured window panes from the inside, cleaned balconies and stabilised the façade. The article stated that decisions now had to be made about how to proceed with the building, a responsibility that lay with the new private owner. 'With the sale of the Scheibe to a private investor, the state has relieved itself of its security obligations. So far, about 45,000 euros have been invested in the maintenance of the building', the article concluded (MZ, 31.07.2015).

It is in such moments of rupture and with increasing decay that the buildings impose themselves (Macmillen & Pinch 2018, 290), enforcing action such as security measures, repair and maintenance (if only at a minimum level). This confirms to some extent what is repeatedly emphasised in repair and maintenance literature – namely, that only in the event of a breakdown or accident, people no longer take 'for granted' or ignore technology and infrastructure (Guy et al. 1997, 196). In these moments, I suggest, the buildings require attention and engagement. Comparing caring for the human body with caring for things, Jackson (2017, 183) notes:

> the care of things may involve a staying with in time and place, a subjecting and reorienting of one's own time to other temporal flows and processes, including the temporalities of breakdown and decay (long and slow, sudden and protracted) that must be accommodated and adjusted to in the ongoing doing of repair work.

The Hochhausscheiben are abandoned buildings and they are falling apart, even if not all parts of the buildings become dangerous or deteriorate to the same extent and at the same time (Appel et al. 2018; Brand 1995). While parts of the façade, windows and balconies are made of asbestos and are increasingly deteriorating and at risk of collapsing, the structure of the buildings themselves is remarkably stable. The different material temporalities generate not only rhythms and different material threats but also different forms of engagement, varying in intensity and actors involved (Edensor 2011, 243). It turns out that standby as an operational mode includes a whole range of actors, including owners but also residents, emergency services and municipal authorities – although not to the same extent. I argue that standby as an ordering mode enforces different degrees of engagement. My investigation of these different forms means to look beyond the municipal planners' perspectives as the city's material engagement can only be understood in relation to the (non-)engagement of others.

The newspaper report on the storm in July 2015 suggests that Scheibe C's maintenance had become a financial burden for the owner at the time, the state of Saxony-Anhalt. Indeed, the required costs for securing the building carried by the state steadily rose over the years. According to the state, an average of 13,909 euros per year was paid for securing the building. In addition, there are costs for traffic safety, rainwater drainage and street cleaning. Since 2004, according to the state government, costs for building security and traffic safety have totalled 92,352.56 euros. Income from renting the roof as an antenna site to a mobile phone company amounted to 3,936.94 euros per year, but an end to the lease was set for spring 2011 (Saxony-Anhalt State Parliament, 15.09.2010). The annual costs finally contributed to the state's plan to sell the building (Saxony-Anhalt State Parliament, 11.05.2015).

The state of Saxony-Anhalt was the only owner of one of the high-rises maintaining the building at least minimally. While the owner of Building E had conducted safety inspections over the years and implemented some safety measures, the owners of Scheibe A and B had disappeared – abroad and into liquidation. Here is what city planners recorded in a 2014 report to the mayor regarding Scheibe A:

> Scheibe A: unrenovated and completely empty.
> The owner, Alster Office Ltd, London, has dissolved.
> The municipality currently has no contact person
> who can speak on behalf of the owners.

> The building was still fenced in by order of [Alster Office Ltd]; due to wind and vandalism the fence often fell down and was thankfully put up again [...]. The parapet plates are problematic, their mounting is defective, so that some plates fall down. Currently, security measures are being carried out as part of a replacement project by the company GHS Halle GmbH & Co. KG Halle (Saale). The estimated costs amount to 85K euros. These costs will be borne by the city for the time being. The Building Department is currently examining the extent to which the costs incurred can be passed on due to the difficult ownership situation.
> (city administration, 21.01.2014)

According to the report, Scheibe B was also completely vacant and unrenovated, as were Scheibe C and E (except for a snack store on the ground floor). The owner of Scheibe B was in liquidation and after a fire in 2009, the building was emergency secured for about 22,000 euros by the Department of Construction at the expense of the city. The employees furthermore assumed that safety measures would have to be undertaken in 2014, at a similarly high cost as for building A (city administration, 21.01.2014).

Standing By

The report clearly states that although the increasing decay of the buildings posed a growing threat to security, the owners of the buildings did not secure them despite their obligation by law. It was the city that stepped in. Apparently, the Hochhausscheiben did not hold much promise for profit accumulation – otherwise, one might assume, the owners would have taken at least minimal measures to ensure public safety, secure the buildings and preserve their potentiality (cf. Beveridge et al. 2022, 289).

In 2013, the following headline appeared in the local newspaper: 'High-rise building becomes an acute danger. Administration must secure "Scheibe A" at its own expense.' The article goes on to say:

> Neustadt's biggest problem is 18 storeys high. Wobbly balcony cladding, smashed windows, pigeon droppings, dilapidation: four of the five enormous Hochhausscheiben in the centre of Neustadt have been empty for twenty years. Because parts of the balcony cladding are threatening to fall off, the city has to secure the façade of the so-called 'Scheibe A'. According to the building regulations office, this could cost a five-figure sum. Although none of the five high-rise buildings, spelt out from A to E, belongs to the municipality, 'Scheibe A' in particular is increasingly becoming a financial burden for the municipality. If there is danger for passers-by, the city has no choice and must secure buildings if their owners remain inactive. The chance for the city to recover the costs of this protection is extremely small. [...]. In addition to its own security costs, the municipality thus also continues to miss out on property tax. (MZ, 13.11.2013)

The city was forced to take care because the owners did not comply with their obligations, even after several requests by the City of Halle. They also ignored the invoices issued by the city. In addition to this, the city also had a double responsibility here: not only did it have to intervene due to public safety concerns, but it is also responsible for the public land onto which parts of the buildings fell. This plot of land and its boundaries are not just administrative facts but material conditions that shape the city's actions – and thus play a significant role in organising standby.

In an email to their colleagues from 2004, a city planner asked to add the topic of the structural condition of Scheibe C and security measures to the agenda of the administration's next jour fixe. They pointed out that the building's condition had 'drastically deteriorated' and informed them that a fence had been erected around the building by some city department, which reached far into the urban city space and made it impossible for pedestrians to pass. This measure was intended to protect passers-by from falling parts of the façade. But this could not be the solution, they wrote, because the city was planning to develop the public spaces surrounding the buildings. For the planners, the goal was therefore 'to quickly obtain structural protection from the owner, the state of Saxony-Anhalt. The topic was also raised at the last meeting of the Halle-Neustadt Association, and those present were understandably unenthusiastic.' (email, 01.04.2004)

The simplest, cheapest and therefore preferable response to material ruptures and decay was to erect fences around the buildings, a measure implemented repeatedly over the years, mainly by the city. However, this approach created new problems. Fences blocked passages, hindered renovations and were frequently knocked down by vandalism and wind. Often, they were reinstalled by the 'Eigenbetrieb für Arbeitsförderung', a municipal employment promotion programme that provides small job opportunities for unemployed residents (Halle (Saale)-Händelstadt: EB Arbeitsförderung n.d.). Many of these workers presumably came from Halle-Neustadt, where unemployment ranged from 13.5 to 17.4 percent (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2015, 16). The image of unemployed citizens putting up fences after every storm around privately owned buildings on public land after every storm arguably exhibits the absurd and ambivalent material politics of standby – where responsibility is fragmented and unemployed citizens are drawn into maintenance work.

Incidents like knocked down fences and fallen window panes do not equally affect and disrupt networks on standby; the tasks of standing by buildings on standby are not equally distributed. Rather, it becomes clear that standby acts through distance and proximity (see for a similar observation Macmillen & Pinch 2018, 301). While most of the owners are entirely absent but contribute to standby through neglect and prevent a realisation of a future in the form of a revitalisation, the municipality becomes involved in the event of breakdown or acute danger. The city administration as owner of the public space surrounding the high-rises and in relation to their commitment to public safety needs to be prepared 'to (possibly) re-stabilise and re-organise' (Wiedemann 2021, 32) order. Wiedemann, who studies modes of 'being on standby' and maintenance practices among people living with diabetes and managing automatic insulin delivery systems, finds how '[p]atients constantly need to be in a state of readiness in order to repair, replace, recharge or reconnect the devices that help attend to the disease' (33). Similarly, the municipality must be prepared when it comes to buildings on standby – ready to coordinate departments, install fences and respond quickly to falling façade parts or other dangers.

Standing by the buildings on standby means, in this case, being prepared and in a '*state of readiness*' but 'without being immediately engaged' (Wiedemann 2021, 44, original emphasis). This state of readiness that I understand as a mode of preparedness following Anderson (2010, 791, original emphasis) is 'a series of events after a precipitating event. Unlike precaution or preemption, preparedness does not aim to stop a future event happening. Rather, intervention aims to stop the *effects* of an event disrupting'. Erecting fences in Halle aimed at preventing harm but did not stabilise the buildings. In 2014, work undertaken on building A was explicitly described by the city as securing measures as opposed to renovations (MZ Saalekurier, 18/19.01.2014). This clarification was likely meant to curb public speculation and prevent false hopes of renovation. While readiness includes a certain engagement in the form of staying with, it does not require proximity all the time. This is to be distinguished from a state of '*vigilance and alertness*' (Wiedemann 2021, 44, original emphasis) through which citizens of Halle get involved.

Residents, physically closest to the Hochhausscheiben, keep a vigilant eye on both the buildings' condition and the city's activities. Similar to Macmillen and Pinch's observation of Detroit residents monitoring deteriorating school buildings, citizens in Halle-Neustadt track the buildings' material integrity, report incidents to the city administration and urge the city to avert danger. Like the monitored school buildings in Detroit, buildings on standby differ from 'unsurveilled ruins' (Macmillen & Pinch 2018, 301). The city administration's files in Halle contain numerous reports from citizens about fires, pigeon infestations, vandalism or falling balcony and façade parts. The residents of Halle-Neustadt – the buildings' neighbours – stay alert. In a fax message from 2003, for example, Halle-Neustadt's district office notes that citizens have reported parts of balconies falling down. They write that the owners should be informed and initiate appropriate safety measures, adding, however, that due to changes in ownership, they did not have the latest status of the current responsible persons (fax, 03.06.2003). In 2009, a citizen sent pictures of a fire-damaged building, questioning the lack of a security assessment of the façade despite a fire-related review. In an online forum of a citizens' association advocating for the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben, a user referred to Scheibe C as a 'patient' and made the following 'diagnosis: somnolence (= disturbance of vigilance (wakefulness)); underlying condition: lack of use, vacancy, dilapidation, neglect' (Bürgerverein Stadtgestaltung Halle, 13.01.2015). This shows that citizens were not only alert to the buildings' condition but were also closely monitoring the city's (re)actions. For the neighbours, contrary to the city, standing by buildings on standby includes being close to them physically and emotionally.

Lapiņa (2021, 231) similarly describes urban spaces on standby as half-built construction sites, 'passive, dormant, hibernating', yet also 'under tension, available, ready to be activated: a site of "active inactivity"'. Perceiving the Hochhausscheiben as requiring vigilance – rendered dormant or put to sleep by the city, the state and the private owners – the citizens are in fact acting as vigilant observers, attentively monitoring the buildings' fate. Their vigilance is to be distinguished from the readiness of the city administration that is prepared to intervene in the event of a rupture and has to pay for security measures. Both forms of standing by are needed in order to keep the buildings in standby mode. In the case of the Scheiben, they are adopted by different actors. While mainly citizens report incidents and are physically and emotionally present, the recipient of these reports is the city (Wiedemann 2021, 44). Together, both forms of commitment create a monitoring system that emerges and grows with the increasing material vulnerability of the Hochhausscheiben on standby. The buildings on standby impose themselves and force humans to *stay with* them (cf. Jackson 2017, 183). The material fragility of standby, tangible through material ruptures and decay, clearly enforces certain actions and coordination between actors.

Maintaining Potentiality

Inspired by Ringel's (2020, 75) analysis of a street which is 'seen to constitute a material obstacle to the city's future', I suggest that over the years, the increasingly decaying buildings risk becoming an obstacle to their own future and any development of the district. Progressive material deterioration represents a risk for the city: once the material condition of the buildings closes a possible future, the city's responsibility surges because it is obliged to secure public order and safety. While the city had no choice but to secure the surrounding public land, it would not have been able or willing to budget

for maintenance beyond securing it in an emergency. With growing decay, however, private investment became more unlikely as the buildings' potentiality risked dwindling. Realising the fragility of the buildings' future, members of one of the citizens' initiatives blamed the city administration in 2015 for having remained inactive: '"The pedagogic conversation" alone (as the past has shown) won't lead anywhere; rather, the years-long tolerance might be a main reason for the dilapidation of the buildings' (letter 30.03.2015). Facing political pressure and bearing increasing security costs led the city to realise around the year 2015 that securing the future 'can't be done without a lot of money, but we also know that if we don't do anything now, it won't get better' (interview, 25.10.2018). There is a connection between the buildings' material decay and the city's increasing commitment, as it focuses on preserving the potentiality of standby to attract private investment for the buildings' future.

As Dawdy (2010, 772) points out, modern ruins are 'continually recreated out of a conjunction of imagination and materiality'. The same can be said for standby, which functions as a configuration that stabilises the potentiality of the future. The hope for future development ties the city administration to the buildings in the form of a promise that is non-binding and rather an 'organising agencement that is only somewhat monitored. This almost uncontrollable presence in absence (or virtuality) of the promise attunes the time-space in a perhaps reliably loose way – and demands endurance to keep it staying.' (Färber 2019, 267) To keep the future open, the city engages in maintaining (the potentiality of) standby – that is, a condition oriented toward the potentiality of reactivation. One fundamental condition of standby is the anticipation of an 'on' mode – or at least the possibility of a future decision. Buildings are on standby only if they retain the potential for reactivation. When both demolition and renovation prove unfeasible, standby emerges as the viable option – one that must be materially maintained.

Maintaining the potentiality of standby is a material practice between 'curated decay' and conservation. Whereas conservation aims at preventing processes of 'mouldering and disintegration' and keeping the object 'in a state of protected stasis' (DeSilvey 2006, 326), 'curated decay' suggests '[l]etting "nature take its course"' (DeSilvey 2017, 179) and is viewed as a 'postpreservation model of heritage' that opens up a more 'active rather than a passive mode of engagement – creation, cultivation, improvisation, renewal' (187).

Part of the maintenance of standby is the rejection of what are considered inappropriate uses to preserve the buildings' 'availability' for future development (Tonnelat 2008, 303). In the case of the Hochhausscheiben, these include not only vandalism but also non-human uses. On 02.06.2013, a local newspaper ran the headline: 'Now nature is intervening: Jackdaws occupy Scheibe C' and added, ironically, that '[f]inally – a utilisation concept for the Halle-Neustadt high-rise building Scheibe C has arrived!' (Sonntags Nachrichten, 02.06.2013). Whereas the jackdaws' presence didn't appear to be actually disturbing, the settlement of pigeons was perceived as a nuisance. A month later, employees of the departments of urban planning and of veterinary services as well as of the state office for building and property management exchanged the pigeon eggs with plaster eggs in order to prevent pigeons from taking over building C (letter to the mayor, 25.07.2013). Throughout 2013, several newspaper articles problematised non-human uses of the Hochhausscheiben and the consequent city administration's obligation to act. One of the articles states:

> Halle's city administration now wants to do something about the pigeon droppings in the Neustädter Passagen – at least as far as that's within its power. […] 'The empty high-rise buildings provide an optimal habitat for pigeons. Only one of the unused high-rise buildings has had nets installed to prevent pigeons from flying into it', [the city's representative said]. The future of the prefabricated building ensemble has been unclear for years. 'Only with the renovation or demolition of the buildings will there be an end to the pigeon droppings problem.' (MZ Saalekurier, 25.04.2013)

In fact, the city initially spoke out against safeguards when the state ceased all investment and vacated Scheibe A and C. In the late 1990s, when the state announced the closure of the student dorms in Scheibe A and C and handed the buildings over in a 'secured condition' (letter, University of Halle-Wittenberg, 09.09.1998), the city administration initially rejected measures including boarding up windows with 2.5 centimetre thick wooden plates and mounting metal plates onto doors. Materialisations of securing the buildings were seen by city planners to signal an 'end of functioning', and the city feared that these signs would deter investors. The archived letter from the university features a pencilled note from the alderman: 'I don't want to be responsible for not finding a buyer' (letter, 04.12.1998). Over the years, however, the city realised that neither demolition nor renovation was likely or feasible in the near future. This way the city (involuntarily) changed game from refusing to secure the buildings to supporting their securing as a means of stabilising the potentiality of standby. At this stage, around the year 2010, the Hochhausscheiben not only challenge, but actually present a risk. They do so both in an actual material sense and in terms of a planning failure that planners want to prevent, as well as in a political sense, as people might blame the state for not caring (enough). Since from the city's perspective, private investment is the only conceivable way to preserve the buildings, they must be materially secured in order for this potentiality to remain. This comes with relatively high costs and work loads. I therefore argue with Wiedemann (2021, 44, original emphasis) that standby is '*not energetically neutral*'. The high costs of securing became an increasingly pressing problem that led the city to consider a mate-

rial stabilisation of standby in the sense of preserving the buildings' potential by protecting their materiality.

In 2010, the possible future of a temporary conservation of the Hochhausscheiben and, more specifically, of Scheibe C was suggested by a deputy of the Left Party. They called for a 'paradigm shift' in the concepts for the Hochhausscheiben based on the principle that preservation of the Scheiben was only possible by way of use (concept, 20.03.2010) in view of the fact that they considered 'all hopes for a redevelopment of the Scheiben towards residential or office use' to be 'illusory' (minutes from a meeting with representatives of city planning and the municipal housing cooperation, 08.07.2010). Their proposal was to convert Scheibe C into a 'solar tower' – that is, to cover the building with solar cells and thus conserve it (Köck, 20.03.2010). The conservation they suggested would, as the meeting minutes report, not exclude 'traditional uses' on the lower floors or in the future (minutes from a meeting with representatives of the city planning and municipal housing cooperation, 08.07.2010). Although the city found this idea innovative, it was rejected for practical and financial reasons (internal letter, city administration, 28.04.2010).

The idea of the possible future 'conservation', however, persisted in various forms over the coming years. In an interview with the local newspaper from 2014, for example, one of the municipal planners from Halle said that considering other possible futures than demolition or privatisation was new for the state of Saxony-Anhalt. As part of an international urban design student workshop, a group had developed a concept for the realisation of 'vertical farming'. A planner stated: 'With vertical farming, you could possibly secure the structure with much less money, because housing people is no longer in the foreground. [...] I would see it as temporary mothballing ['Einmottung' in German] until another use is possible again.' (MZ Saalekurier, 16.05.2014)

In 2015, the city followed this idea further and considered stabilising the in-between condition. It commissioned a study to investigate the possibilities of temporarily covering the buildings with a wind- and rainproof, non-combustible membrane construction. The intention for such a measure was to conserve the current material state of the buildings and to save securing and maintenance costs. The study was to investigate the possibility of arresting decay – a mode 'where buildings are stabilized but not restored' (DeLyser 1999, 614). In contrast to policies of 'arrested decay' that DeLyser analyses for the ghost town of Bodie, California, where it served the construction of authenticity, arresting decay through wrapping the Hochhausscheiben was meant to serve the conservation of the material in order to enable later development. With an enveloping membrane, the commissioned study stated, 'it would be possible to preserve the buildings for an indefinite period of time, to stop the decay and to preserve the urban identity of this place. [...] The remaining lifespan of the monolithic reinforced concrete buildings would allow for sustainable use.' (Frießleben Architekten 2015) The study thus opened up the prospect of an institutionalised form of standby.

As opposed to the construction of authenticity and to creating a 'living-history museum' (DeLyser 1999, 604), the idea was to institutionalise standby and keep the buildings in a state of limbo, awaiting their reawakening (see Lapiņa 2021, 231). The high-rises are, however, not the 'margins of manoeuvre of a dominant order' that Tonnelat (2008, 303) describes, nor interim spaces awaiting gentrification (Lapiņa 2021; Ringel 2020) (although they might be seen that way at some point). In the eyes of the planners, 'the stupid thing is that I have a product that is not in demand – too bad!' (interview, 02.10.2018). The buildings on standby are awaiting development, but one that has no clear form or time (Lapiņa 2021). In between embracing and curating decay and conservation, stabilising the buildings' materiality by covering them would have meant – similar to conservation technologies – to 'slow or halt physical decay' (DeSilvey 2017, 32), yet without attributing the 'status of museum object' (DeSilvey 2006, 326) or fixed heritage to their materiality.

In the end, wrapping the building was rejected and never realised. As such, the material stabilisation of standby – of conserving the buildings without reactivating them – became just one more possible future that was negotiated but ultimately dismissed. Instead, the city maintained the condition of standby by intervening in cases of material breakdown, continuously un/making possible futures while hoping for development through private investment. Maintenance here doesn't predominantly serve to stop decay, but to maintain the 'potentials of the future' (Ringel 2020, 571). With the buildings remaining on standby, the future remains open – feeding the hopes of citizens organised in a collective to fight for a future to stand by the 'promises of standby' (Färber 2019; Kemmer 2020; Kemmer & Simone 2021). Standby ties people around the buildings to their future. Consequently, maintaining standby means maintaining relationships between people and things and between the present and the future.

▲
Fig. 34
Presence. Photo by Hühne 2017

▲
Fig. 35
Hochhausscheiben A, B, C.
Photo by Hühne 2016

▲
▲
Fig. 36/37
Neustädter Passage before and after renovation.
Photos by Schmuhl n.d. (late 1990s; 2005)

▲ ▲
Fig. 38/39
Magistrale with Scheibe A before and after the construction of the shopping centre and the tram line.
Photos by Schmuhl n.d. (1990s and early 2000s)

▲
Fig. 40
The Hochhausscheiben as seen from the south.
Photo by Hühne 2018

▲
Fig. 41
Scheibe E with skate park.
Photo by Hühne 2018

Problem and Value

How a building is valued can determine whether it is preserved – if found 'worth keeping' – or demolished if not. A common criterion for the valuation of architecture and buildings and architectural 'heritage' in particular is 'authenticity'. The criterion was first introduced in the 1964 'Venice Charter', where value is linked to the building's or site's original materials and minimal intervention is recommended (Schäfer 2016, 364). As Jones and Yarrow (2013, 6) note, conservation theory often assumes that an object's value resides inherently in its material form. Their own study turns away from such an understanding of authenticity:

> Authenticity is 'crafted' through different forms of expert practice. Tracing the different forms of expertise that mediate heritage conservation shows that there are different views of the building, but more profoundly there are also different ways of enacting the [building] as an object of intervention. (22)

Within the process of production of authenticity, late modern society negotiates questions of whether or not architectures are 'an expression of a specific urbanity', whether they are 'seen as "fitting" into the image of a city or as being well "integrated" into a certain urban ensemble' and whether or not they are 'worthy of protection' (Reckwitz et al. 2020, n.p.). As Reckwitz et al. describe, along these parameters, architectures are 'evaluated as successful or unsuccessful. These evaluations refer to socially circulating, more or less implicit social criteria of "success" or "failure" that organise the planning and use of buildings.' Authenticity, however, is not the only parameter along which success and failure of buildings and architecture are (e)valuated. From an STS perspective, technologies and any kinds of objects are successful when they are stabilised by associations in such a way that those associations become invisible. If an object 'works' or 'fits', it isn't questioned. In contrast, these associations come to light in the case of failure (Jacobs et al. 2007, 613). For the failure of the large housing complex Red Road, for example, Jacobs et al. (627) find:

> In the 'death' of Red Road we saw the way
> in which its designation as a housing
> 'failure' and the announcement to demolish
> reconfigures its socio-technical network,
> dropping away old allies and bringing in new ones,
> producing new translations of its worth and
> intensifying efforts variously to 'close' or 'open'
> this leaky black box.

In this view, success is not determined by a single authority or judgment, but by networks. What makes an object 'successful' is a range of translations – through scientific studies, regulations or material forms (Jacobs et al. 2007, 613) that come together in specific sites. This assembling process, described by Latour (2013, 351) as 'work of collection', takes place incrementally, step by step. Importantly, such stability is ephemeral and both success and failure can easily turn into the opposite. Jacobs et al. (2007, 616) show how Red Road was once a 'successful housing solution' but was later translated into 'a fact of failure' (621). A key turning point came when the buildings' steel construction – once a promising building technology – was questioned (619). Material elements, such as the steel-concrete construction or asbestos, can thus become a 'mediator' (Latour 2005) for a building that is performed as success or failure, valuable or problematic. These evaluations are not fixed – they depend on the associations of multiple (human and non-human) elements that perform it as worth keeping or not. In both cases, (non-)value is translated and (re-)produced in reports, plans or policy formulations. Like other mediators, they can either stabilise an object by turning it into an unquestioned 'black box', they can reopen controversies or even lead to demolition – as in the case of Red Road in Glasgow.

'Emptiness'

'Empty' as an adjective describes an absence: 'firstly, containing nothing and emptied (e.g. vessel), secondly, free and unoccupied (e.g. place) and thirdly, without content or void (meaningless)' (Pfeil 2014, 35). As Pfeil (38) notes, 'empty' can consequently describe a place in material terms, but it can also describe a place that has lost its use and/or meaning. Freed from fixed ascriptions, emptiness, as several authors have argued, leaves space for differing interpretations. DeLyser (1999, 606), for instance, studying ghost towns such as Bodie in California, finds that such places, their artefacts and landscapes 'are reinterpreted by each generation of viewers; they can convey new meanings and new associations far from what their original users had in mind'. What DeLyser observes is that the material state of the ghost town allowed for multiple interpretations and was challenging perceptions not only of the past but also of the present. Pelkmans finds for empty buildings in Adjaria, Georgia that their (half-)emptiness also allows for multiple aspirations for the future. He (2003, 129) notes how these buildings have become 'signs' for a

> turn for the better, of a future of fulfilled dreams.
> That the buildings were empty was perhaps
> even a precondition of the maintenance of that
> dream, because as long as they were empty
> they belonged to the future and therefore remained
> potentially accessible to everyone.

Especially critical academic analyses and creative imaginaries highlight the potential of emptiness, where unused space becomes a resource and a chance for alternative urbanity beyond state-driven and capitalist urban development (Beveridge et al. 2022, 282). In such a view, 'the void is not pure nothingness, an emptiness defined by sheer negativity' but may be a place of emergence (Gordillo 2014, 57). Färber (2014, 131) shows how 'Creative City Imaginaries' have 'turned shrinking Berlin into a city full of "empty space"' that has become attractive explicitly '*because of* the spatial testimonies (industrial wasteland) of its poor economy' (original emphasis). In my understanding, this shows that the valuation of emptiness shapes and transforms space. Rather than being conceived as static space upon which different interpretations are projected, valuing – understood as socio-material practice – allows us to consider the material effects of interpretations and imaginaries. A creative reinterpretation of empty space can thus entail revaluating that space.

Often however, empty buildings are seen as problematic spaces and especially so in urban policies, as they are perceived as 'signs of urban degeneration and blight' (Beveridge et al. 2022, 282). This can be observed particularly in shrinking cities where emptiness is generally perceived as alienating and signalling decline (Dissmann 2014; Pfeil 2014). Dzenovska (2020, 11) suggests the term 'emptiness' to describe processes of material and social 'emptying', as well as of a loss of meaning in post-socialist spaces. As Dzenovska (2021) explains, emptiness is the experience of material and social undoing without knowing the outcome, without replacement or a sense of what's coming next. According to Dissmann (2014, 11), 'the dominant practice for encountering this alienation aims at *making the emptiness disappear*' by *filling* the emptiness (original emphasis).

I understand the Hochhausscheiben not as truly empty, but as spaces 'filled' with 'specific processes, resistances, imaginaries, images, dreams but also designs' (Krivy et al. 2011, 245; see Kemmer 2020, 168 for a similar observation). Still, planning discourses, policy papers and institutionalised urban imaginaries perform buildings as 'empty' and this turns them into opened or 'leaky' black boxes (Jacobs et al. 2007, 627). Abandonment and 'emptiness' call the existence of the buildings into question and endow them with an uncertain future. However, in the case of the Hochhausscheiben on standby, their so-called 'emptiness' is better described as 'presence of absence' (Krivy et al. 2011, 244), rather than a material and social void or meaninglessness. Dzenovska and Knight (2020) point out that empty does not mean empty in an absolute sense as the space-time of emptiness is 'crammed with speculation and anticipation', and that the term might be somehow misleading.[22] Whereas 'emptiness' tends to refer to an afterlife, 'standby' refers to the contested in-between within which 'emptiness' becomes a socio-material

22 The authors themselves have considered the analytical option 'to dismiss the language of emptiness and show that in conditions perceived as empty things happen and nothing is empty' (Dzenovska & Knight 2020, n.p.).

driving force and an 'active moment' (Krivy et al. 2011, 247) that triggers processes, mobilises actors and generates controversies. To underline this, I use 'emptiness' in inverted commas.

'Emptiness' as Decline

In almost all planning for the centre of Halle-Neustadt, the 'emptiness' of the Hochhausscheiben appeared as the most pressing problem. A report from 2017, for example, mentioned it as one of the weaknesses of the centre of Halle-Neustadt, contributing to the stigma of the place, together with a general desolate condition and negative appearance (Plan und Praxis 2017, 49). Within the report, 'emptiness' came to stand for a signal for stigmatisation and decline.[23] It was assumed to negatively affect future development opportunities and investment, but also left room for potential to save the buildings.
In German urban redevelopment policies, 'emptiness' in the housing stock in East German cities and towns was predominantly problematised as an effect of urban shrinkage around the early 2000s. The commissioned study 'Neustadt Kolorado. Perspectives for Halle-Neustadt' states in 2004: 'The term "shrinking cities" is used to describe the phenomenon of an (enormous) loss of inhabitants. As a result, there is a high degree of housing vacancy' (Bader et al. 2004, 11). In another publication by the same architectural collective, one of the authors asks: 'How could what was once good, suddenly become so grey and empty, unloved and uncomfortable? [...] How could the zombification spread in Halle-Neustadt?' Answering these questions, they find: '[t]he needs of humans, their dreams and ideals change. If our cities do not react accordingly, they will become worthless and void. And at this point, something has gone wrong in Halle-Neustadt.' (Foerster-Baldenius 2014a, 14–15) 'Emptiness' was not only seen as a result of shrinkage but became a key problem and symbol of urban decline – especially in the case of the Hochhausscheiben, whose vacancy was publicly framed, particularly by the media, as a sign of the city's decline. A newspaper article from 1997 refers to the buildings as '18-storey monstrosities', mentioning cockroaches, decreased interest and the high refurbishment costs (MZ, 04.08.1997). The problematisation went as far as calling Scheibe A a 'drug house' in a tabloid headline. The article reports that corridors are strewn with pieces of aluminium foil and drug addicts who spend the night in the kitchens and corridors. One reason for these conditions, according to the article, is that many students move into 'real flats' out of fear, and therefore 40 per cent of the rooms are empty. The article scandalises the 'emptiness', purporting drug addicts and dealers had moved in (BILD, 29.05.1999). The example demonstrates how media discourse of this kind sees unused or misused buildings as signalling social and moral decay. 'Emptiness' destabilises a building's existence as soon as it is evaluated as a signal of decline. In such cases, the buildings themselves become problematic objects prone to be demolished.

23 In fact, scholars have long argued that the presence of vacant buildings can have the effect of contributing to the decline of an area 'by lowering nearby property values, promoting criminal activities, and posing fire safety hazards' (Han 2019, 773). The well known so-called 'broken windows' theory developed by Kelling and Coles (1997) established the connection between material decay and non-maintenance and crime. Empirically, however, the correlation between loss of value and emptiness and social problems could not always be proven directly.

Relational 'Emptiness'

The central location of the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt was the second lens through which city planners viewed their 'emptiness' as particularly problematic. Munn (2013, 141) distinguishes between a location in the sense of a 'physical "position" or "emplacement"' and a 'location in the sense of its variable spatial relations (near, far, north of, etc.) with other places (or relevant reference points)'. Guggenheim (2009b, 46) describes buildings as 'mutable immobiles' – objects that are defined more than most objects in relation to their surroundings. While the relationship of buildings with their surroundings and uses may change, their location does not (Bartmanski & Fuller 2018, 205; Guggenheim 2009a). The relationship between buildings plays a major role on how 'emptiness' and ruination are perceived, especially by urban planners who, as Macmillen and Pinch (2018, 306) note, 'are trained to evaluate holistically, to pay wide and close attention to cities. They are more like geographers than architects in this respect. [...] planners pay more attention to projects' surroundings and context than to aesthetic considerations.' The authors (307) observe how planners in Detroit were paying great attention to the relation between individual buildings and their surroundings when evaluating the buildings' potentiality for reuse.

In Halle, too, the location of the 'empty' Hochhausscheiben was central to the planners' evaluation of the buildings as they (e)valuated 'emptiness' in relation to other buildings and urban development. One of the city's major concerns was the presence of 'emptiness' in this specific location that was perceived as particularly problematic in relation to other 'empty' buildings. In fact, the Hochhausscheiben were not the only 'empty' buildings in Halle-Neustadt. Rather, they were surrounded by several other vacant buildings at that time, and the 'emptiness' of other buildings in the surrounding core had a reciprocal impact on their development opportunities and thus on their value (Macmillen & Pinch 2018, 302). Many of these other vacated buildings had no networks to protect them from demolition, so here vacancy had often been the decisive factor in devaluation processes. Abandonment presented imminent danger, as the city spoke of 'the further threat of emptiness' (letter, 14.09.1999). In 2000, the mayor of Halle wrote to the Ministry of

Saxony-Anhalt concerning the planned abandonment of Scheibe C:

> What is particularly important to me here is the fact that a virtually hopeless marketing of Scheibe C or accepting years of empty housing in the middle of the largest large housing estate in our state would be in stark contradiction to the declared urban development goals of the state. (letter, 13.06.2000)

Returning to some of my ethnographic material discussed in Part I, I now turn from the rhythms of searching for possible futures to the ways in which the condition of 'emptiness' was articulated and understood. What the mayor emphasised here is that the Hochhausscheiben are located in a 'powerful centrality' (Murawski 2019, 26) and therefore the buildings' 'emptiness' was seen as particularly problematic from the city's point of view. Here, they referred to the centre both in terms of a physical location and its specific functions and meanings.

According to German Building Law, 'deplorable urban conditions' (in German 'städtebaulicher Missstand', §136, 2) exist when '1. existing buildings or other characteristics of the area do not meet the general requirements for healthy living and working conditions [...] or 2. the area is significantly unable to fulfil the tasks imposed on it by its location and function'. While long-term vacancy is not explicitly named, it is often interpreted as an indicator of such conditions because of the negative effects it is anticipated to have on the development of buildings and their surroundings.

With regard to the Hochhausscheiben, this concern was raised in 2017. A City Council's decision identified 'the emptiness and the desolate condition of the four unrenovated high-rises [...] as the main problem' (VI/2017/02810, 2017, 3) of Neustadt's district centre. It summarised key findings of preparatory studies commissioned to determine whether the area showed structural deficiencies that would justify its designation as redevelopment area – an instrument in German building law. The report from 2017 said:

> The negative effects of the structural deficiencies of the Scheiben high-rise buildings (Scheiben A, B, C and E), which have been empty for many years, prevent a qualified revitalisation of the Halle-Neustadt district centre [...]. The emptiness also means a lack of footfall in the Neustädter Passage. This results in a lack of purchasing power for the existing retail uses [...]. Thus, the urban planning deficiencies in the Scheiben high-rise buildings also lead to functional deficiencies in the Neustadt district centre, since the longstanding emptiness and the appearance of the high-rise buildings [...] could cause the Neustädter Passage to lose its function as a central service area.
> (Plan und Praxis 2017, 54)

Somewhat surprisingly, the report noted that the buildings' 'emptiness' has had, until today, 'little effect on the use in the Neustadt Centrum [the neighbouring shopping mall] and the shop units along the Neustädter Passage. Only a few units are vacant and this is due to fluctuation, they don't point to structural vacancy issues in the area.' (Plan und Praxis 2017, 37) This suggests that the problematisation of 'emptiness' and its effects on the surrounding commercial areas was not necessarily based on measurable current effects but equally on anticipated ones. The evaluation of 'emptiness' was thus future-oriented: from the planning perspective, the concern was that 'emptiness' and deterioration of the Scheiben could deter potential investors (interview, 02.10.2018). Although the 'emptiness' of the Hochhausscheiben had not yet negatively affected the area's function as a central supply zone in 2017, planners were concerned about potential negative impacts if the vacancy persisted. Furthermore, as employees of the so-called 'Quartiermanagement' for Neustadt told me, the 'empty' high-rises were believed to harm economic development and the perception of Neustadt as a potential and liveable urban space (interview, 13.07.2020). This suggests that 'emptiness' is evaluated and problematised in planning along temporal-spatial relations. The 'empty' Hochhausscheiben are performed as a problem in relation to their surroundings and to future development opportunities that could be inhibited by their 'emptiness'. Evaluations translate 'emptiness' predominantly as 'lack of footfall' and 'obstacle' to the future regarding development (cf. Ringel 2018b, 75).

In the letter I have quoted above, the mayor had written to the state of Saxony-Anhalt that accepting vacancy in the centre of Neustadt would contradict the urban development goals agreed between the state and the city. The defined goal of planning for Neustadt was to demolish 'empty' housing estates from the fringes to strengthen the centre. Thus, when evaluating the Hochhausscheiben, their relationship to 'emptiness' elsewhere in Neustadt (beyond its centre) also plays an important role. In response to the state's announcement of their intention to abandon buildings A and C, the city's alderman wrote to the planning unit:

> I would like to ask you [...] to prepare [...] a coherent 'line of argument' in preparation for the meeting.
> In doing so, [... the] critical question – why we are so intent on preserving the Hochhausscheibe or indeed all of them – should prove helpful. As you know, I am certainly in favour of careful and differentiated demolition concepts, but I think it is wrong at this location. This is precisely what needs to be justified in detail now.
> (internal letter, 21.04.1999)

In the years that followed, the city of Halle drew up a comprehensive urban development concept that focused primarily on the elimination of 'emptiness' in Neustadt. The demolition of about 5,000 flats was planned. The declared strategy was to demolish from the outside inwards – from the edges to strengthen the centre: from the large housing estates such as Halle-Neustadt towards the old town, but also from the edges of Halle-Neustadt towards the centre of Neustadt (III/2001/01469, 2001). On the edges of Neustadt, demolition areas were to be designated for small-scale housing construction, while other areas were to be revalued as green spaces. In the urban development concept for Halle-Neustadt from 2001, the centre with the high-rises was designated as a preservation area. Its objective was an upgrading of the centre and the central axis and the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben as formative buildings. The concept was flexible in terms of a possible destruction of several floors. A relational understanding of 'emptiness' provided the basis for this evaluation of the centre and the Hochhausscheiben as elements worth preserving in Neustadt. Using different maps and in consideration of population projections and the demands of the municipal housing companies, planners assessed the existing buildings in Neustadt and developed a demolition strategy (Bernt 2019, 176–177). The decision to preserve and revitalise the centre of Neustadt rests on this 2001 urban redevelopment concept.

Negotiating 'Emptiness' and Worthiness

From the early 2000s on, urban policies in Germany 'have attempted to deal with the causes and effects of shrinkage, principally through programmes for the demolition of what was considered "excess" housing and infrastructure and the regeneration of the traditional urban cores' (Gribat & Huxley 2015, 164–165; see also Bernt 2009, 2019; Gribat 2012). The centre of Neustadt was identified as an area in need of strengthening, despite its re-designation from a city centre to a district centre after 1990 – a change that rendered both its scale and significance subject to debate. Nonetheless, it was deemed necessary to reinforce the centre's function and find a new use to ensure its continued relevance – a position reflected, for example, in the 2009 Integrated Urban Development Concept, which stated: '[w]ithout functional strengthening of the centre, it must be assumed that the centre of Neustadt has no long-term development prospects' (V/2009/08266, 2009).

By no means everyone in Halle agreed that eliminating the 'emptiness' of the Hochhausscheiben in Neustadt's centre by designating new uses was the 'right' way to go. A planner told me:

> There were also really heated discussions in the department, that is, it is not that often that people really rub up against each other professionally, because the urban development department was very worried and still is, because they are still the great masters of the housing strategies, that a use of the Scheiben that is too residential leads to either them standing empty because there is not that much demand or [...] the Y-houses[24] [...], which of course nobody wants. Neustadt has done well without the Scheiben for all these years, purely in terms of use. (interview, 25.10.2018)

When the municipal housing companies learned in the early 2000s that the city was planning to apply for funding to revitalise the buildings for residential use, they voiced strong opposition. In a letter to the planning department, the managing director of one of the companies expressed concern upon discovering – via press reports – that the city intended to apply to the Urban 21 programme with a view to promote housing for young people and seniors. They considered the proposal

> as highly questionable because the cooperatives and the municipal companies have immense income losses due to empty flats and do not know how to finance a possible demolition. On the other hand, private investors are to be subsidised with sums in the double-digit millions in order to bring more flats onto the market. (letter, 17.02.2000)

An employee of another housing company told me that when they were offered the opportunity to acquire and develop the Scheiben, they declined – primarily due to the already high vacancy rates in Neustadt. To them, this 'emptiness' signalled a lack of demand. Regarding the Scheiben, they said:

> These Scheiben [...] should be examined very critically and their necessity should be questioned; they were built at that time in order to create as much living space as possible for workers and students on as little land as possible; we no longer need this living space in Halle-Neustadt today. [...] For us, it was clear that residential use in the Scheiben would not make sense. [... S]ince there is no demand pressure, we still have enough vacant living space in conventional housing types, so we don't need another 1,500 or 2,000 flats on the market; 1,500 or 2,000 flats on the market that would simply drive or exacerbate the vacancy situation. (interview, 14.01.2019)

Some planners and the public housing companies saw Neustadt generally, but also its centre, as oversized (personal conversation, 09.06.2022). A board

24 The so-called Y-houses (named after their shape) are closer to the centre of Halle.

member of a local housing cooperative wrote, the 'proportions' in Halle-Neustadt were no longer right as 'the Neustädter Passage was designed for significantly more residents than live in Neustadt today' (Schwarzendahl 2014). As the high-rises were not in demand from an economic perspective, the question of whether they were worth preserving was all the more an urban planning and a political question. As Kraftl (2010, 406) notes, 'economic systems surrounding buildings are nearly always accompanied by something *more*' (original emphasis). In Halle it was a question of prioritisation at the beginning of the 2000s, as eliminating 'emptiness' in one place may provoke 'emptiness' in another (Bennett 2021).

How 'emptiness' is evaluated and whether the buildings are considered necessary depends on the evaluation criteria used. Different parameters lead to different conclusions: economic, political, urban planning or architectural. It's important to note that reactivating such a large number of flats could lower housing prices in Halle-Neustadt. If the Scheiben were to be renovated to be more attractive than existing stock – where tenants often stay due to a lack of better affordable options – some residents might choose to move. From an economic perspective, especially one focused on reducing vacancy rates across the whole of Neustadt and distinguishing between municipal housing companies and private investors, reusing the Scheiben may not seem reasonable. By contrast, an urban planning perspective emphasising the significance of the centre may come to different conclusions and support the buildings' redevelopment. In fact, within the city administration, opinions differed. And the question of how to eliminate 'emptiness' has become, above all, a political question in Halle. The city repeatedly considered acquiring one or more buildings – either for demolition (as in the case of Scheibe E in 2001) or for its own administrative use. However, an internal email from August2013 shows the tension between economic and political reasoning. One of the employees wrote that from a financial point of view, the buildings were not needed and moving the administration into them would not be reasonable due to high redevelopment costs. Political objectives, they acknowledged, may differ from such reasoning (email, 16.08.2013).

Furthermore, there is disagreement within the planning department as to what would justify prioritising the towers and thus devoting large amounts of public funding to the buildings that could equally be needed elsewhere in Halle (interview, 08.07.2020). As Chiapello (2015) points out, economic valuations have become a core public responsibility. Since the state is required to spend public money for the common good, the question is on what it should be spent. Moroni et al. (2020) emphasise that in answering the question of whether and why empty buildings are a problem, a distinction must be made between state-owned and privately owned buildings. While empty state-owned buildings are always a problem because they represent unused resources, privately owned 'empty' buildings only become a problem when they are completely abandoned, attract unlawful activities, become a threat to public safety and signal decline and moral and material decay (Moroni et al. 2020, 1303). Even though this is the case for the Hochhausscheiben, what really speaks against revitalisation and use but also against the use of public money are all the other 'empty' spaces at other sites in Halle and Halle-Neustadt that the planners are hoping to develop. Throughout the process of evaluating 'emptiness' as the main problem, the city internally contested its own formulated goal to strengthen the centre and the performances of the Hochhausscheiben. Clearly, the evaluations of 'emptiness' have shown that the buildings were performed as a problem. They didn't appear 'problematic enough', however, to justify the use of large sums of public money for the elimination of 'emptiness' through demolition or the use by public institutions.

Significance

In a 2020 discussion among a group of planners from Halle's city administration, we addressed different coordinates of the in-between related to the valuation of the Hochhausscheiben. The planners reflected on the buildings' persistence despite their prolonged vacancy, debating why demolition has never been pursued. One planner suggested that the buildings have survived because they are perceived as symbols – symbols of a past era, of a modernist vision, or simply of centrality. The fear, they noted, was that removing them would mean destroying something irretrievable, even if its precise symbolic meaning remained difficult to define. Another planner questioned whether this symbolism was merely political or structural or whether the Scheiben, like churches, held spatial or architectural significance beyond ideology. The analogy to the Marktkirche in Halle's old town – a costly, underused structure that no one would consider demolishing, served to underline this point. Regardless of their political origin, the Hochhausscheiben were seen by some as urban anchors: a 'centre' that, if removed, would create a void. Others saw the buildings more controversially; some planners said they 'hate' Neustadt and the Scheiben and would prefer to see them gone. Yet even among critics, there seemed to be a recurring tension: while removal might make sense from a market-economic perspective, it remained difficult to justify this step from a planning perspective that includes other parameters. The discussion revealed that the buildings' valuation was tied not only to planning logics and urban form but also to emotional attachments, professional trajectories, generational positions and the intensity with which one had engaged with the site. Are the Scheiben remnants of a past best left behind, or are they indispensable structural symbols? To what extent are valuations related to generations or to the intensity of engagement with the buildings? The lack of consensus underscored the complexity of planning in the presence of symbols whose meanings were shifting, layered and contested (group discussion, 06.02.2020).

The relation between architecture and meaning is a matter of controversy in the literature. Often, one is given more weight than the other or the two are seen as 'mutually exclusive' (cf. Bartmanski & Fuller 2018, 204–205). However, architecture becomes meaningful when meaning is attributed to it – when buildings are made to express or reflect a situation or idea. At the same time, architecture itself can modify the meaning it is supposed to carry (in this case, it acts as a 'mediator'; cf. Rydin et al. 2018, 54; Latour 2005).

This interrelation between valuation and materiality is also a central pillar in Macdonald's (2009) study of National Socialist built heritage in Nuremberg. Understanding heritage through an assemblage approach, Macdonald shows how Nazi architecture was not simply inherited as heritage but actively reconfigured through processes that destabilised its original associations and re-inscribed it as sites of learning. Crucially, Macdonald demonstrates that historical and aesthetic valuations may diverge and that negotiations over heritage value are both shaped by material affordances and capable of generating material effects. This was particularly evident in Germany in the evaluation of National Socialist architecture. For example, although Bavarian heritage law allows for the recognition of all buildings constructed before 1945 to be recognised as 'buildings of "historical significance,"' a 'judgment still had to be made' for Nazi architecture (Macdonald 2009, 124). These judgements were made in negotiation processes in which materiality had 'mediatory effects' (131). As Macdonald shows, heritage – through its materiality – acted as a mediator in the process of assembling the heritage of Nuremberg. In this view, buildings are not simply containers of meaning or value – they are sites where meaning and value are constantly being (re)negotiated through their material presence. Building on these insights and following DeSilvey and Edensor (2013, 479), we may understand 'significance as material and social effect' rather than a given value. Value, from such a perspective, becomes an effect of 'multiple sociomaterial "negotiation"' (Färber 2014, 122).

Valuating Buildings' History and Form

In their original plans from the early 1970s, the high-rises were intended to provide a vertical frame to the surrounding and otherwise rather flat functional buildings and facilities and to create a concentration in the centre by combining living and working. They are located north of and at right angles to the main axis, the so-called Magistrale, which marks the end of the centre on the opposite side, to which they stand perpendicular (Bürgerverein Stadtgestaltung Halle, Quo Vadis, Hochhausscheiben Halle-Neustadt, n.d.).

The composition of residential high-rise buildings, the pedestrian mall and functional buildings as well as a railway line underneath the central square were taken from the 'highest-rated competition design and further developed in the subsequent work' (Thöner & Müller 2006, 221). The planning team worked under the leadership of Richard Paulick, a Bauhaus graduate. Paulick was called in for a reason: Halle-Neustadt had meanwhile been chosen to become a showcase socialist city with a metropolitan character. Existing plans for Halle-West were then, however, almost completely thrown overboard, resulting in disagreements with Paulick's young and international team (Dralle 2013, 143).

The reference to the Bauhaus school and to the architect Paulick was particularly emphasised in the context of the valuation of Neustadt's centre. For example, the urban development concept from 2017 referred to the district centre as 'part of the "Paulick core"' (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2017, 297). The figure of Paulick was also highlighted in the context of an exhibition on his life and work that was shown in the foyer of Scheibe A in winter 2021/22; a street in Halle-Neustadt commemorates his work in Halle; and there is a page dedicated to him on the website of the city of Halle (Saale). A rediscovery of the origins of the Hochhausscheiben can be observed with new attention being paid to Bauhaus architecture today. Within this context, Halle-Neustadt is valued as a 'modern city'. The managing director of the Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment of the State of Saxony-Anhalt – publisher of the brochure 'The Future of Modernity' (2014) with the Hochhausscheiben on its cover – wrote that after out-migration and deconstruction, the 'pendulum has now swung in the opposite direction'. 'Today', they continued, 'many clubs and initiatives have sprung up to improve the image and identity of the largest area of the city of Halle (Saale) for in spite of being the sinking star, Halle-Neustadt embodies all the significant and positive elements of a modern city' (Kompetenzzentrum Stadtumbau in der SALEG 2014a, 2).

The city's website also states that Paulick promoted industrial housing construction and used the experience gained on a research trip to Sweden (1964) for this purpose (Stadt Halle (Saale), Halle (Saale) – Händelstadt: Berühmte Hallenser, n.d.). In fact, architects and engineers from Halle also travelled to Sweden in 1971, were inspired and bought the licences for the all-concrete construction method developed by the company Skånska Cementgjuteriet. This explains why similar ensembles can be found in Stockholm and Gothenburg.[25] Swedish architects and engineers, in turn, came to Halle and, together with local experts, built the first Scheibe E. In addition, parts of the panels that clad the façade were imported from Sweden. This cooperation testifies to an internationalisation of urban planning in the GDR in the 1970s – an important fact and an argument for those who would like to see the Hochhausscheiben listed as monuments, attributing them with historical value (Pasternack 2014a, 238). The Betonkombinat Halle then further developed the so-called 'Schotten' mixed construction method, in which the load-bearing walls and ceilings are cast on site and the façade elements

25 The staff of the Geschichtswerkstatt and citizens fighting for the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben like to draw comparisons with the buildings in Stockholm, which are in use. Municipal staff also mention the Swedish buildings, which are recognised as important architectural landmarks and, in Stockholm, are in the centre of the city (field notes, 23.07.2018; interview, 02.10.2018; field notes, 15.05.2019).

are merely curtained, introducing Halle's monolithic construction method. As Escherich (2017, 211) notes, '[n]umerous innovations were tested in Halle-Neustadt in the field of urban engineering, building construction and technology alone. Some of them began their triumph in the GDR here, such as the "monolith concrete construction method" of the Hochhausscheiben'.

During my internship at Halle's city administration in 2021, the planners discussed whether to refer to the construction of the Hochhausscheiben as 'Swedish construction method' or as 'HMB – Hallesche Monolithbauweise' (field notes, 15.04.2021). They ultimately agreed on the formulation 'monolithic construction method (HBM), a modification of the all-concrete construction method developed in Sweden', for a city brochure (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2021, 4). The buildings' origins and construction were regularly highlighted when they were performed as valuable. Uniqueness played a key role in this performance – whether through highlighting international collaboration or local specificity.

Highlighting the origins and structural specificity can be understood as part of a 'production of the valuable' (Schäfer 2016, 354). With Munn (2013, 142), valuations 'give time a specific form – in general, making absences and new pasts, as they make new forms of the present and, consequently, alter future potentials'. As Göbel (2020, 2) notes for ruins, '[t]heir cultural past is their key aesthetic feature, which generates logics of its own cultural and economic value making. This [valuation] acts according to aesthetics of urban ruins, which are specifically designed and fabricated, and not *naturally* given as it is often assumed' (original emphasis). Valuation goes hand in hand with a commodification that operates primarily in the attention economy, where certain aspects are highlighted while others are not. The emphasis on the past is part of the production of significance and the process of revaluation of buildings that (once more) become valuable and expose a potential (Göbel 2020, 3). Macmillen and Pinch (2018, 293) note that 'communicating buildings' historic significance could be a prudent strategy for adaptive reuse. Once translated into the real estate lexicon of "character," "uniqueness," and "original features," significance could make resale more plausible.' In the case of the Hochhausscheiben, their valuation within the city administration was in fact firmly embedded in the city's efforts to market the buildings and promote their revitalisation and use through private investment.

One way to stabilise their valuation as architecturally and historically significant buildings would be to grant the Hochhausscheiben ensemble the status of a monument that deserved protection. This was indeed discussed again and again over the decades (Escherich 2017; Pasternack 2014a). As early as in the beginning of the 2000s, architects Graul et al. (2002), in their concept for the revitalisation of Neustadt's centre, suggested an 'ensemble protection' for the Scheiben. They saw Halle-Neustadt as an urban planning example of European standing. Following this concept, the city's design advisory board, consulting the city administration on architectural valuation issues, stated: 'The presented new perspective on the urban significance of the 1970s architecture, in particular the sculptural significance of the ensemble of Hochhausscheiben, is to be emphasised' (report, 18.03.2002). However, although the significance of the architectural form of the Hochhausscheiben has been recognised over the years (e.g. at a conference on the 'Ostmoderne' (East modern architecture) held in Weimar in 2014, Escherich 2017, 213–214), protection through the instruments of listing the buildings was rejected by urban planning. There were concerns within the planning department that transforming and renovating the buildings would prove more difficult than without heritage protection (according to Escherich (2017, 214), albeit such concerns were based on an outdated concept of monuments). Architects – such as members of raumlaborberlin – emphasised the necessity of finding a contemporary remodelling and warned already in the early 2000s that 'Halle-Neustadt (must) not become a museum' (Foerster-Baldenius 2014b, n.p.).

In 2015, the city planning department, in cooperation with the Saxony-Anhalt State Office for the Preservation of Monuments and Archaeology, commissioned a so-called 'value plan'. It was meant as starting point for discussions about how to preserve what is valued while still allowing the buildings and urban structure to evolve. A subsequent report by an urban planning firm noted that so-called 'over-building', including, for example the construction of additional storeys and extensions, had harmed the area's spatial quality, and called for stricter approval practices to preserve its architectural quality as an asset for future development (Plan und Praxis 2017, 54). On the one hand, potential was seen in their authenticity; on the other hand, planning documents emphasised that changes should be allowed in order not to obstruct the way of redevelopment. Urban planners were required to consider their own valuation in relation to other (e)valuation processes, such as those of heritage conservation, but also of architects, citizens and politicians. For the planners, the perspective of monument protection was one of several valuations that they considered in relation to the objective of redeveloping the area. The revaluation of the buildings' origins was central in processes of making the future in planning.

Valuating Urban Significance

Because the buildings are also valued for their role in shaping Neustadt's urban landscape, their theoretical absence is often understood as a loss of something integral to the cityscape. A letter from the alderman of the city of Halle to the state of Saxony-Anhalt from 1999 stated:

> Even if, for economic reasons and due to lack of demand, this hall of residence cannot be kept in the long term

> – the indications were known to me as well – I have repeatedly tried to make it clear that the preservation and redevelopment of these *striking* Hochhausscheiben is *absolutely necessary* for the district centre. The buildings decisively shape this centre and are prominent landmarks of the city skyline that we cannot dispense without further ado. (letter, 14.09.1999; emphasis added)

The city of Halle advocated for the preservation and redevelopment of the buildings, viewing them as indispensable to the centre of Neustadt due to their role as vertical accents in the cityscape. This position is reflected in several planning concepts for Neustadt, including one from 2001, which explicitly identifies the Hochhausscheiben as 'large structures to be preserved' (Neuordnungskonzept für den Stadtteil Halle-Neustadt 2001, map 7 of 10).

This was once again confirmed by a study in 2009, when the architectural office KARO from Leipzig was commissioned to visualise different deconstruction variants to assess the significance of the buildings for the centre. The question the visualisation aimed to answer was: 'What happens if a development occurs at one or more Scheiben that leads to demolition?' (KARO architects 2009). They visualised four scenarios: the demolition of Scheibe C, the demolition of all Scheiben apart from the renovated Scheibe D, the demolition of three Scheiben, and the demolition of Scheibe E. The study found, however, that the buildings' significance also rested in the ensemble. According to the architects, the buildings were important as volumes with 'urban symbolic power', and their legibility as an ensemble of the centre would be lost if one or more buildings were demolished (KARO architects 2009). 'The credo', as one of the planners from Halle said in reference to the study, 'was that these five things are really important for Neustadt'. According to this planner, all considerations of taking them away had shown that the centre of Neustadt would be lost (interview, 02.10.2018).

In fact, plans for Halle-Neustadt repeatedly concluded that demolishing (some of) the buildings was not to be advocated, as the centre were no longer recognisable and thus its function as a centre endangered. While their 'emptiness' was seen as particularly problematic because of their size and central location, the buildings themselves are ascribed importance here. In fact, the distinction between the evaluation of 'emptiness' and the 'valuation of significance' is difficult to make (cf. Chiapello 2015, 16–17) as they are closely interrelated, mutually supporting and countering one another.

Negotiating Value and Worthiness

The International Building Exhibition 2010, entitled 'Less is Future' (BBSR n.d, '2002 – 2010 IBA Stadtumbau // Weniger ist Zukunft'), with its theme for Halle 'Balancing Act Double City – Communication and Process', served to shape the image of the five towers of the old town and the five high-rise towers as their counterparts in the new town, and it was believed to 'balance' between Halle and Halle-Neustadt (Escherich 2017, 213–214). The exhibition's main question at the time was: 'How do you deal with this urban heritage?' It 'showed that there were still no unanimous answers to this question'. Whereas the IBA's original intention was to comprehensively upgrade Neustadt to the point of equivalence with the old town, this objective was later abandoned. The city administration temporally withdrew from the IBA process in 2007, as it wasn't able to define its own position (Pasternack 2014c, 430).

At another site in Halle, two high-rise towers were ultimately demolished following long debates during the IBA. These high-rise buildings are repeatedly cited by some of the planners as a reference and comparable process. In relation to these buildings, the city posed a decidedly different question: 'what are the high-rise buildings worth to us?' 'A great deal', was the verdict at the time, 'but their economic non-viability was paramount' (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2009). One planner recalled that during the discussions held in the context of the IBA, the renovation of the high-rises in the centre of Halle had ultimately failed due to a relatively small sum – around 1 million euros – that the city had decided not to provide (interview, 25.10.2018). Another reason why those towers were demolished rather than the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt is that the city was hoping for the possibility of replacement buildings in the central location.[26] The prerequisite for the agreement to demolish two other towers was in fact the prospect of new constructions (Stadt Halle (Saale), 2009). Demolition often becomes an option when there are prospects for replacement (previously, I demonstrated how the absent prospect for a replacement of the Hochhausscheiben contributed to the fact that they remained in place). In this case, it is not so much the buildings as the site that is significant. Bartmanksi and Fuller (2018, 203) confirm this for the centre of Berlin where the GDR-built Palace of the Republic was demolished, but the site was '[b]y no means [...] to be abandoned. Another building was planned to fill the void, a replica of the Prussian palace, which by now has been completed in all its controversy.

Even though the city of Halle moved into Scheibe A and was willing to invest around 3.5 million euros per building for their renovation, according to one planner (interview, 25.10.2018), the significance of the buildings remains contested, as the discussions within the planning department recorded above show. A similar dynamic has been observed for 'ambiguous remains of Second World War and Cold War military infrastructure' in the UK which were 'not allowed to be demolished but not considered valuable enough to merit expenditure on stabilization' (DeSilvey & Edensor 2013, 473). Indeed, the Hochhausscheiben were found valuable but not valuable *enough,* which contributed to the fact that the buildings remained in place and left them in a prolonged standby mode.

26 This hope has gained new momentum since 2023 with the planned construction of a new national institution in this place – the so-called 'Future Centre for German Unity and European Transformation'. It is expected that this will help the restructuring of the entire area.

Stability and Change

In 2017, preparatory studies for defining a redevelopment area in the Neustadt district centre described the 'historical value and uniqueness of the ensemble as an important starting point for identification of the district's residents and attraction for visitors' (Plan und Praxis 2017, 49) and as one of the buildings' main strengths. The city, taking this identification of and with the buildings as a clue, performed the buildings as potential.[27] The planning department often referred to this aspect. In 2015, it emphasised that demolishing the Hochhausscheiben would mean the 'loss of a landmark and an architectural-historical value'. Among different possible futures considered, demolition was described as likely to face the 'most resistance among the population and the greatest organisational effort on the part of the city of Halle (Saale)'. A presentation by the city planners noted drily: '[d]efinitely no acceptance and tolerance among Neustadt's first residents' (city administration, 31.03.2015).

Several planners linked the valuation of the Hochhausscheiben to the emotional attachment of both the older generation of Neustadt residents and long-serving city planners. They described how individuals within the city administration had developed what they referred to as a 'dogma' (or 'credo'), and were sticking to it. Having long been convinced of the high-rise ensemble's architectural quality, no one was willing to think beyond this view or explore alternative ways of reinterpreting it (field notes, 20.04.2021; 27.05.2021). Macmillen and Pinch similarly observed an ambivalent relationship between significance and permanence of buildings in their study of school buildings. The planners they interviewed – given the task to evaluate the buildings – showed a sense of responsibility towards the stock they were taking care of. As the authors (2018, 297–298) note, this sensitivity was 'inseparable from judgments of aesthetic value'. Resonating with Hommels (2005, 338), this shows that shared values and persistent traditions contribute to obduracy.

Beyond the affective ties between some planners and the Hochhausscheiben and the shared values among a generation of planners, the buildings have acquired value precisely because they were preserved, because they stood by. This echoes Holtorf and Ortman's observation, cited by DeSilvey (2017, 178), that 'archaeological sites are not being saved because they are valued, but rather they are valued because they are being saved'. While DeSilvey attributes this phenomenon to a dominant 'preservation paradigm' (Macmillen & Pinch 2018, 297) in the case of the Hochhausscheiben points to a different dynamic – one that includes the agency of the buildings themselves. Their valuation was shaped, in part, by the impossibility to demolish them. The buildings' valuation can partially be understood as being embedded both in attempts to fill 'emptiness' and in a number of constraints when it comes to the making (design and realisation) of possible futures. Drawing on Hommels (2005, 330–331), this kind of obduracy emerged from the interplay of local interactions, strategic adaptations by actors and 'the constraints posed by the sociotechnical frameworks within which they operate'. A key moment came around 2000, when it became clear that no funds would be available for demolishing one or more of the high-rises, and the city itself wasn't able to shoulder the costs. This financial impasse informed the 2001 overall concept for Neustadt, which prioritised the centre's strengthening and the preservation of the high-rises – a preferred future that has continued to shape administrative practice. Yet, valuations are not static, they're always contested and prone to controversy. Furthermore, valuations need to be actualised, they change over time. As Alexander and Sanchez (2018, 17) remind us, any object can lose or gain value at any time. In Halle's planning department, staff continue to debate the value of the Hochhausscheiben, and their future (e)valuation remains uncertain.

Valuation takes time. The 50th anniversary of Halle-Neustadt in 2014 brought renewed attention and appreciation to the district (Escherich 2017, 213). At this time, the municipality deliberately invited young planners to see how they would respond to Neustadt and its centre. There was hope that this younger generation would develop new perspectives and bring new dynamics into the debate that had come to be perceived as polarised (interview, 02.10.2018). An international workshop on Neustadt Centre was held in cooperation with the state's Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment in 2014 and in the same year, the planning department cooperated with a monument preservation seminar at Bauhaus University in Weimar (interview, 08.07.2020).[28]

While the buildings had already been performed as valuable in concepts and plans in the early 2000s, the dynamic changed in 2015 when the City Council decided to preserve them and was willing to co-finance re-

27 To be precise, not all residents shared this appreciation. While some are long term preservation advocates, among them architects and engineers, some of whom were involved in the creation of Neustadt, online comments indicate that many others were less invested in preservation and simply wanted action to be taken, regardless of the outcome. What they all had in common was that they perceived the 'empty' and decaying Hochhausscheiben as a problem. This was the result of a citizen survey on the design of the centre, where the majority named the towers as a priority and expressed their agreement for revitalisation (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2019, 5; 9).

28 In 2025, the centre of Neustadt was designated a heritage site, while Scheiben B and E, along with the department store in front of it, were designated architectural monuments by the State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology Saxony-Anhalt (Denkmalinformationssystem, n.d.). As the book is going into print, I wasn't able to take these latest developments nor their still unknown implications into account.

vitalisation. Once more I refer here to the 2015 resolution that I discussed in different places above, as it marks the council's revaluation of the Hochhausscheiben as a significant ensemble that resulted in the formal decision to preserve it (VI/2015/01130, 2015). This renewed act of valuation was closely linked to the study by internationally renowned office Lacaton & Vassal (2015) that explored possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben. Known for their principle of valuing and working with the existing built environment, Lacaton & Vassal's commissioning further underscored the turn towards preservation (Bauen+ 2021; Weißmüller 2014). The study found that the group of Hochhausscheiben was an 'ensemble of urban significance' and that redeveloping them would allow for the preservation of a 'landmark' of Halle (Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer 2015, 66).

Despite increasing efforts to perform the Hochhausscheiben as culturally and economically valuable – reflected in political decisions, subsidies and the city's use of Scheibe A since 2021 – their ongoing vacancy continues to hinder the realisation of this potential. The search for possible futures risks turning 'emptiness' into an obstacle. Already in 2009, KARO Architekten emphasised that the potential of the high-rises was linked to the condition that the buildings were used (KARO Architekten 2009). While the buildings were considered worthy of preservation and performed as potential, their 'emptiness' threatened to undermine their perceived worth – potentially even reopening discussions of demolition.

The redevelopment statutes of 2017 established mixed-use as a condition for revitalisation. They stipulated that the lower six to seven floors should be allocated to commercial use – 'shops, businesses and services [...] to revitalise the passage and make it more attractive'. Upper floors could serve residential use – depending on the demand (VI/2017/02763, 2017; excerpts from 'Sanierungssatzung Nr. 3'). Despite this decision, debates about what constituted a 'reasonable use' of the Hochhausscheiben persisted.

For planners, the Hochhausscheiben presented both a pressing problem and a promising potential: their 'emptiness' rendered them problematic, whereas their significant architectural form rendered them valuable. These conflicting performances of the buildings as both problem and value within (e)valuation processes coexist in their ongoing standby mode, affording in-betweenness its own powerful form (cf. Douglas 2002). This form challenged those engaging with it, as it was able to 'haunt the planners' vision of what the city should be' (Edensor 2005a, 62) – and what it could be.

While the buildings on standby were performed as both problem and value, a closer look at evaluations and valuations shows that they were enacted as problematic but not problematic enough and as valuable but not valuable enough (cf. DeSilvey & Edensor 2013). Non-directional sociomaterial negotiations of worthiness (Macdonald 2009) formed the coordinates of standby mode and contributed to the persistence of the in-between of material form and meaning.

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Halle-Neustadt 2023


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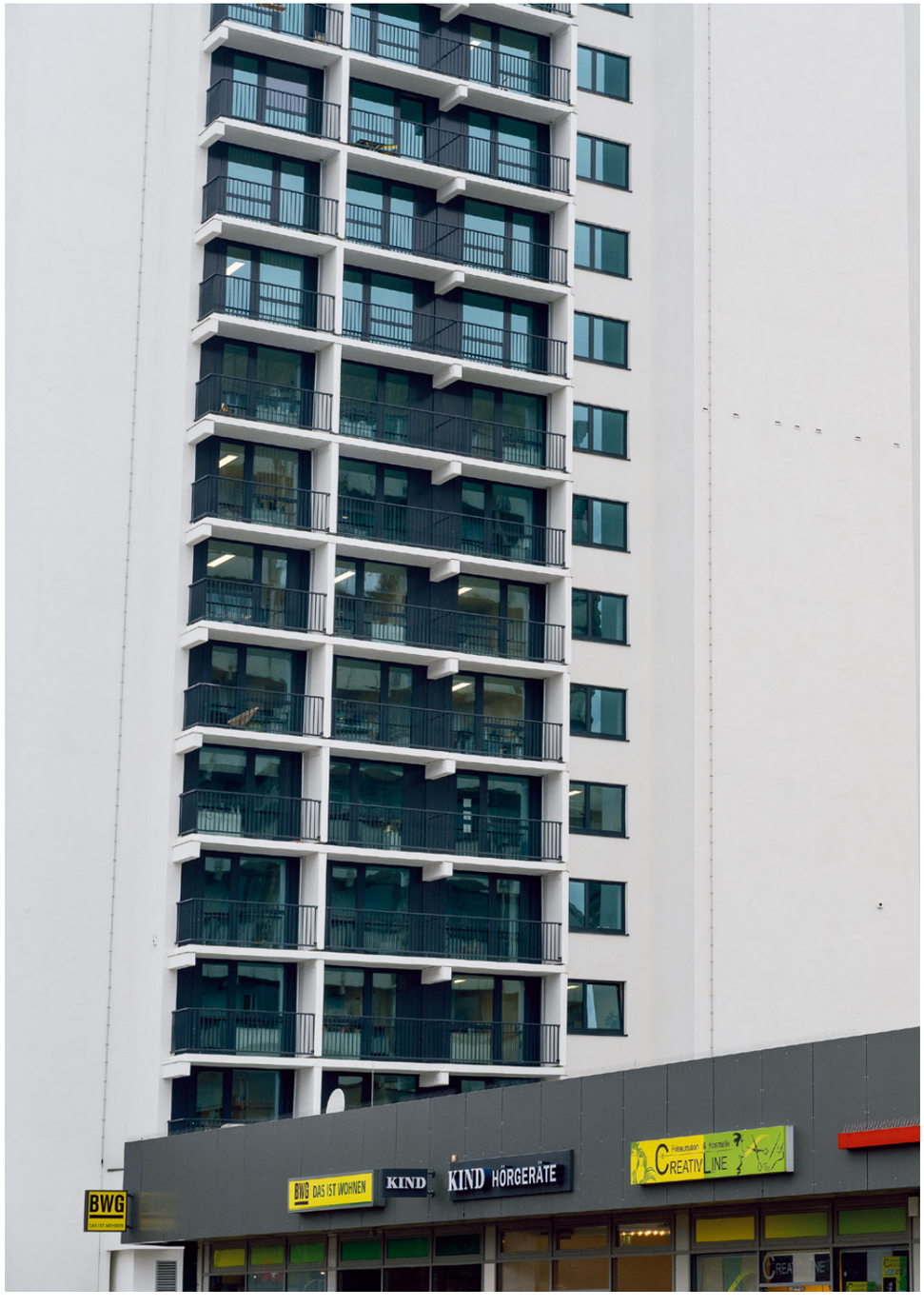
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Part III
Political Matters

Detachment

Buildings on standby exist through networks (cf. Jacobs 2006; Jenkins 2002) and form these networks as their materiality challenges actors and binds them. Following Jenkins (2002, 230), they can be understood as 'a network node', existing in interaction and shifting with changing relations. If the networks are stable, the buildings themselves are stabilised. In the opposite case – when networks disintegrate or buildings are 'dropped from stabilizing networks' (Edensor 2005b, 313) – buildings decay into ruins.

This part examines how actors are related and relate to each other (cf. Hommels 2005, 334), addressing the quality of these relations and the actual practices of making them. The formation and quality of relations is an aspect that often remains underexposed in recent conceptions of infrastructures and buildings, even though these emphasise relations (Kemmer 2020, 17). This gap becomes particularly evident in cases when buildings remain in an 'intermediate stage' (de Laet and Mol 2000, as cited in Wiedemann 2021, 44), carrying the potentiality for an 'on' or 'off'. ANT provides a useful lens for analysing such cases. It directs attention to how arrangements come to be (Müller 2015b, 68) and to 'the dynamic processes by which networks of relationships become formed, shift and have (or fail to have) effect' (Rydin & Tate 2016, 9). Tracing these relations reveals how urban in-between spaces are produced and sustained (cf. O'Callaghan et al. 2018; Beveridge et al. 2022).

The Hochhausscheiben are embedded in *loose* networks. In a mode of standby, loose relations between property rights, market forces and state planning (Beveridge et al. 2022, 285, see also Part II) shape the ways in which possible futures are un/made and give rise to gaps 'between what is designed and what is built' (Abram & Weszkalnys 2013, 22). Following Kemmer et al. (2021, 14), looseness can be seen as an '*ordering principle* in standby' (original emphasis). It describes a condition in which relations are neither solid nor completely disrupted, and instead are characterised by partial engagement and provisional linkage. Kemmer et al. (2021, 6) note that

> standby can be understood as an infrastructural state of planned detachment. During standby, the withdrawal, reduction, or impassibility of some components – that is, workers, energy flows, or techno-material elements – points to modes of (partial) disconnectivity without necessarily implying dysfunctionality.

The Hochhausscheiben remain in an in-between: possible futures are designed, but their materialisation is not achieved. The 'conditions of (im)possibility' for realising such futures are largely shaped by the relational networks within which the buildings are embedded – and these, in turn, shift as actors come together or drift apart. While possible futures may outlast networks and

could survive in the 'heaven of ideas' (Latour 1996, 68; see Part I), their realisation demands the alignment of both human and non-human actors. As ANT emphasises, action can only happen and actors only become 'capable of action' if they succeed in forming alliances (Müller 2015a, 31). In a mode of standby, alignment is not only difficult, it is also selectively pursued. Urban planning does not strive to stabilise all relations; rather, it cultivates some connections while allowing others to remain loose. Following Kühn (2021, 129), standby involves 'the work and techniques of loosening and tightening, of unweaving and weaving'. Indeed, standby challenges assumptions of relational and network thinking. As important as the network perspective is for understanding standby, such an approach is also challenged by the looseness of relations and detachment (Candea et al. 2015). Actors do not always strive for the strengthening of relations; in fact, it is often 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) that give standby a certain stability as an in-between – as an enduring in-betweenness rather than a resolved state.

Slow Drift, Failing Alignment

Ownership of Scheibe E changed several times in the early 2000s. From 1999/2000 onwards, the building was administered by a mortgage bank in Berlin as the owner entered bankruptcy proceedings. It was put up for auction, but no buyer could be found, which actually did not surprise anyone at Halle's city administration, as they saw little hope for the buildings at the time (notes, 08.03.2000). The building was then sold off at a new auction in 2001. The company that had bought the building in 2001 filed for insolvency in 2002, and when the city contacted the new owner, who had bought the building at the forced auction, they only answered via phone that they had no time at the moment and in August there were company holidays in Bavaria. A planner cynically commented the telephone transcript: 'how nice!' (22.07.2003). They never reached the investors again.

In 2005, a spiritual community named after an Indian guru proposed to acquire the Hochhausscheiben at no cost in order to establish a private university there. After a conversation with the so-called Maharishi World Peace Foundation and subsequent research, one planner wrote to her colleague: 'Our research on the internet revealed that the peace palaces presented are rather 'Luftschlösser' (literally translated 'castles in the air')' (internal email, 20.06.2005). Even if this is probably one of the most bizarre examples, the intentions of potential investors and owners at the time to actually develop the buildings were reasonably doubted.

An illustrative example is an incident from 2008 concerning the sale of Scheibe E. A newspaper article at the time reported that building E had a new owner, although the situation appeared ambiguous. It was noted that the property still seemed to be for sale or possibly in the hands of an estate agent, as a large banner 'for sale' had been advertising it for several weeks. However, according to the managing developer cited in the newspaper article, this was not necessarily the case. They explained that the company had acquired the property because they considered the location to have development potential. While the prominent sales banner remained in place, the company did not wish to rule out future offers. They added that, following professional securing measures, various use concepts were now being explored without any time pressure (MZ, 17.02.2008). The same banner would continue to hang there until 2023 – despite multiple changes in ownership – faded and decaying, with a defunct telephone number and no evident efforts by any owner to remove it or pursue sincere redevelopment plans.

Online research by city planners on the owning companies ended without results and due to widely ramified and intransparent corporate structures, letters were returned as undeliverable due to wrong addresses. An email from 2013, for example, stated that the city has been unsuccessfully trying for years to send notices to the owner of Scheibe A and all letters were returned as undeliverable (email, 13.11.2013). This shows that relationships between the buildings and the city drifted further and further apart, but so did those between the city and the owners and between the buildings and the(ir) future.

From an urban planning point of view, the 'property and ownership situation' of the Hochhausscheiben turned out to be 'extremely complicated in several respects' (letter, 10.08.2011). Numerous letters and minutes mention this as one of the main reasons for the uncertain future of the buildings and one of the main obstacles to development. As early as 2000, the city found:

> Unfortunately, it is impossible to say at the moment where the development will go with these buildings, especially since they have different owners. Both redevelopment and a removal of floors require an expenditure that's only affordable if there is a demand for use by suitable tenants. (letter, 09.08.2000)

If the planners' concern in 2000 was that it would be difficult to persuade different owners to come to an agreement, by 2010 the city had partially lost track of the owners. In a letter to the alderman from 2011, the planning department explained that, of the five high-rises' owners, only Scheibe E's owner was reachable. The owner of Scheibe B had become insolvent, and efforts to sell the building through a compulsory auction were ongoing but unsuccessful, prompting a restart of the process. Scheibe A, they noted, belonged to a company that had since dissolved and apparently returned to privateownership. The owners of Scheiben A and B were believed to reside

outside of Germany, making communication difficult (letter, 10.08.2011). In 2015, the city stated: 'speculation, resales, mortgages and foreclosures have resulted in owners who were unable or unwilling to act in the case of three high-rise buildings' (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 3). Relations between the city, the buildings, the owners and the future have been stretched. The emerging formation – standby – can be understood as one permeated by loose relations.

Whether or not a future can be found and eventually find its materialisation, will depend on the alignment of actors. Generally, as the planners from Halle explained to me, 'this is [...] how urban planning works, many people come together and try to realise the city' (group discussion, 14.05.2019). Contrary to this, I found that actors involved, including the city of Halle, attempted to create alignment and detachment simultaneously.

In a letter from 2009, the city's planning department responded to a citizen who had suggested to demolish several Hochhausscheiben that such a measure would require not only public funding through urban redevelopment programmes approved by the state of Saxony-Anhalt but also the consent of the private owners (letter, 10.12.2009). In this way, while the city planners found the citizen's proposal worthy of consideration and invited the citizen to discuss the idea at a joint meeting, they also pointed to the complexity of such an undertaking, as it would require a coming together of elements such as state funding, the city, the state, and the owners.

The role that planners assigned themselves was that of a mediator who steers 'things in the right direction'. Urban development, as today's alderman for city development put it in an interview, is

> an incredibly tough and exhausting process and I still enjoy it because you have to hold dozens of individual discussions and convince many people to participate in order to steer things in the right direction – because each of them has their own idea, but I always see my task in this way, I have to close the big brackets around it.
> (interview, 28.05.2021)

Their reflection underscores an understanding of contemporary planning less as a matter of directive control – as it was in a centralised system like the GDR – and more as a process of negotiation, persuasion and mediation (interview, 28.05.2021).

Standby can be understood as a situation in which alignment is sought but does not come about. Crucial steps towards alignment – understood as a prerequisite for joint action – were either absent or failed. In terms of ANT, alignment requires 'the formation of a common interest and single will through the translation of initially disparate entities that stabilises an actor-network' (Müller 2015a, 33). Translation, according to Callon (1984, 196), in a first step identifies a problem and relates actors to it, who are then to be brought to participate through 'interessement', 'enrolment' and finally by 'mobilisation'. Through enrolment, new actors enter the network, while mobilisation can stabilise a 'common cause of the network' (Rydin & Tate 2016, 7) so that each actor may represent the network as a whole (Callon 1984, 196). Less frequently – although Callon also mentions this possibility – the focus is on failed attempts at relating. This is precisely what happens in standby: failed attempts at relating, coupled with efforts to keep relations loose. In Halle-Neustadt, this was evident in moments when joint efforts failed and commitments had no permanence.

Two examples from the early 2000s show how difficult it was to get actors to align in collective efforts for a revitalisation of the centre of Neustadt and the Hochhausscheiben (the alderman called it an 'exhausting process'). Back then, the city was trying to get the owners of the Hochhausscheiben and businesses at the foot of the towers to cooperate in the revitalisation of the centre. In particular, the city saw the state of Saxony-Anhalt, owner of Scheibe C, as responsible to work on a future for the Hochhausscheiben.

On 20 December 2001, the head of the planning unit invited representatives of the regional state, among them a representative from the Ministry of Finance of Saxony-Anhalt, to a consultation scheduled for 23 January 2002 in Halle's city hall. The programme for the meeting included a presentation of ideas for the development of the centre of Neustadt by the city and architects commissioned by the city (letter, 20.12.2001). This caused discontent on the part of the representative of the Ministry of Finance, who wrote to the city's alderman one week later to say they regretted not being involved in choosing the architects working on the redevelopment plans (letter, 27.12.2001). Several emails were sent back and forth, until finally the minister agreed to attend the meeting.

From the planners' point of view, the consultation went very well. The representative of the Ministry indicated the possibility of state use, or so the planners believed after the meeting. Two days later, one of the planners informed the mayor of the city of Halle in an internal letter:

> I am pleased to inform you that we have justified hopes of initiating the revitalisation process of the Neustadt district centre [...] At the same time, a request was made to support the state of Saxony-Anhalt in that the property in Barabarastraße, which would then no longer be needed, would be put to a subsequent use.
> (internal letter, 25.01.2002)

The internal letter suggests that the planners interpreted the consultation as a step toward revitalising the Neustadt district centre, reflecting their hope that ongoing efforts would eventually enable the use of the Hochhausscheiben.

Escaping Fixity

Apparently it was too early to spread the word. On 31 January, the representative of the Ministry asked for the minutes to be 'corrected' (letter, 31.01.2002) regarding two details – with quite big consequences. Whereas the minutes originally stated they personally assured their support, the revised minutes now mentioned the support of the state of Saxony-Anhalt. They secondly demanded to change the entity responsible for finding a potential use for the property in Barbarastraße. Had the original minutes placed responsibility on the city to find a potential use (or support the state in doing so), the new version saw this responsibility with the state that must be given a 'free hand' for the subsequent use of the property in Barbarastraße that would lie vacant if Scheibe C were to be used. Even though the Ministry asked for the city's support in thinking about potentialities, they underlined that the ultimate authority over the property's fate rested with the state. They were in this regard marking the 'property line', that is, pointing to the (legal) boundaries of decision-making authority, confining it to the property owner's discretion (Bennett & Layard 2015, 411). Whether the city tried to put a commitment into the minister's mouth cannot be discerned. Clearly, however, the state, as owner of Scheibe C, rejected the city's interference in its decision-making on the future of its property and responded with a deliberate act of detachment. The city tried to tie the state to the issue of Scheibe C's subsequent use, urging the state to assume responsibility and prioritise the building for accommodating governmental institutions. The state, however, escaped fixity and detached itself.

As the city attempted to extend its influence and strengthen its ties to both the state and the building, the state reacted by withdrawing – mirroring the dynamics of detachment that Callon (1984, 212) describes in his study of scallops: an extreme sensitivity to all attempts at manipulation and a reaction by detachment. His observation helps to understand that the state of Saxony-Anhalt refused working with the city in the search for a possible future for Scheibe C, as the city sought to increase its influence and strengthen relations. Commitments, if not avoided altogether, have no permanence in standby; on the contrary, they can become detached from any obligation, just like the actors who had articulated them in the first place. An actor who shows commitment in a web of loose relations forfeits some of their autonomy because strengthening one relation inevitably impacts all others.

How elements escape fixity also becomes clear from the following example: The day they changed the minutes, the city underlined the importance of cooperation between all actors in a statement to the press (press release, 31.01.2002). The press release announced the city's intention to stimulate investment by designating the area for redevelopment. At the same time, it aimed to involve property owners through an 'urban development contract', binding them to a joint effort to revitalise the centre (press release, 31.01.2002). According to the city administration's plan, owners in the centre would 'commit themselves to a symbolic cost contribution of 1,000 euros' for the commissioning of a concept by signing a joint agreement. The agreement between the city and the owners (first version of November 2001) formulated a 'commitment to cooperation' in the revitalisation of the centre with 'an appropriate cost-sharing by the owners concerned, which is still to be specified in detail'. The costs and benefits of public space renovations were to be shared among all involved. While the owners were expected to participate in the planning, as they equally would in any profits, they would be supported in return with their projects by public funds. The agreement said: 'Owners should pledge support to shoulder expected high unprofitable costs; these should be distributed as appropriately as possible' (agreement, version as of 18.06.2002). During a meeting over the agreement, the owners criticised the city for not contributing itself, feared interference with their private property and complained that banks would not attribute grants for projects in Neustadt, including the city's own bank. The city planners replied that the city itself was equally involved in the planning and that the agreement was necessary in order to acquire state subsidies for the revitalisation. According to the city, the banks should be included in the dialogue in order to encourage their support for investment in the centre of Neustadt (minutes, 18.06.2002). In the end, only four owners out of thirteen signed the agreement. The plan for concerted action and a sharing of responsibility failed – to the frustration of the city that expressed its disappointment: '[t]his is a very questionable result', wrote a senior city planer:

> I continue to adhere to the goal of bringing together all conceivable efforts of property owners and the public sector for the district centre of Halle-Neustadt and continue to offer leading the discussion together with the planners commissioned by ourselves, in order to ultimately get a feasible planning concept off the ground. (letter, 19.06.2002)

The owners refused cooperation as they feared the city could interfere with their property and impose its 'rules for cooperation' by means of the signed agreement. Where the city wanted to create planning security and strengthen relations through a declaration of commitment, the owners wanted to maintain flexibility and looseness. At the same time, they blamed the city itself for not sufficiently engaging, as well as banks that refused to finance projects in the centre of Neustadt. In fact, the city's financial resources were very limited due to population losses, declining local revenues and rising social needs, which in part helps explain its only partial engagement. Bernt (2009, 755) aptly captures the dilemma: '[w]ith a declining number of residents and less business to tax, local government revenues are under stress, and the ability of local government to cope with the difficulties is seriously impaired.'

Here, too, alignment did not come about, as actors escaped fixity. According to planners from Halle, it was particularly difficult in Neustadt centre to form networks that would enable joint action. In contrast to the old town of Halle, for example, there were only a few large building complexes here and respectively few owners. As soon as any of them detached themselves, nothing moved forward. Moreover, some of the owners were connected in other networks in which the city did not participate, which complicated its role as a mediator further (field notes, 20.04.2021). These were very delicate negotiations and conversations that they, as a city, had to have, they explained (field notes, 24.06.2021).

The Absence of a Centre

Obviously, the city did not fulfil the mediator role in such a way that collective efforts could enable the materialisation of possible futures. As long as owners did not wish to participate, the city seemed unable to take on the self-assigned mediator role between buildings, owners and the future. Subsequently, the city itself financed concepts for the revitalisation of the centre and hoped to attract investment from private investors by pointing out possibilities. Furthermore, it continued to work on the development of the centre of Neustadt where action was possible.

The fact that the city is unable to fulfil its mediating role has essentially existed since the end of socialism. At that time, the power of command shifted away from cities, giving way to complex and unstable governance structures shaped by interdependencies within urban development networks (cf. Bernt & Haus 2010, 19–20). New forms of organisation had yet to be found or were highly unstable (Bernt & Haus 2010, 19; Haller & Altrock 2010, 160). In fact, Bernt and Haus's (2010) analysis of urban governance in East Germany in the early 2000s identified the absence of a 'steering centre'. The loss of tax revenue that accompanied deindustrialisation and depopulation severely limited the capacity of municipalities and local housing companies to take an 'independent approach to the problem' (Seelig 2007, 21).

Bernt (2009) argues that cities risked entering a vicious cycle of decline: unemployment and depopulation reduced income for maintaining infrastructures, which in turn worsened living conditions and drove further out-migration. In response to the city's serious impairment (Bernt 2009), the state has 'increasingly been given a "guaranteeing" or "activating" role' (Bernt & Haus 2010, 14) – a shift often driven by 'cooperative optimism, which sees the role of the state primarily as a facilitator, bringing together the different interests and thus ensuring win-win solutions for all parties involved' (Bernt & Haus 2010, 23).[29] They (2010, 20) argue that the absence of a steering centre needs to be understood against the background of financial constraints but also of today's dominant principles of privatisation and market orientation, pluralism and cooperative political styles. These structural conditions contributed to the gaps I observed, that is, the missing links between actors and the disconnections between vision and reality. The city sought to bridge these gaps through cooperative optimism, yet its limited authority often reproduced the looseness it aimed to overcome.

The present configuration can be described with Guggenheim (2009a, 171) as one 'which contains many actants that neither belong to a specific network nor link to another network'. Guggenheim uses a case study of a building transformation in Zurich where the court ruled that conversion 'would require a new network to be put in place, consisting of cooperative owners, a lot of money and an "integrated concept"' that would allow the industrial building to be turned into housing. The case resonates with what I call standby mode, as the building likewise remained in an in-between state where the (re-)formation of a stable network was not achieved. We're left with a situation of mismatching elements that cannot be put together to form a new whole.

Similarly, the planners from Halle described the non-alignment of actors using the metaphor of a puzzle. Reflecting on this in 2019, they described how, over the years, the pieces never seemed to fit together. However, in that moment, they felt that

> suddenly, like in a puzzle, everything fits and then
> it's like the project can be successful and that's when you
> really need all these preliminary stages because
> only then you can see that the pieces of the puzzle fit;
> and then there are also projects where this moment
> simply doesn't arrive because one element is missing.
> (group discussion, 14.05.2019)

For years, the Hochhausscheiben represented just such an incomplete puzzle for the planners. Yet, the puzzle metaphor is in my view too rigid to capture shifting relations and practices of 'doing relations', such as looking for perceived missing pieces (e.g. profitability), thereby reinforcing and enclosing the gap rather than bridging it. Instead, I see looseness 'like a Foucauldian mini-discourse', which 'runs through, shaping, and being carried in the materially heterogeneous processes which make up the organisation' (Law 2003, 1–2) of standby. As Law (2003, 1) argues, all 'organisation is a materially heterogeneous process of arranging and ordering'. From this perspective, 'that process

29 Studies show that the realisation of demolitions in East Germany was far from easy due to poor cooperation. Although both housing companies and municipalities shared this goal, collective action was hindered by a 'free rider dilemma' (Bernt 2009, 761), with companies waiting for others to demolish first. Haller and Liebmann (2002, 34, 38) noted, one year after the inception of urban redevelopment policies in 2001, that demolitions required high levels of cooperation and coordination, which proved complicated in practice and led to numerous conflicts. According to Bernt (2009, 762), it is in this way that 'a general blocking of any action occurs'. Bernt et al. (2017, 567) argue that this situation is to be understood as 'a state of limbo in which public planning remains theoretically in place, but its implementation is impossible'.

may be understood as strategy: not, to be sure, necessarily (or indeed often) an explicit strategy but rather as implicit strategy' (Law 2003, 1). Rather than only involving practices of 'doing relation', standby also includes the loosening of relations, leaving some actors detached from collective efforts and slowing down the materialisation of possible futures.

Dealing with Complexity

Looseness in standby 'results when things do not quite "add up"' and this resonates with how Law and Mol (2002) describe complexity (cited in Knox et al. 2008, 871). Adding this perspective, I suggest that keeping relations loose in the high-rises' networks was a 'way of dealing with complexity' (Kühn 2021, 129). Loose relations between the city and buildings allowed the city to keep responsibility away from itself, which appeared as a necessity to the city as it would not be able to 'step in' (Bernt et al. 2017, 566). Due to its financial difficulties, the city of Halle would not be able to acquire the buildings itself or pay for their demolition or revitalisation. Neither would it be able to oblige owners to demolish or renovate the buildings, because it is bound by law to shoulder part of the cost, should the owner be able to prove the unprofitability of demolition or renovation.[30]

Although urban planners considered the ownership situation as complicated and harmful for development, the city welcomed any expression of interest, given the lack of prospects for the buildings on standby. Since buildings A, B and E had been offered again and again at auctions without success, the city administration was happy when there was a buyer. In 2015, for example, they presented the sale of Scheibe B to an investor as a solution, although the investor was hesitant when asked about their plans for the building by a local newspaper. The article reports:

> When the auction hammer fell, the city of Halle had one problem less. The auction of the Neustadt Hochhausscheibe B plays into the cards of Halle's city administration. After all, a coherent concept is still being sought for the dilapidated high-rise giants, which were previously considered unsellable. Now the future of one of the four decaying blocks is in the hands of the new investor [...] for 300,100 euros. [...] The investor was cautious about the future use of the 18-storey building. (MZ, 07.03.2015)

Before the auction date, hopes for bids were very low. A newspaper article from 5 February reported that the building was to be auctioned off for one euro. Its poor structural condition made it economically unviable, with land valued at 267,900 and demolition costs at 1,065,982 euros. In addition, previous auction attempts had failed, as there were either no bids or bids too low for a creditor as in 2009. Another auction in 2010 was withdrawn (MZ, 05.02.2015). In fact, not only the city but also initiatives like the citizens' association Stadtgestaltung hoped the investor would renovate the building and put it to use. Even though hesitant about a future use, the city was pinning its hopes on the owner: better one buyer than no buyer at all, because the buildings had long been considered unsellable (MZ, 07.03.2015).

When asked about the future of the buildings, a planner wrote in 2013 that it seemed 'almost impossible at the moment' for them 'to find an investor on the open market who can cover the relatively high refurbishment costs with a profitable subsequent use and still achieve sufficient returns' (letter, December 2013). In 2013, the city had 'about two to three concrete discussions per year' with interested parties. These usually had 'housing, senior living or student housing in mind, but then they don't get back in touch after checking the actual investment costs and the needs in Halle', a planner reported in response to a request from the press (email, 13.11.2013). As the above cited newspaper article points out, the city had a problem if no buyer could be found, and it had one less if the building was sold, even as the future remained unclear. In fact, of course, the city only had one problem less if the owner took care of the building, and it only had one problem less for a short time if the owner did not.

Planners perceived the loose relations between the city and the buildings as problematic because they prevented development. At the same time, the city was welcoming any new investor and trying to support them. Had they found one, responsibility for the (non-)realisation of possible futures lay with the owners, while the city planners were able to engage in searches for possible futures without being obliged to fully engage. The city repeatedly emphasised that it was not the owner and 'can therefore only offer assistance and make suggestions where these are needed' (letter, December 2013).

This attitude changed around 2014 when the city saw an opportunity for alignment due to a shift in the real estate market. Interestingly, it also increased its own engagement and strengthened relations with the buildings in this time. Speculation in particular was now recognised as a problem, and the city aimed to tighten relations to prevent the Hochhausscheiben from turning into objects of speculation and instead steer productive investment.

30 Kemmer and Simone (2021, 11) also note that looseness can be a necessity, if in a completely different context. For residents in Rio and Jakarta, looseness can become a necessity as it might allow them to 'refigure themselves, to find new ways of operating under the radar, and thus to persist'. Despite the disparity of contexts, this also applies to Halle-Neustadt because it can thus uphold the image of the mediator and maintain its legitimacy. As Abram and Weszkalnys (2013, 12–13) point out, 'it has become increasingly imperative for municipalities to present themselves as though they were effective actors despite the threats to their autonomy and accountability' today.

For the planners, preventing speculation was a prerequisite for exploiting this momentum and directing investment in a way that would make a reactivation of the Hochhausscheiben more likely. As they wrote in a letter to the mayor,

> the speculation scenario can, as nationwide examples show, mean significantly higher costs for the city, since owners who are unwilling or unable to act can stand in the way of any overall development strategy and demand a high price for their willingness to cooperate
> (draft letter, October 2014).

The resolution text from 2015, which declared the preservation of the buildings to be the goal of the city of Halle, states:

> In order to promote private investment, to control urban and functional development, to preserve the Scheiben ensemble and to prevent uncontrolled speculation and mortgaging and other developments damaging the B-Centre [31] Neustadt, there is a need to install a suitable promotion and tax regime in the area of the Scheiben ensemble in the centre of Halle-Neustadt. Which urban development statute is most suitable for the Hochhausscheiben is based primarily on the urban development goals [...] that are to be achieved. (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 10)

In fact, it appears that shifts within all relations are triggered when a single element changes (cf. Hommels 2005, 334) – in this case, the prospect of private investment into the revitalisation of the Hochhausscheiben, which began to seem more realistic as potential profit became more likely. An article with the title 'New chances for the Scheiben' reports:

> A final solution for the four vacant Scheiben in Neustadt is getting closer. And the chances for new flats in the centre of Halle's district that the Lord Mayor [...] is aiming for are good. [...] The time for a solution for the Scheiben is better than ever. This is mainly due to the cheap money available and the low interest rates. 'Many investors are currently desperately looking for investment properties.'
> (MZ Saalekurier, 09.06.2015, quoting a representative of the Centre for Urban Redevelopment of the State of Saxony-Anhalt)

An article in a building journal from 2016 comments that the decision from 2015 to preserve the buildings was to be understood as 'channeling initial positive signals in the right direction' (Scheffler 2016). With the decision, the city had 'finally taken an active role in the development of Neustadt' (Scheffler 2016). Several authors have argued that looseness can give rise to new formations (Kemmer 2020; Stäheli 2018), and that the destabilising effects of certain elements may set things in motion, opening up new directions as new knowledge is acquired (Svabo 2009, 368).

This also became evident with further developments after 2015. According to a city representative, the city of Halle finally realised

> that the problem was not the building structure, but the ownership structure [...]. But you also have to say that there are holes worth millions, if you want to renovate them, you can't do it privately. You can't just go there as a single person and say, I want to acquire and redevelop them.
> (field notes, 12.05.2021)

According to the planners, the steps the city took after 2015 were only made possible by the interaction of various elements – first and foremost, economic development. In a media report on the Hochhausscheiben from 2014/2015, leading planners of the city administration and political actors from the city and the state are quoted saying that

> 'everything depends on economic development. If it is positive, the demand for housing in Halle will also increase, including in Neustadt'. What can the city do for Neustadt in terms of planning? 'Of course, we hope the funding agencies will give us intelligent tools for urban redevelopment. But of course, we are also investing in Neustadt.' (MZ, 16.05.2014)

In an interview, the same planner replied to the question of the planning agency's options regarding the Hochhausscheiben that 'one has a few'. They said: 'I am not a supporter of the thesis "we can't do anything, we have to wait and see what the market will bring"', but they refer to the time after 2015. They emphasised: 'Of course, you have to say that the situation in the years before [1990–2015] came about in an economic downturn, where you can't work magic. [...] [It has] certainly also helped us now that we have moved into positive waters as a city. And also as a region.' (interview, 08.07.2020)

Planners often pointed to unclear ownership and the lack of contact with owners as key reasons for the continued in-between state of the Hoch-

31 'B-Centre' denotes Neustadt's centre as second-tier centre, lower ranked than the A-centre (Halle's old town centre).

hausscheiben. Meanwhile, the city placed its hopes on private investment and avoided taking on more responsibility. Yet, Abram and Weszkalnys (2013, 17–19) observe that impossibilities of 'closing the brackets around' things, a task described by the alderman as both exhausting and satisfying (see above), often leads to struggles and frustration, particularly for planners on the ground (Abram & Weszkalnys 2013; Beveridge et al. 2022, 292).

In 2015, the city took advantage of the momentum and, when interested parties were ready to invest in the Hochhausscheiben, strengthened its own relation to the buildings and its role in configurations. However, the effects of these shifts on all necessary relations and for the future of the Hochhausscheiben remain to be seen. Today, one cannot necessarily speak of stabilisation of an alignment that would secure a realisation of possible building futures.

One of the planners from Halle voiced that the Hochhausscheiben embodied the constant 'struggling of the city with a place' (field notes, 14.05.2019). They experienced the un/making of possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben as a conflict-laden, difficult process. In this view, the buildings on standby become 'witnesses' of processes of struggling that manifest themselves within them. The understanding of buildings as a process of 'struggling' resonates with conceptions of (urban) infrastructures not only as technical artefacts but also as 'organizational arrangements, sociocultural practices and meanings, and political struggles' (Farías 2016, 43). The in-between of the Hochhausscheiben reflects ongoing endeavours in which no stable organisational arrangements emerged to enable the realisation of a possible future. On standby, the provisional remains provisional (cf. Kemmer et al. 2021, 6) as no configuration is found that would allow for the alignment of actors.

Farías (2016, 48–49) speaks of 'an ontological politics, in which what is at stake is the construction of a common world'. In the case of the Hochhausscheiben, the missing common world is not primarily a common vision or end, but the modalities of coming together needed to realise it. While an end to the in-between was the declared goal and revitalisation became the dominant option, uncertainties and conflicts over how revitalisation could be organised pushed a common goal into the background. Standby appears therefore less as a process of struggling *for* something, but rather as struggling *with* the relations and capacities required to bring a possible future into being: a conflict-laden process in which agency and responsibility are negotiated. In this sense, buildings on standby are embedded in processes of struggling over the abilities to shape and shift the conditions of (im-)possibility for building futures to materialise.

Things play a central role in the politics of standby as dis/connectors – they regulate loose relations in standby, shape in/activity and influence how futures may or may not be realised. One of the planners from Halle described the case of the Hochhausscheiben as a 'drama' or even a 'criminal act' in which all actors had varying opportunities to assert their interests. And then, they told me, there were the moments of possibility, available means, potentials and constraints (field notes, 11.03.2021).

Inspired by ANT, my own perspective is concerned with 'the *capacities* of entities [...] to affect and be affected' (Farías 2016, 42, original emphasis). The 'drama' then unfolds in interactions through which the above-mentioned capacities become tangible and are negotiated. If agency and responsibility are negotiated in the process, actors do not own them, agency rather arises from relations and interactions.[32] As Latour (2005, 45) argues, 'we should begin [...] from the *under-determination of action*, from the uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when "we" act' (original emphasis). Instead of taking for granted the path dependencies and power of certain actors over others, ANT-inspired urban studies is concerned with 'how agency is distributed within the socio-material situations of creating a city and highlights the contingency and multiplicity of these socio-material situations' (Färber 2019, 264).

A key contribution of STS, and of ANT in particular, lies in opening the social sciences to the heterogeneity of elements that shape the social and inform practices (Müller 2015b, 67–68; Schäfer 2013, 348). In this view, '[a]ll things are what they are in relation to other things, not because of essential qualities [... This] means that dualisms dissolve: well-known examples are the distinctions between humans/nonhumans, truth/false [*sic!*] and micro/macro.' (Gad & Bruun Jensen 2010, 58) Nonhumans are not only determining and serving as a backdrop for human action; according to Latour (2005, 72), things

> authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on. ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things 'instead' of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans.

'Society', in this view, 'is not stable enough to inscribe itself onto anything. On the contrary, most of the features of social order – scale, asymmetry, durability, power, division of labor, role distribution, and hierarchy – are impossible even to define without bringing in socialized nonhumans.' (Latour 1994, 793) This recognition also reshapes how we may understand politics. 'It is clear', Woolgar and Neyland (2013, 14) write, 'that an understanding of governance and accountability in contemporary life requires a focus on ordinary, everyday, pervasive objects and technologies'. Politics does not merely happen around and to things but through them (Woolgar & Neyland 2013, 14).[33]

Research attentive to the agency of things has predominantly emphasised their stabilising effects. A central assumption of ANT is that all kinds

32 With Barad (2010, 267), we can also call them 'intra-actions' to emphasise co-constitution: 'In contrast to the usual "interaction", the notion of *intra-action* recognises that distinct entities, agencies, events do not precede, but rather emerge from/through their intra-action' (original emphasis).

33 The proposal of understanding agency as distributed among both human and non-human actors has made ANT equally famous as it has garnered criticism. Especially by critical urban researchers, ANT and assemblage research were accused of neglecting power. According to its critics, the aim of critical urban research is to uncover power asymmetries and structures, and they accuse assemblage research of naïve objectivism and question a wider applicability of the approach (Brenner et al. 2011). Defenders, on the other hand, argue that structural analyses do not do justice to the complexity of the production of the urban (Färber 2014; McFarlane 2011). It is true that assemblage thinking questions 'pre-existing power asymmetries among actors deriving from underlying socio-economic structures' (Farías 2016, 45) and refuses to assign power to particular actors or actor-configurations per se (Graham & Marvin 2001, 11). It should be emphasised, however, that even though ANT proposes a 'generalized symmetry' (Latour 1991) of all elements (human and non-human), they are not to be regarded as equal. Rather, the aim is 'to force a detailed empirical account' of asymmetries and, for example, black boxed elements and 'obligatory passage points' in networks (Farías 2016, 45).

of relations gain stability through the delegation to 'more durable materials' (Law 2003, 3). Latour and Woolgar (1986), for example, showed how 'inscription devices' help produce facts and reality, underscoring the role of non-human actors in processes of ordering. Things can also 'help bring actants into association with each other' (Rydin & Tate 2016, 8) – acting as intermediaries and mediators. Planning, Rydin and Tate (2016, 8) argue, strongly depends 'on mediators such as communication devices, models, photographs and site visits' for enrolling actors. Mediators, in Latour's (2005, 39) understanding, do more than connect actors. They can 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry', which in his view differentiates them from intermediaries.

'Promissory things' can connect and make connections endure through promises they embody (Kemmer 2020, 168). Studying the suspended tram line 'bonde' in Rio de Janeiro, Kemmer (2019, 61; referring to Ahmad 2010) shows how promises, desires and expectations distributed across a cluster of such promissory things can bind people and things together across gaps and thus fill these gaps. However, promises are often far less binding than is commonly assumed; they are 'elusive', as Abram and Weszkalnys (2013, 23) argue: 'the "gaps" between ideal, ideology and practice fill themselves with things unplanned, unexpected and inexplicable, and with things that get overlooked and forgotten'. This makes promises unpredictable, as they can be forgotten or change. Drawing on such a conception of promise, Kemmer (2020, 171) assumes that '[b]ecause of their unpredictability, then, promises also seem to articulate rather volatile, fragile, and "loose" relations between people and things'. She explores how gaps between the present and a potentially better future were, in her case, filled by elastic 'affective bonds', spanning between residents (Kemmer 2019, 60).

I propose the concept of 'dis/connectors' to highlight the potential of things such as subsidies and regulations to both link and separate, stretch and loosen relations, keep them loose or even disconnect. While they have the potential to contribute significantly to a realisation of a future for the buildings, they can also obstruct particular futures, depending both on the relations within which they are embedded and those inscribed in them. This conception also deviates from the role often ascribed to objects in planning, namely that of 'instruments' for creating order. Studying urban voids, von Schéele (2016, 15–17), for example, sees laws and institutions as instruments in the striving for order and mastering uncertainty. Weszkalnys (2007, 221) shows that processes of ordering can also create disorder. She finds in relation to plans for Alexanderplatz in reunified Berlin that '[p]lan and failure, order and disorder were entwined: Just as the new plans appeared to produce more disorder, the perceived disorder was productive of order.' (226) Rather than enforcing order, dis/connectors regulate in-between states of simultaneous ordering and disordering (cf. Knox et al. 2015). For example, subsidies, donations and regulations do not merely facilitate planning – they mediate its indeterminacy in standby.

What role exactly do things play in struggles over agency and responsibility? How do humans assign responsibility to things and how do these then act? (Beauregard 2015, 533) Dis/connectors shape standby's in/activity and 'simultaneous on-offness' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 1). Struggling over agency and responsibility both addresses and emerges from dis/connectors, revealing the tensions between relating and entangling actors on the one hand, and unrelating or keeping at a distance and differentiating them on the other (Barad 2010, 244; Lapiņa 2021, 246). Each dis/connector constitutes 'politics in its own way', (trans-)forming capacities to act and enabling or delimiting 'a particular sort of engagement' (Gomart & Hajer 2003, 36; 47) and alignment. I therefore take a closer look at this 'actual work carried out' (Abram & Weszkalnys 2013, 4) by dis/connectors in such negotiations.

De/activation through Subsidies

As we know, none of the possible futures has been realised – due in part to the way subsidies operated as regulators within standby's loose networks. On the one hand, subsidies promised to fill gaps and connect actors. They had activating effects, especially on the city, since the city decides on handing out subsidies to individual projects at the municipal level. On the other, they also had deactivating effects, as funding programmes included conditions the city could not meet.

Promise

In 2000, the city of Halle applied for state funding for both the revitalisation and the demolition of one or several of the Hochhausscheiben. Yet funding for neither proved likely and the city administration had to face questions about what priority the buildings had in their plans for Neustadt. A city councillor asked the city administration: 'What kind of priority do the high-rise buildings have [...]?' And: '[i]n the case of an application for funding not being approved in a second attempt, what impact would this have on the future of the high-rise buildings?' (City Council, question, 06.09.2000). Someone had stamped the copy of this question with an image of a ticking bomb – the topic obviously had explosive political power. The question touched a sore spot, as the realisation of any future for the Hochhausscheiben appeared unlikely without subsidies.

The city adminstration replied that the buildings had the highest priority, but if a renewed application was rejected, it was expected that private investment would be unlikely (city administration, 19.08.2000). Indeed, sub-

sidies were seen as the only way to promote private investment, filling the gap produced by a lack of profitability. The city feared that their refusal would signal the site's unviability. At a time when prospects for renovation and reuse were slim, subsidies seemed to hold the promise for (and the only pathway to) a future for the Hochhausscheiben – promising activity where none seemed possible. As a planner from Halle noted, by the early 2000s it became clear that market forces alone wouldn't generate a viable use for the buildings – leaving a societal response, that is, funding from the federal state or national government as the only option. Alternatively, the planner suggested, municipalities should be equipped with sufficient financial resources to take care of the existing built environment (interview, 02.10.2018).

Public funding equally appeared like a promise to private investors as it created potentiality where it seemed absent. Throughout the years, developers approached the city before or shortly after acquiring one of the buildings to inquire about possible public funding for revitalisation projects. For example, the new owners of the high-rise building E, who had acquired it in a foreclosure auction, notified the city planning department in 2002 that they had purchased the building, adding:

> Since we are planning extensive modernisation and renovation measures, we would like you to inform us to what extent subsidies will be granted for the individual parts (façade, windows). [...] Please let us know in writing at short notice what information you require in order to specify the possible subsidy measures. (fax, 27.02.2002)

Potential investors tied their interest in developing the buildings to the possibilities of state funding. An employee of the city planning department from 1999, for example, noted that Scheibe B had been purchased privately and a use concept was being worked out. Since according to the owner, the banks were not willing to finance the refurbishment of the high-rise building and they 'did not want to put everything into it themselves', the new owner did not pay the full purchase price and waited for information on state subsidies for refurbishment (notes, 25.05.1999; 08.06.1999). When the planners told the investor that subsidies for innovative construction and housing might be available, but only to a limited extent (2000 Deutsche Mark per square metre), the investor withdrew from the contract that had not yet gained legal force (notes, 10.11.1999). They said they would 'buy only if funding is possible' (notes, 11.11.1999). Another example from 2000 was a mortgage bank from Berlin that presented a 'utilisation concept for Scheibe E after refurbishment and modernisation', lacking, however, important information on financing. According to the developer, the volume had not been calculated entirely and they were waiting for promises of public subsidies from the city, state and federal governments. The use concept states: 'the economic operation of the property after refurbishment is only possible with the support of public refurbishment funds' (concept, 21.07.2000).

In the described cases, state subsidies acted as a promise and created expectations to bridge gaps (Kemmer 2020, 168) such as the local state's inability to act and the absence of demand and profit options. Subsidies became one of the central elements in relations between the buildings, the state, investment and private investors, and the future, as they promised to fill gaps. Haller and Altrock (2010) describe urban development funding as a 'supplement' with a 'repair' function, while Bernt (2009, 762) calls subsidies under the programme Urban Restructuring East[34] 'windows of opportunity'. He shows how housing companies and city governments in East German cities formed 'grant coalitions' (Cochrane et al. 1996, as cited in Bernt 2009, 765) to access demolition funds, highlighting the dependence of local actors on the supra-local state levels via public funds and public-private cooperation. To reduce pressure on very limited local budgets, municipalities sought to 'mobilize the taxing powers of the central state through a system of intergovernmental grants and try to shift responsibilities to the upper levels of government' (Bernt 2009, 760). These coalitions, however, were rather unstable as they emerged mainly in response to programme criteria and unlike other public-private partnerships, the coalitions were 'bargaining over a bill that is paid by somebody else' (765). While challenges to realising demolition plans have been widely noted (see Haller & Liebmann 2002 as one of the first), this research shows how subsidies – by acting as a promise – did enable alignment and collective action.[35]

Activation

Subsidies activate actors such as the municipality that decides which projects are eligible and applies for the state funds. Municipalities' competence lies in implementation; they must ensure that projects are embedded in the urban development concepts they have developed and involve all key stakeholders (Liebmann et al. 2006, 75). While the federal government and the Länder define the general objectives and funding priorities for the funding programmes, the municipality applies for funding for specific projects and selects the funding criteria accordingly. Projects a municipality aims to support must be in line with an urban development concept, and municipalities have to ensure that all 'key actors' participate (Liebmann et al. 2006, 75; Oebbeke

34 The Stadtumbau Ost programme was launched by announcing a competition. According to a press release from 2001, the competition 'is the starting signal for the East German municipalities to tackle the difficult process of urban redevelopment'. For the first programme period between 2002–2009, a total of 5 billion Deutsche Mark was made available, including 2.2 billion from the federal government. 'Objectives of the programme are [...] an upgrading of urban neighbourhoods, the improvement of the quality of living and life, the creation of owner-occupied housing in the existing stock and the demolition of housing that is no longer needed in the long term.' (Oebbeke 2001)

35 However, the majority of these observations relates to the cooperation between the municipality and municipal housing companies. Clearly, municipalities have a definite interest in stabilising their municipal housing companies' budgets.

2001). Such a concept is also a prerequisite for a municipality to participate in the competition for urban development programmes in the first place. As one of the planners from Halle explained, while funding programmes are made at the supra-local level, the federal state does not interfere in local funding policies. In each individual case, it is a discretionary decision that the municipal administration and politicians must make.[36] They have to ensure proper use and compliance with the law and, they stressed, that there is a product in the end (field notes, 01.03.2021). Public funds, as a planner from Halle noted already in a press release in 2002, are scarce and therefore 'will only be able to be used with priority where they promise high efficiency' (press release, 31.01.2002). Holding planning responsibility for and sovereignty over planning, municipalities are responsible for requesting and receiving the funds, while the city distributes them to applicants (Seelig 2007, 33). In this way, municipalities have control over the funds to be used appropriately and quickly in the sense of the concepts they have prepared. Prior to application, it is equally the municipality's job to check funding eligibility, including, in the case of an existing redevelopment statute, compliance with the objectives and the financial concept (Seelig 2007, 33). Another condition is that urban development funding can only be granted if a project is not expected to be profitable; and it is the municipality's responsibility to ensure this (email, 11.12.2015). The municipal administration examines the unprofitability and whether public money would be used sensibly, economically, timely and expeditiously (group discussion, 29.03.2021).

Since 2015, planners have widely recognised that it is impossible to refurbish one of the towers and rent it on the market in Halle-Neustadt without subsidies. One of the planners told me: 'It's true that it quickly becomes unprofitable and it was always said that it wouldn't work without subsidies; with the 9.90 euros[37] you can just about make a profit, but it quickly becomes a risk if I don't rent it out; it's just so much space, so you can quickly make a profit and quickly make a loss' (field notes, 29.03.2021). In connection with the development of an urban strategy for preservation options in 2015, the planners determined as the 'basic problem to date' that 'realistic prospects for use in the classic sense (e.g. residential, office) have not yet emerged from market demand'. They calculated that the required funding for the reimbursement of unprofitable costs in the case of a realisation of refurbishment would amount to 1.5 to 4.5 million euros (city administration, 31.03.2015). The explanation accompanying the resolution on the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben from 2015 states that the owners of Scheibe B, C and E had asked the city to support them in finding public funds for the realisation of revitalisation projects for the towers. Owners had estimated that approximately 1 to 3 million euros per Hochhausscheibe would be needed to support the unprofitable costs (explanatory comment on draft, 24.11.2015). In 2015, this need was acknowledged, and it was found that subsidies could indeed fill the gap of rentability and allow for a revitalisation.

Before 2015, however, the city held that the buildings had to be self-sustaining and that if they were not, any funding would be inefficient. In an email to the investor, the municipal employee wrote that the city's financial councillor had also confirmed that 'a municipal guarantee for this property is very unlikely to be considered [...] Nevertheless, we hope that you will be able to complete the financing of the property in another way' (email, 04.10.2011). When in the same year the State Development and Transport Minister had visited Halle-Neustadt, they agreed with one of the planners, saying that 'the operation of the towers would have to be financed from their own income after the conversion'. According to the newspaper article on the visit, the minister then promised to inquire whether the state could cover the costs of an economic feasibility study. The newspaper article commented under a photo of the minister standing in front of the buildings: 'Minister [name] only turned [their] back on the problem of Hochhausscheiben for the time being' (Wochenspiegel, 27.07.2011) Over the years, the city's position shifted between seeing revitalisation projects as profitable or the profitability was seen as so hopeless that not even subsidies could fill the gap or at least were not seen as efficiently spent.

Responding to investors' requests for public funding, the city planning department emphasised in most cases over the years that the city would like to support them with their project, but that subsidies for redevelopment would not be available. The fact that no subsidies were granted throughout the years was also due to the fact that the city of Halle could not and did not want to bear the costs that funding would imply for its own budget. In fact, the political commitment to the Hochhausscheiben via the 2015 decision formed the basis for applying for this support, as it legitimised the use of public funds. However, there was a problem: if funding were granted, the city would have to pay its own share. When, for example, an investor considered renovating Scheibe E in 2014, they asked about funding opportunities. As they

36 Federal funds are distributed to the Länder using 'indicator-based distribution keys', as the Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building writes on their website. These differ depending on the urban development programme and include, among other things, the number of inhabitants, vacancy rates, etc. The distribution of funds from the federal government to the Länder is determined annually in the so-called Administrative Agreement on Urban Development Promotion. The basis of this administrative agreement is the support of urban development projects in cities and municipalities. The funding guidelines of the Länder define 'the more detailed requirements for the eligibility of measures and projects, funding priorities and more detailed selection criteria'. The administrative agreement and funding guidelines thus control the programmatic objectives of urban development funding (Rechtliche Grundlagen der Städtebauförderung, n.d.).

37 This corresponds to the net cold rent that the city of Halle, as today's tenant of Scheibe A, pays per square metre and month for office spaces. The rent for the total net rental space is €7.25 per square metre, €9.90 for office space and €0.67 for ancillary space. This is how it was decided in a referendum in 2017 for use from 2021 and for a duration of 30 years.

told the planning department, they were prepared to invest 900 euros per square metre themselves, while they would expect that everything above this amount would be covered by subsidies (letter, 25.07.2014). In response, the city of Halle wrote that theoretically, up to 50 per cent of the funding gap could be covered by one of the two funding programmes Social City ('Soziale Stadt') or Urban Restructuring East; the city's own contribution, however, might also have to be covered (one-third of the funding amount). Finally, the city concluded: 'Unfortunately, a guarantee for the approval of urban development funding cannot be given' (letter, 03.09.2014).

Deactivation

According to calculations from 2015, the necessary funding for one Scheibe would have comprised up to one third of the total annual funding allocated to Halle. The draft of the 2015 resolution contrasted the funds needed by investors with the 'average approval framework of upgrading funds per year for the city of Halle (Saale) (subsidies Urban Restructuring East, federal/state plus city funds, average of the last 5 years) consisting of 3.4 million euros' (city administration, 31.03.2015). The draft confirmed that 'bearing the unprofitable costs for the refurbishment of the Hochhausscheibe (one Scheibe per year) would mean that no other urban development project could be financed from city funds in these years' (explanatory comment on draft, 24.11.2015).

As a precondition for funding through Urban Restructuring East, municipalities were required to contribute their own funds toward the financing of revitalisation projects. The programme aimed at helping municipalities 'to reduce parts of the housing vacancies and at the same time to invest in the upgrading of urban districts' (Seelig 2007, 34). According to the programme regulations, both demolition and upgrading were supposed to be realised equally. In practice, however, demolition measures dominated in the following years. As numbers for Saxony-Anhalt from 2006 show, the discrepancy between demolitions and upgrading grew already during the first years of the programme. While the funds for upgrading in 2002 were almost equal to those for demolition (around 12 million euros), in 2004 there was a difference of over 20 million, with about 22.2 million spent on demolitions and 1.8 million euros on upgrading (Liebmann et al. 2006, 33). Following Seelig (2007), this was due to the fact that demolition measures were financed differently than revitalisation. In general, all measures were to be financed equally by the federal government, the state and the municipalities, but 'an exception to this principle was allowed for deconstruction: while all three partners must contribute equally to the funding of upgrading measures, demolition is borne by the federal and state governments alone' (Seelig 2007, 30). The logic of equal shares, however, holds for revitalisation measures: 33.3 per cent are to be financed by the federal state, 33.3 per cent by the state and 33.3 per cent by the municipality (Seelig 2007, 32). The first status report on the Urban Restructuring East programme from 2006 points out that municipal administrations have 'the essential steering competence in the implementation of the urban redevelopment programme'. However, the authors also state:

> In many cases, the situation resembles a quandary. On the one hand, local governments are interested in supporting the stabilisation of large housing companies. On the other hand, they are often hardly in a position to raise the necessary municipal share for the implementation of upgrading measures. This often leads to municipalities reacting to demands from the housing industry rather than actively shaping the urban redevelopment process themselves. In such a climate of cooperation, the danger of uncontrolled actionism is great. The integrated urban development concepts easily lose their significance as a steering instrument. (Liebmann et al. 2006, 75)

The funding for a revitalisation project of one Scheibe with 1 million euros would thus have included 333,300 euros of the city's own funds. However, according to the budget from 2015, 'approx. 263,300 euros of own funds were available for the planning department for the years 2017 to 2019 to co-finance all urban development funding programmes in Halle' (explanatory comment on draft, 24.11.2015).

As Seelig (2007, 36) states, '[i]f the budget situation is tight, it may not be possible to raise the required municipal share of own funds. As a result, the implementation of upgrading measures fails.' My material confirms that revitalisation failed, among other things, due to the city's inability to contribute its part. In 2011, for example, and in response to an enquiry from a private owner, the city administration examined whether and which funding programmes would be available to support the Hochhausscheiben. The answer concedes:

> The examination showed that the relevant programmes will expire in the future or have been exhausted (e.g. Social City). In addition, there is the problem that the city is currently not in a position to pay its own share of funding programmes, which makes it difficult or impossible to access such programmes. (email, 19.10.2011)

The city was in a predicament here, where the preferred future and the conditions to shape it were drifting apart. On the one hand, subsidies had an activating effect on the relationships between the city and buildings, between

buildings and private investment and the future. They endowed particularly the city with agency, but at the same time weakened it by requiring a municipal contribution – which the city could neither afford nor was willing to make, as allocating funds to the revitalisation of the Hochhausscheiben was not considered an efficient use of resources. Bernt and Haus (2010, 18) see in the state's simultaneous 'self-modification and self-aggrandisement' a contradiction in which 'the probability of failure is built in, as it were'.

Subsidies actually had a deactivating effect here because the requirement for municipal co-financing limited the city's options for action and could prevent revitalisation – even when it was a shared goal of both the city and investors. Struggles over the profitability and availability of public funding are ultimately struggles over agency. While the promise of funding gathers actors (federal state, city, investors and buildings) and is not lost as long as gaps in rentability persist, it produces de/activating effects that stabilise an in-between of the Hochhausscheiben and invigorates processes of 'struggling with'.

For city officials, a privately funded revitalisation remained the political priority. When during my fieldwork an investor expressed interest in renovating one of the buildings without public funding, they were welcomed with open arms. As the alderman explained, they were very happy about it 'because you don't always have to call on the state' (interview, 28.05.2021).

Manoeuvre with Donations

As financially poor municipalities – constrained by population losses, declining revenues and rising social needs – became a well-known problem in the 2000s, the so-called 'experimentation clause' ('Experimentierklausel') was introduced that allowed the city to apply for a discount on its own contribution vis-à-vis the state and the federal government and also created the option for an investor to take over the municipality's contribution. The Building Code was also changed to include possible private donations under the paragraph 'relief of the municipality's own contribution'. These changes in the law created opportunities to replace the city's own share and thus increase the possibility for revitalisations to materialise. Discounts, payments by investors and donations were thus supposed to offer fixes that subsidies presented initially – namely, to close gaps in municipal budgets.

In addition to an extra pot for the Hochhausscheiben that the city had to create in its budget, the resolution draft from 2015 states: 'the basic aim should be for the investors to take over part (around two thirds of 33.3 per cent) of the city's own funds by applying the experimentation clause. The city would thus only have to contribute 10 per cent (explanatory comment on draft, 24.11.2015). The remaining 10 per cent would then ideally be covered by a private donation.

In the case of Scheibe C, fierce conflicts were unravelling over the application for funding as the investor and the city were fighting over the coverage of the city's contribution. A private investor had acquired the building in 2015 from the state of Saxony-Anhalt (for the price of 1 euro) and planned a revitalisation with the help of 3 million euros in subsidies that they requested for 2016 (explanatory comment on draft, 24.11.2015).

This dispute between the city and the investor arose over the funding application, as different media reports show. An article in the tabloid BILD from 7.12.2015 headlined: 'Millions scandal around Scheibe C. Investor wanted to start renovation in 2016. City administration put the brakes on the project.' (BILD, 07.12.2015) Another article reports in more detail that, according to the investor, the city administration had changed its attitude and gone from initial support of the project to a 'blockade'. The investor told this newspaper that the administration was deliberately working slowly in their view, making an application in 2016 'almost hopeless'. They were reported to threaten that if the city hesitated any longer and did not apply for the funds, it would have to pay for the demolition of the buildings itself in the last instance. Furthermore, they let the public know via the article that 'previous political statements on the desired redevelopment of the Scheiben in Halle-Neustadt' would remain 'only lip service' should the city refuse the funding application. They were questioning whether 'the city's political leadership [was] seriously looking for a solution to the problem that had been hindering the development of Neustadt for years' (HalleSpektrum, 07.12.2015). Another newspaper reports: while the investor accused the city of not adhering to agreements and refusing to apply for state funding for no reason, the municipality accused the investor of not fulfilling the obligations required for an application, such as the submission of a complete overall concept (MZ Saalekurier, 21.01.2016). Among other things, this involved the financing concept. In addition to scepticism towards the investor, internal documents also show how the city and the investor were in negotiation about how the city's own contributions could be taken over.

Blackmail

A few months later, the BILD tabloid headlined: 'Way for subsidies suddenly clear. Investor pulled a joker out of [their] sleeve.' (BILD; n.d. [2016]) It reported that the owner of Scheibe C had leverage over the city of Halle through a clever move – the purchase of the outstanding debt of one of the creditors of Scheibe A. As the article reported, the city planned to turn Scheibe A into an administrative location and was trying to find an investor who could act through compulsory auction. In order to prevent the plans of the city and its mayor and get the city to submit the application for funding quickly, the

investor of Scheibe C had acquired debt shares from a creditor of Scheibe A (whom the city itself had not been able to locate) and now let the auction of Scheibe A fall through. The newspaper quoted the investor who accused the city administration of deliberately delaying the funding application for the redevelopment of their property and thus letting their project fail. According to the BILD article, the investor now threatened that 'nothing at all' would happen with either Scheibe A or Scheibe C, if the city administration continued to 'trick' with the funding application – apparently with success: the deadline for the funding application was extended and an urgent application in 2016 was planned.

After the the project's financing was included in the budget planning in 2016 through an addendum, the city granted the investor funding in 2017. Yet this happened with some reservations as a confirmation of the replacement of the city's contribution remained pending:

> The City Council resolves, subject to the confirmation of the application for relief of the municipality's own contribution, subject to the conclusion of a donation agreement for the remaining municipal contribution, to grant a pro rata subsidy of a maximum of 3,697,500.00 euros for the above-mentioned measure. (VI/2017/03260, 2017, 1)

The explanatory text for the decision to fund Scheibe C through federal funding programmes stated:

> This means that the city itself does not have to raise any funds for financing. Subject to approval, 2/3 of the funding for the urban redevelopment measure will come from federal and state funds (2,465,000 euros), and 10 per cent from a donation from a third party (369,750 euros).
> The difference is paid by the last funding recipient as part of the relief of the municipal share (862,750 euros).
> The city's own contribution is reduced to 0.00 euros.
> The measure is budget-neutral for the city of Halle (Saale). (VI/2017/03260, 2017, 4)

Lastly, it is noted: 'The funding agreement will not be signed until the donation agreement has been signed' (VI/2017/03260, 2017, 5).

In fact, the story did not end here. It picked up speed again and reignited tensions between the mayor of Halle and the City Council but also between city politics and the administration when the costs of the renovation drastically increased after 2019 and the investor demanded another 7 million euros of state funding. In 2017, a chicken-and-egg dilemma re-emerged: the city insisted on a coherent financing plan and a firm donation commitment, while the investor required a public funding guarantee before proceeding with planning.

At the heart of the conflict was the question whether the city's required contribution could be covered by a private donation, which raised the question of trust. One of the planners said: 'this is politics, it is about whom you trust' (field notes, 29.03.2021). Negotiations around the donation took place behind the scenes, but contradictory results repeatedly leaked to the public. At times, rumours circulated that there was no donor at all, or that the donor had withdrawn. At other times, the debate turned to whether an earmarked or an undesignated donation would be legally admissible to be used for the Scheiben. Critics pointed out that if the donation were truly unconditional, the city should direct it toward pressing needs, such as the renovation of schools. Other debates focused on potential tax write-offs and legal precedents from similar cases, both in Halle and in other places – where the legal complexity surrounding donations ultimately blocked project realisations (Halle (Saale) Händelstadt 2021). According to the investor, the City Council statements made no sense without knowing what was happening behind the scenes. When asked what that entailed, they only replied that the city of Halle was 'special' and that the mayor and the City Council were against the project. The donation, they assured, existed (interview, 22.04.2021).

In fact, information did not necessarily get through to my informants at lower hierarchical levels in the administration either. A planner once said, 'you only hear something by chance if you happen to be in the right place at the right time' (group discussion, 29.03.2021). This also meant that planners sometimes were preparing something that had long been overtaken by 'behind the scenes' negotiations. The case of the Scheiben was decided by upper levels in the administration, by the mayor and the alderman, as these buildings had great importance for the district and the city as a whole, not least because of the amounts of money involved. According to one of the planners, only the City Council, the mayor and the alderman were involved in decisions over the Hochhausscheiben (field notes, 27.05.2021).

Blurring Boundaries

The financial hardship of municipalities can be eased when the municipality's own contribution is paid by third parties: the developer, the state or a third private party donating to the city. However, what should have been a relief, enable alignment and close gaps in fact fragmented responsibility and led to manoeuvres in the struggle over agency and responsibility at the margins of legality. As Bernt and Haus (2010, 27) note for urban development programmes and problems of their implementation,

> the limits of control [are] at least partly homemade in urban redevelopment [the authors see responsibility with the state

> and federal levels]. They are the result of 'non-decisions' in which the existing ownership and actor structure under which urban development takes place is no longer addressed, but accepted as given and unquestionable, and responsibility is fragmented and shifted to negotiation rounds that are hardly comprehensible to outsiders.

Bernt and Haus see urban development programmes as institutional fixes that, instead of reorganising the making of the city, try to make ends meet but create yet new problems. As I see it, the possibility of donating expands networks instead of tightening relations. The possibility of filling financial gaps in the city's budget through private donations opened up room for manoeuvre that to one of the planners from Halle appeared necessary but also felt extremely uncomfortable (interview, 03.06.2021). They saw a risk that their obligation to act equitably could be undermined, as individual negotiations and trust began to outweigh formal regulations. Another concern was that donations might create expectations of direct reciprocation from the city administration, with donators potentially requesting specific services in return (field notes, 19.03.2021; 29.03.2021). This discomfort resonates with what Frederiksen and Knudsen (2015) describe as 'greyness': a condition in which informal practices and personal ties blur the boundaries between acceptable and questionable conduct. Greyness, they argue, plays an important role in 'relations of exchange, patronage and favours' but also intimate relations (13). City planners from Halle explained that donations took place in 'a legal grey area' and that it was a 'matter of consideration' (field notes, 29.03.2021) and manoeuvre – a space of negotiation and discretion without clear-cut rules.

At the heart of these manoeuvres was the danger that the city might be accused of not even wanting to achieve the goals it had set itself (centrally including the revitalisation of the Hochhausscheiben). This became clear in the political debate about further funding for the revitalisation of Scheibe C in 2021: if the City Council did not approve the use of subsidies, it risked creating an investment disaster and its own goals of preserving the Hochhausscheiben were put in jeopardy. However, it equally risked an investment disaster if it did grant subsidies to the investor and they still did not realise the revitalisation. In this case, millions of public funds risked being lost. As the city's alderman told me: 'there must not be an investment ruin at the end, there must not be a statically cracked ruin; [...] it has to actually work now' (interview, 28.05.2021). After the additional funding of another 7 million had been decided (VII/2021/02131, 2021), it was withdrawn again in the autumn of 2021 (VII/2021/03346, 2021). The City Council members had been convinced that the risk and responsibility for the city were too high as, for instance, the question of the private donation could not be resolved. As the planners explained to me, if the donation did not come, the city would have had nothing in its hands, no 'means of pressure'. They highlighted they were not against donations in principle, and there are indeed good examples where buildings have been revitalised with the help of donations (field notes, 29.03.2021).

Donations and other things nourish manoeuvres, as they do not question the conditions of (im)possibility that collective action within loose networks creates. They extend the number of actors involved and lead to individual negotiations becoming the basis of a revitalisation project. The 'dangerous' space between objective and realisation became increasingly relevant after the 2015 resolution in which the city declared itself politically in favour of preservation. This was reinforced in subsequent years by the redevelopment statutes (whereby the city committed itself to the revitalisation) and a referendum in 2017, in which the people of Halle voted for the city administration to move into Scheibe A as a tenant. In 2020, an investor of Scheibe A abandoned the redevelopment despite a signed lease agreement with the city. Afterwards, the municipal bank acquired the building and continued working towards a revitalisation with another (local) construction firm. A newspaper article reported:

> The Saalesparkasse wants to buy Scheibe A in Neustadt and thus close a chapter that must have caused a lot of turmoil *behind the scenes*. The [investor] has not shown to be a *reliable partner* for the city of Halle and has not started the redevelopment of Scheibe A as discussed and – hopefully – contractually agreed. It was also of no use that mayor [name] repeatedly referred to a valid lease agreement. It is hardly possible that this can be fulfilled by 1 January 2021. What is certain, however, is that with Saalesparkasse as a contractual partner, the city now has a reputable company it can trust. It remains to be seen whether the city will learn from this development. After all, a referendum, the first in the history of the city, was the background for the conclusion of a lease agreement with the [investor]. The *citizens must be able to trust* that the city will also implement the result. (MZ, 16.01.2020; emphases added)

The examples show how 'political action [...] takes place *next to or across* institutionalised political orders' (Gomart & Hajer 2003, 34, original emphasis). I note a 'weaving' (Kühn 2021, 121) of relations. Private investment in situations of loose relations can appear to be a favour that private actors offer the city. In fact, interdependencies lead to a coming together of actors but also establish the principle of reciprocity in a way that can become a dilemma for the city that is struggling with its obligation of equal treatment and transparency and its declared objective to bring about a revitalisation of the buildings.

Regulations that Matter

Manoeuvring, as previously described in relation to donations, also extended to regulations. In 2006, the owner of building E publicly linked the building's potential revitalisation to the municipality's willingness to waive the requirement for additional parking spaces. Without such concessions – and without a municipal lease – the investor warned that the project would become financially unviable, shifting responsibility back to the state. According to a newspaper article, they said: 'then the state has to see what happens to it' (MZ, 18.02.2006). Behind the scenes, they applied further pressure, seeking a meeting with a department head and threatening to escalate the issue to the mayor and the public (email, 11.10.2006). Their renovation plans thus hinged not only on municipal use but also on flexible regulatory interpretation. Parking regulations emerged as a highly contested issue in Neustadt's centre (field notes, 17.05.2021). Actors turned regulations into objects of 'mattering' by seeking to fix their meaning, leaving their interpretation without fixity or delegating responsibility to regulations. As Barad (2010, 254, original emphasis) argues, 'mattering is about the (contingent and temporary) becoming-determinate (and becoming-indeterminate) of *matter and meaning*, without fixity, without closure. The conditions of possibility of mattering are also conditions of impossibility.'

(Non-)Fixity

In 2015, an investor planned to revitalise building E and create a student residence. In an email to the planning department, the investor explained why, from their point of view, no building application was required (email, 19.10.2015). Since Scheibe E used to house single workers during GDR times, the investor did not see the need for a building application, even though this use dated back a long time. In their email, the investor referred to laws and a judgement in a similar case from 2013. Particularly relevant for the investor was whether there were any parking space requirements and whether they would have to comply with new regulations on noise, sound, heat and fire protection. They planned to meet energy and heat regulations, but hoped, as the email indicates, that a building permit wasn't necessary (email, 19.10.2015).

The planning department referred regulatory questions to the building regulations department, where the investor soon met with staff. Trying to fix the agreements on interpretations of the regulations, the investor summarised the results in an email. Here, they repeated that, as they understood from the meeting, no building permit was needed for residential use, as it matched the building's former function, and only a fire protection concept was required (email, 04.11.2015). The municipality's response clarified that a permit was indeed necessary for any structural changes, regardless of the building's use and that parking requirements would apply only if additional demand arose (email, 06.11.2015).

Minutes from an interdepartmental meeting in August 2015 under the topic 'general assessment of the Scheiben ensemble in the centre of Neustadt in terms of building regulations' highlighted that whether a building application is required depends on how the planned reuse is assessed: a continuation of the former use does not require a permit, while a new use following long-term vacancy does (minutes, 19.08.2015). This assessment also affects parking requirements. Under the current standards, investors may require additional space to provide sufficient parking. However, 'grandfathering' provisions may exempt them from such obligations. According to the regulations on 'grandfathering', the duration of vacancy plays a decisive role in determining the requirements for revitalisation. 'Grandfathering' determines whether a planned reuse is considered a 'continuation' of the former use or a 'new use'. Essentially, it is a matter of building law assessment to decide whether the buildings are 'on' or 'off'. From a regulatory point of view, 'expired grandfathering' means that a building has seen an interruption equivalent to 'off'. The building cannot be reused and requires formal activation. In contrast, if 'grandfathering' exists, it is easier to allow exceptions regarding thermal insulation and energy, for example, because the goal of preservation outweighs compliance with today's common standards. Without this protection, a new building application is necessary, which in some cases may impose requirements that actually hinder preservation.

Exceptions

The importance of regulatory exceptions in enabling possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben was already evident in 1999. At that time, planners raised the question of whether certain technical standards and minimum flat sizes could be relaxed. For instance, Halle's city administration proposed allowing one-room flats smaller than 35 square metres or without a vestibule (letter, 23.06.1999).

According to the city's justification to the state, these exceptions would be necessary to enable the use of the Hochhausscheiben. A letter from the city administration to the state of Saxony-Anhalt described these exceptions as 'extremely important', as they would allow for 'planning security' (letter, 23.06.1999). At that time, the exceptions concerned the size of the flats, and technical exceptions were granted by the state. However, state funding was ruled out if the building were to be used for student flats. A state representative wrote to the city: 'I would therefore recommend that the investor either retain the target group of students for certain flats and not apply

for funding for these flats, or change the concept' (letter, 14.09.1999). The investors then urged the city planners to 'clarify these matters in advance and work towards a positive exemption decision so that the chances of success for the redevelopment concept we're currently working on can be increased accordingly' (fax, 27.09.1999).

A City Council resolution from 2009 aimed to secure development goals for Neustadt's centre, which had come under threat after the state of Saxony-Anhalt withdrew plans to use Scheibe C as office space. Citing anticipated costs under the new 2008 high-rise guidelines, the state claimed the building was no longer viable. The city, however, countered that these guidelines applied to new constructions, while existing buildings like the Hochhausscheiben required only selective compliance. Additional lifts and a subdivision of the long corridors were certainly necessary, but these could be found in earlier regulations, too. Furthermore, the resolution (V/2009/08266, 2009) states, these requirements did not preclude office use. The city thus implicitly accused the state of using regulations as a pretext to avoid taking responsibility for Neustadt's development.

Pulling Together

Being aware that the buildings challenged existing regulations – and that these regulations, in turn, hindered their revitalisation – the city administration of Halle developed a reading to circumvent these challenges. This approach both satisfied urban planning, which aimed to facilitate revitalisation, and met the building regulations. Finally, as one of the planners explained, they had agreed on a hybrid solution within the administration, actually indicating that the buildings were to be understood as neither 'off' nor 'on': while the buildings 'don't fulfil "grandfathering" in the classical sense' and all the specifics (i.e. fire protection, escape routes, wiring) needed to be checked, parking spaces would only need to be created if the intended use indicated additional requirements (interview, 03.06.2021). Whether or not the Hochhausscheiben qualified for 'grandfathering' was described by planners as a difficult question and 'one of the complex issues' (interview, 03.06.2021); another planner simply noted, 'well, it depends' (field notes, 17.05.2021).

In fact, exceptions regarding technical requirements were not allowed per se, yet neither were they rejected. In principle, reuse was recognised as a continuation, thereby enabling revitalisation. This, however, left room for multiple interpretations of individual technical aspects and regulations.

For the alignment of actors – a pre-condition for successful revitalisation – the non-fixity, or looseness, of certain regulations seems important. While regulations need to be precise enough for actors to agree on what is at stake, they must also allow some openness or flexibility. This balance can enable collective action, similar to what Bowker and Star (1999, 16) describe as a 'boundary object'. They define boundary objects as 'objects for cooperation' and

> as those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice *and* satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. […] This is achieved by allowing the objects to be weakly structured in common use, imposing stronger structures in the individual site tailored use. They are thus both ambiguous and constant; they may be abstract or concrete. (original emphasis)

The fixation without fixity furthermore allowed for postponement. In the case of Scheibe C, for example, provisional building permits were issued in the mid-2010s, even though many details of the construction plan remained undecided. Issues such as distance requirements and the associated possible purchase of city-owned land in the vicinity of the building were still pending. According to one of the planners, this kind of non-fixity was common practice and necessary to enable action; however, it could also allow conflicts to be postponed, which sometimes resulted in no one taking responsibility for unresolved issues (interview, 03.06.2021).

The municipality's day-to-day work was guided by the principle of 'not acting against a law and not acting without a law' (field notes, 05.03.2021; 11.03.2021). When the investor of Scheibe C applied for a construction permit, the planning permission was granted, but crucial matters such as land re-designation and ownership transfer were left unresolved – to be agreed upon later. An extension depended on re-designation, which in turn required an agreement with neighbouring owners. As long as this remained pending, public subsidies could not be disbursed. This created risks not only for the investor, who was theoretically liable for interest on the unused funds, but also for the city, which doubted this repayment would occur. Planners also feared that unspent subsidies could lead to reduced state funding for Halle in the future (field notes, 18.05.2020).

Compared to other issues on the table of the building regulation department, the case of Scheibe C and its planned extension (subject to the question of neighbouring plots to be resolved) was 'as concrete as I've ever experienced', one planner mentioned (group discussion, 29.03.2021). While the general regulatory reading allowed the project to begin, it offered no guarantee that specific issues would be easily resolved. This general 'accord' also permitted the postponement of certain decisions.

A similar dynamic emerged with Scheibe A, where the flexible reading enabled the revitalisation through the postponement of the parking issue. A planner explained that, for Scheibe A, the creation of parking spaces was not a pre-condition for the plans to be approved. However, a subsequent survey revealed that many employees moving into the building in 2021 intended to come by car at least occasionally. Ultimately, different parking spaces

in the vicinity had to be rented – resulting in unforeseen costs that had not been included in the initial calculations. The question of the parking spaces was postponed.[38] The revitalisation of Scheibe A – 'on time and of excellent quality' – was made possible, as a representative of the bank from Halle that owns the building said at the inauguration in summer 2021, by the 'outstanding work on the part of everyone involved. [...] All the other people involved in the planning department and in the other departments of the city also pulled together wonderfully.' (Du Bist Halle, 01. 07. 2021) By this, they certainly also meant the cooperation, through which regulations were flexibly interpreted, resulting in permits that functioned as enabling regulators. In my reading, laws and regulations have dis/abling capacities for the alignment of actors, which is necessary for any possible futures to be realised. Whether they enable a project depends on the abilities of actors to negotiate a shared reading. In the absence of common aspirations, laws and regulations can stabilise loose relations and reinforce the in-betweenness of buildings. Rules concerning the preservation of existing buildings, parking requirements or fire safety become objects of struggles and central to materialising the conditions of the (im)possibility for futures.

Studying standby as process of struggling, we see how relations are re-examined, agency and responsibilities are (re-)distributed and negotiated and that these negotiations are often conflictual. Standby is a mode that embraces uncertainty rather than attempting to master it, and instead of creating order and stability sustains an in-between where cause and effects are blurred and responsibilities are pushed around. The preceding explorations outline the interdependencies that contribute to the in/activity of standby. While the city, for instance, lacks the necessary money, investors are dependent on the city when applying for funding.

38 In fact, it is unclear whether this was intended or not. As a planner told me, parking space requirements had not been considered at all for the reuse of Scheibe A. In order not to be accused of having failed to do so, the mayor had later come up with the idea of a mobility concept for the centre of Neustadt as a whole (field notes, 18.05.2020).

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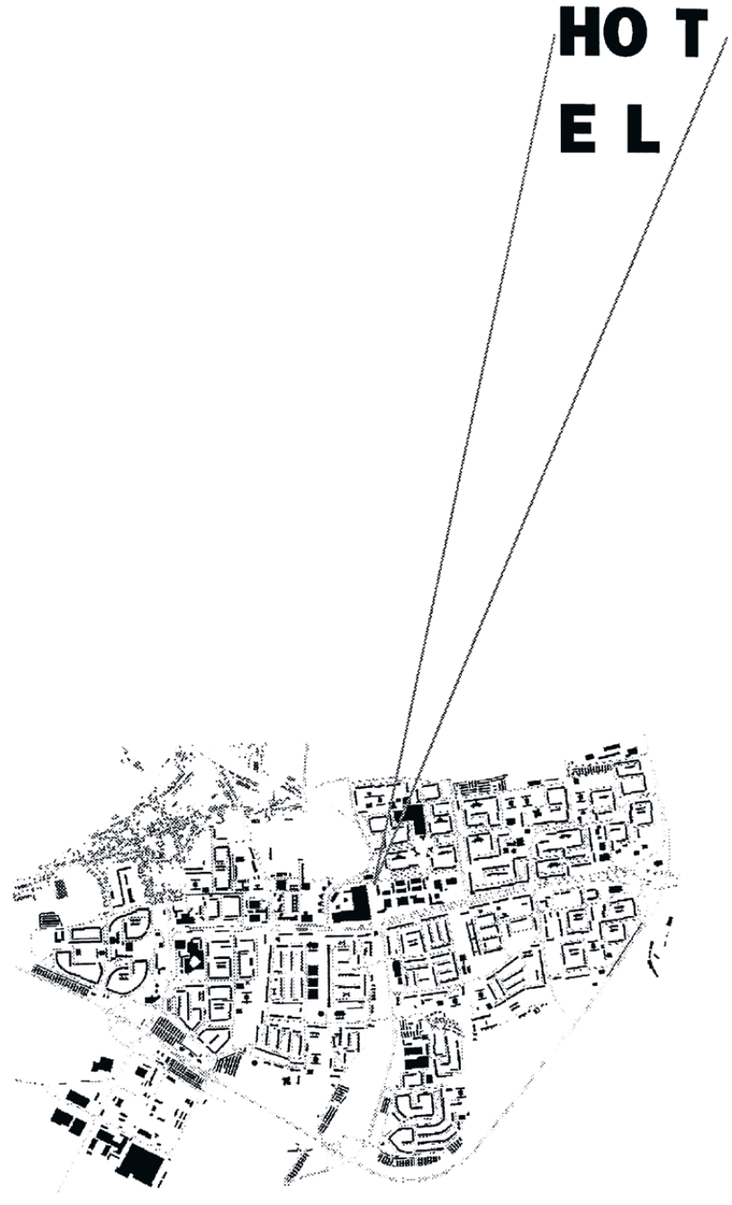
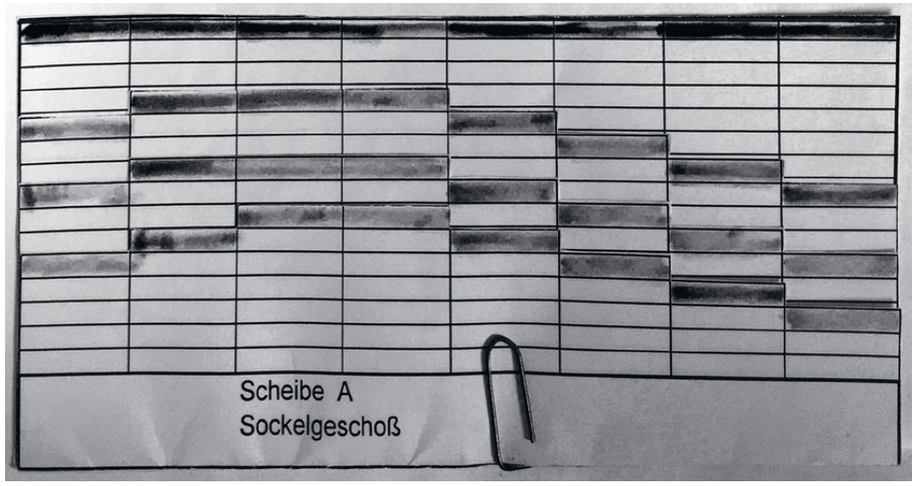
Fig. 43
The City Council inquiry from 2000, stamped with a ticking time bomb by a city planner, visualises the explosive political power of the future of the Hochhausscheiben. Halle City Administration

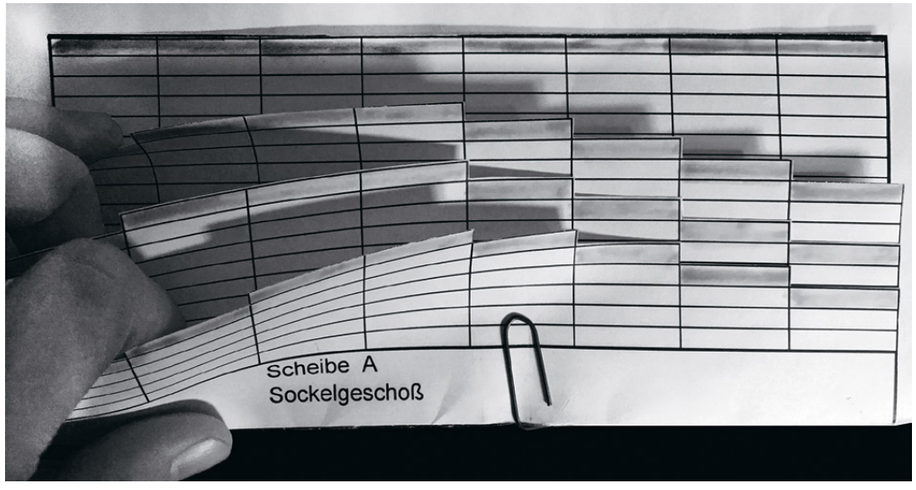
▼
Fig. 44
After plans to convert the Hochhausscheiben into solar towers failed, a politician resigned from the City Council in protest and had '*trotz alledem!*' ('despite it all!') affixed to the façade of Scheibe C. Photo by Schmuhl n.d. (2010)

▲
Fig. 45
Especially the first-generation Neustadt residents stand by the buildlings and follow the city's actions with vigilance and doubt

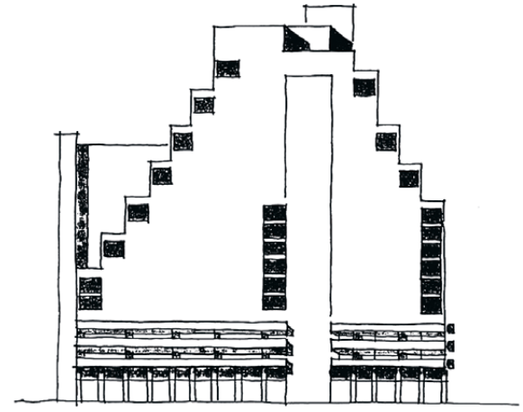


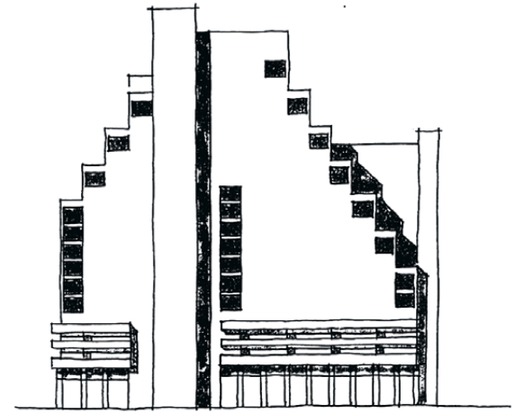
▲
Fig. 46
Concept for the theatre project Hotel Neustadt in Scheibe A.
raumlaborberlin 2002





▲
Fig. 47
In search of alternatives: a resident's proposal for a partial demolition with floors to be removed variably across buildings A—D from 2000.





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▲
Fig. 48/49
Possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben.
Uwe Graul, Hermann & Valentiny and Partners, Morgner & Partner 2001

Doubt and Accountability

In 1999, various city departments received an anonymous letter entitled 'Stop, demolition is not a solution!'. A concerned citizen questioned why buildings A and C were vacant and what plans existed for their future. 'Are they going to be renovated, or are they threatened by demolition? But that can't be the solution (demolition and new construction).' The author referenced an example from Magdeburg, where buildings were demolished to open a view of the cathedral, only to be replaced by a new building. The citizen felt betrayed and wrote: 'It would be *mean* if something like that were planned here for profit' (receipt date, 05.11.1999, emphasis added).

Between January and April 2005, 511 citizens visited the neighbourhood office in Halle-Neustadt. Among them, 19 asked about the future of the Hochhausscheiben and either criticised their appearance or the city's lack of immediate action to improve the situation. At a neighbourhood conference organised in May of the same year, citizens were referring to the Hochhausscheiben as 'problem children' that were not (properly) taken care of (3rd District Conference in Halle-Neustadt report, 17.05.2005). Concerned neighbours often took initiative. In a letter from 1998 to the State of Saxony-Anhalt, a city representative had written that the owners of the renovated Scheibe D got involved in the search for possible futures for the other buildings 'because they are naturally concerned about the future of their surroundings' (letter, 23.03.1998).[39] In 'public debate', as the planning department put it in a letter to a citizen, 'citizens and stakeholders express their concerns, wishes and ideas and enter into a discussion with the city and the state about the actually existing framework conditions and possibilities for action by the public authorities'. Requests by citizens can, as the letter continued, 'increase the pressure to act and can, if necessary, accelerate solutions to problems' (letter to a citizen, December 2013).

As I observed, the Hochhausscheiben on standby came to matter politically – they emerged as matters of public consideration, contestation and justification. While their uncertain future was perceived as a problem, there was no (simple) solution to the problem. This way, they 'sparked publics into being' (Marres 2005). They generated publics not only through their material presence and location, but precisely because they embodied an unresolved matter. As Lippmann (2002) put it:

> it is in controversies of this kind, the hardest controversies to disentangle, that the public is called in to judge.
> Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are

39 Of course, not every citizen got involved in searches for possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben. While some citizens' engagement can be explained by physical, professional or biographical proximity, broader publics are generated by what Gomart and Hajer (2003, 47) refer to as 'forms'. These public-generating forms include neighbourhood conferences and other events, but also newspaper articles, concepts and referendums. Through these forms, different publics interact with the city. Standby's public, as I will treat it here, consists of those whose caring for the buildings and their future in one way or another we can trace.

> lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. (as cited in Marres 2005, 211)

Buildings on standby exemplify precisely such controversies. They present complex, indeterminate problems for which no ready-made solutions exist. According to Marres (2005, 209), following Lippmann and Dewey, 'complex issues actually *enable* public involvement in politics' (original emphasis).

In what follows, I address ethico-political questions by examining how 'accountability relations are enacted' (Woolgar & Neyland 2013, 14) with regards to objects on standby – namely, the Hochhausscheiben. The term 'accountable' has, as Woolgar and Neyland show with reference to various dictionaries, different meanings:

> **accountable**: adj. 1. Subject to having to report, explain or justify; responsible, answerable. 2. That can be explained, explicable. (Random House Dictionary, 1967) and **accountable** (adjective). 1. **responsible**. Responsible to somebody else or to others, or responsible for something 2. **able to be explained**. Capable of being explained. (Encarta Dictionary, 2006, as cited in Woolgar & Neyland 2013, 31, original emphasis)

As Woolgar and Neyland (31) note, 'a first sense' of the word 'connotes moral or ethical compulsion. A second sense connotes technical capability.' According to them, 'discussions about the moral order of governance – what should and should not be done with ordinary stuff – are populated by a litany of contrasts, nearly always [...] between what could be done and what was in fact done' (6–7). My aim here is neither a moral judgement nor a determination of the limits of responsibility nor the claim that acting responsibly can actually mean refusing to accept responsbility (Metzger 2014, 1007). Rather, in a sort of 'moral inquiry' (Beauregard 2015, 534), I turn to how actors address and negotiate questions of who is or should be responsible and what it would mean to act responsibly. The aim is to explore how actors address moral questions of what 'good' or 'right' ways of caring for the Hochhausscheiben would look like. I consider contestations over who should care – and how and what/who is not taken care of – to be central questions of politics (Gomart & Hajer 2003, 36).

Marres (2005, 212) argues that while '"manageable" problems can be expected to be taken care of by existing institutions', the 'public can adopt an affair when currently available instances are failing to address it in a satisfactory way'. In the case of the Hochhausscheiben, publics took an interest because they perceived them as an ongoing, unresolved problem. This engagement was often driven by emotional attachment to the buildings and doubts about the city's handling of the issue. Doubt emerged in situations of unclear responsibilities and where the question of responsibility appeared pressing. As Pelkmans (2013, 2) notes, 'doubt points [...] to pragmatic referents, to the question "what to do?" Questions of being, of truth and of action should always be seen in relation to each other.' Woolgar and Neyland (2013, 221) argue that it is in moments of disruption including breakdown and failure but also challenge and contestation that 'the artful enactment, constitution, display, or concealment of governance and accountability relations are brought to the fore'. In each moment of disruption, 'central and taken for granted aspects of mundane governance are disrupted' (221). Interactions around these claims reveal expectations and how (unfulfillable) expectations are dealt with. Rather than disrupting the taken for granted, doubts point to the instability of standby and further destabilise standby politically. Rather than necessarily fostering a new form of 'caring for place' (Metzger 2014), doubts are able to destabilise the 'social and moral order' (Woolgar & Neyland 2013, 243). This destabilisation may, however, eventually lead to resolution, commitment and cooperation – potentially contributing to an ending of the buildings' state of standby.

Doubt has become an important research interest in relation to experiences of uncertainty, crisis, transition or failure (Bear 2014; Carey & Pedersen 2017, 18; Gladwell 2013; Janeja & Bandak 2018; Pelkmans 2013). Baer (2014), for example, sees doubt as a central theme in conflicting times; Carey and Pedersen (2017) outline ways of understanding infrastructures, from social to affective, that are involved in generating and sustaining uncertainty and doubt. Pelkmans, in his *Outline for an Ethnography of Doubt* (2013), understands doubt as a 'quality' rather than a clearly definable phenomenon. Here, doubt is part of a series of phenomena that comprise parts of 'cycles of hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment' (3). According to him, uncertainty can activate doubt, but in contrast to uncertainty, doubt always includes an assumed existence of alternatives. Furthermore, 'doubt has a complicated relationship with belief [he later writes that 'doubt and belief should not be seen as opposites, but rather as co-constitutive parts' (4)], and the same holds for the relationship with action: rather than necessarily leading to inaction (although that is certainly a possibility), doubt may also be a facilitator of action by triggering a need for resolution' (3–4).

Doubt, Pelkmans (2013, 5) argues, is a relational phenomenon shaped by shifting temporal connections. His focus lies primarily on how doubt affects individual or collective lives, and on how people make choices between alternatives, how they change opinions and 'and how they come to terms with not being certain' (16). Building on this perspective, I explore the role of doubt in shaping engagement with the buildings, how it figures in relations between citizens and the local state and enactments of accountability and the becoming of the buildings themselves.

Demand: Doubts and Convictions

One of the central controversies in the un/making of possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben revolved around the question of possible use(r)s. Imagining a future for the buildings was impossible without imagining future occupants. Yet the questions of who could and should live there, shaped by both anticipation and speculation, were answered differently by various actors, including citizens, developers and city planners.

Revitalising for Whom?

In 2002, during a consultation held by Halle's city administration, architects Graul et al. – commissioned by the city to develop a revitalisation concept for the centre of Neustadt – recommended to preserve all five towers. However, their proposal quickly sparked controversy around the question for whom the buildings would be refurbished. The architects suggested that preservation would be viable if the buildings were put to mixed use: office and residential use and 'special' housing, such as housing for students and pensioners. They were convinced: if '[d]ifferent typologies set new standards for flats and offices, they will represent alternatives to the monotonous offer of the surroundings' (Graul et al. 2002). This way the architects suggested that turning the buildings into an offer that differed from existing supply in Halle Neustadt would ensure the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben.

The proposed uses were met with skepticism during the consultation phase. Some of the local actors present at the consultation (most of the owners of the Hochhausscheiben did not attend) voiced strong doubts about residential use. The manager of the nearby shopping centre described the proposal as politically explosive, given the vacancy problem faced by housing companies. A local pastor questioned whether there would be any demand at all. A business owner asked what rent levels the architects had assumed in their calculations. According to the minutes, Graul et al. projected 9 Deutsche Mark per square metre for housing and 12 Deutsche Mark per square metre for commercial use, which they considered realistic (minutes, 12.04.2002). Whether these prices were in fact realistic depended not only on the required investment but also on assumptions about which rental levels would be low enough to attract tenants. The discussion highlighted a deeper uncertainty: it remained unclear whether the buildings could meet current and future housing demands, what possible uses they could serve and who their potential users might be. Seeking answers necessarily involves anticipation and speculation, as the central question is whether there could be demand, both now and in the future. The then ongoing population decline in Halle-Neustadt reinforced this uncertainty. The key issue was whether the Scheiben could create a housing offer that would attract residents and, if so, who these residents could or should be.

These uncertainties and ambiguities triggered doubts (cf. Pelkmans 2013, 16) among city representatives and citizens. While the city doubted that there was any demand, citizens in turn doubted that such doubts were justified and started questioning the city's argumentation. Standby, as I suggest, comes with doubts that render it politically unstable, because the city's legitimacy for sticking to the goal of revitalising the Hochhausscheiben is legitimised through participating citizens. If citizens assume that the city will set the goal but won't pursue it, a central relationship that gives standby a certain stability becomes fragile.

The city and citizens advocating for the buildings' preservation agreed that preservation should be the goal and that finding a (long-term) use was essential to achieving that goal. While the city repeatedly emphasised that demand was the basis for any action, it also assumed that such demand was minimal or non-existent. In a reply to a citizen's association from 2013, for example, a planner wrote: '[t]he basic question is always who has a need and for what is this need?' (letter, draft, September 2013). Yet earlier letters from 2009 acknowledged: '[t]he most important issue for the preservation of the tower blocks is to find a user. Due to shrinking population figures in the Neustadt district, the need for residential and office space is decreasing.' (letter, 10.12.2009) In a letter to the state of Saxony-Anhalt, the city even wrote that 'the demand for office and residential use is practically zero' (letter, 20.07.2009).

Citizens challenged this assumption. In 2015, a member of a citizens' association supporting the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben wrote to the planning department:

> In the past, the public debate on the Halle-Neustadt city centre and the associated Hochhausscheiben was essentially and recurrently characterised by two main arguments:
> 1. it was assumed that there were no possibilities of use for the buildings at all.
> 2. it was assumed that any refurbishment would be uneconomical.
> We have long doubted the validity of both arguments.
> (letter, 30.03.2015)

This explicit expression of doubt led the city to specify its own doubts about the existence of demand. A handwritten note on a letter to the citizens' group by one of the planners reads: '[t]here is need, but not there and like that!'

(letter, draft, September 2013). Furthermore, it turned out that the city only considered certain user groups to be useful for the Hochhausscheiben but had doubts that they would move into the buildings.

From an urban development perspective, residential use was either generally refused or envisioned as high-priced housing. Urban planners emphasised the need to increase diversity and comfort in Halle-Neustadt, 'not just cheap housing'; 'ideally, even new construction' should be made possible (interview with a planner in MZ Saalekurier, 16.05.2014). Guided by the ideal of a 'social mix', the city aimed to attract middle-class residents and families to stabilise the district for the long term. As the alderman told me, the city administration was interested in 'the middle price segment, because there are far too many cheap flats in Halle-Neustadt and we simply have to make sure that the middle class, i.e. a middle-upper segment, feel comfortable there and would like to move there' (interview, 28.05.2021).

In 2015, the mayor publicly stated that the aim was 'to house high-quality flats, especially for families, in the Scheiben' (MZ, 07.04.2015). A commissioned study found that

> with an estimated investment requirement of 17 to 20 million euros, different housing and use typologies in a higher quality segment could be accommodated in the Scheiben, which would meaningfully complement the offer in Neustadt, and that an economic viability could be achieved without subsidies already with a net cold rent of approximately 7.50 euros per square metre. (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 5)

In contrast, the resolution text on the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben states that '[t]he predominant interest of investors' was to establish 'low-price small flats'. This, however, 'speaks against the urban goals of a balanced mix of uses to strengthen the centre function and to supplement the existing housing supply with special forms of housing' (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 11). The investor of the ongoing renovation of Scheibe C described the city's reluctance toward their project: '[i]t's plain and simple to see that the city doesn't want this project – why? Because the housing companies say that with this project you are taking away our tenants. We say, no, we won't do it because what we are doing doesn't exist yet.' (interview, 18.05.2020) While the investor aimed to attract students to Neustadt through the creation of micro-apartments, the city also sought to bring in new residents – but not through the already widespread model of micro-apartments. Another investor saw an opportunity in 2015 to revitalise one of the tower blocks by simply renovating it and setting up accommodation for refugees (VI/2015/01130, 2015). Subsequently, Halle's city administration weighed the potential advantages and disadvantages of using one or several of the buildings for this purpose but expressed concerns about a spatial concentration of social problems, revealing implicit assumptions about social problems associated with refugees or with their precarious status.

In fact, Halle-Neustadt was already found to be a socially weak neighbourhood. It was included in the National Urban Development Programme Social Cohesion (previously called Social City), a programme established in 1999 to foster 'the stabilisation and upgrading of economically and socially disadvantaged and structurally weak neighbourhoods' (Ludwig & Epp 2021,1). Not only for Halle-Neustadt, but for many East German cities and towns, an increasing social differentiation and polarisation of urban areas and social segregation in residential areas was observed, with residential areas with high vacancy rates such as Halle-Neustadt seeing a spatial concentration of social problems (Beer 2002, 53; Haller & Liebmann 2002, 45; Bernt & Volkmann 2023, 151). Doubts about potential demand were closely linked to how the buildings were viewed in relation to their social and physical environment. They also reflected the city's development goals for Neustadt and its belief in the ideal of social mix – particularly the aim to attract middle-class families. By redeveloping the Hochhausscheiben (and all other projects), the city hoped to counteract segregation and improve Neustadt's image. The doubts about a demand for the Hochhausscheiben must be understood as shaped by convictions, assumptions and expectations about who might want to live there – or not.

Standby and Its Public: The Anchor

From the perspective of Halle's planning department, Neustadt has not become a 'banlieue' in the past decades only because of what they call 'anchor tenants', i.e. the first residents of Neustadt living here for forty years now (MZ Saalekurier, 16.05.2014). Similarly to the planners' view, a sociologist from Halle, Pasternack (2014c, 523), writes that 'GDR housing, which was initially intended to be *social* in the true sense of the word, suddenly became a social hotspot, alleviated only by the civilising effect of the everyday routines of the ageing first residents, insofar as they remained in the suburb' (original emphasis).

These first-time residents were also among the most actively engaged in searching for possible futures for the high-rises. They took part in city-organised events and other forms of participatory planning, such as a questionnaire distributed during the 2019 exhibition of the structural concept for Neustadt's centre in Scheibe D. The median age of participants was 69 years, and most had lived in Neustadt for an average of forty years (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2019, 2–3). Respondents welcomed the city's intention to preserve the Hochhausscheiben but criticised their vacancy and neglected surroundings (4–5). Through such public engagement, the city saw its goal of revitalisation affirmed. As one planner noted in 2019, involving citizens helped

legitimise municipal projects. In practice, primarily those with emotional ties to the buildings took part (field notes, 24.06.2019). The city needed them, but as the years went by, doubts grew among them. Although they agreed that the buildings needed long-term uses for preservation and even supported the goal of attracting middle class tenants, they believed that suitable uses could in fact be found. Members of one of the associations were convinced that 'business follows tenants, not the other way round' and that '[i]n the sense of a stronger demand orientation, however, one should not focus solely on a trend target group' (letter, 30.03.2015). In fact, they were also not in favour of housing refugees in the buildings but were demanding an 'unconditional preservation' and a good mix of age-appropriate and student housing at affordable rents (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2019, 9–10). They also saw potential here for alternative organisational forms of housing, e.g. cooperatives (letter, 29.08.2013). As they told me, people in Neustadt often moved and they would, in their view, also be willing to move into the Hochhausscheiben (field notes, 15.05.2019). The city, however, didn't envisage Neustadt residents as future users of the buildings. While low-cost small flats could ensure revitalisation, the city's goal was to attract new, middle-class residents, arguing that abundant affordable housing already existed.

Standby's Political Instability

With the enduring vacancy of the high-rises, citizens began to doubt the city's argumentations and actions. In 2015, a citizens' association criticised the city and its municipal housing company GWG for using an alleged lack of demand to justify inaction on a vacant high-rise in central Halle-Neustadt. In fact, a 2014 article confirmed that the housing company dismissed renovation plans as it was questioning future student population growth and deeming senior housing conversions too costly. GWG also ruled out office space due to low demand and referenced the vacancy of 3,000 flats in a central housing block in Neustadt to argue against adding 4,000 more to the shrinking market (MZ, 25.02.2014). According to the citizens, however, the 3,000 vacant flats were due to the fact that GWG had cleared the building for planned demolition and was avoiding their responsibility by repeating the same problematisations (letter, 30.03.2015). They supposed that the argument of lacking demand served to keep

> a discussion of the problem [...] as far away as possible from the municipal sphere of responsibility. In our view, the city and – consequently – its subordinate GWG have so far been far from any significant commitment with regard to the high-rise buildings. (letter, 30.03.2015)

This controversy reveals the political instability of standby. In fact, those citizens who were united with the city in pursuing the revitalisation of the buildings began to doubt the city's intentions to achieve this goal. The certainty of the stable relationship of Neustadt's first-time residents with the municipal administration increasingly crumbled. In addition to these citizens, there were others who saw a pretext in the argument that the high-rises could not be demolished because of the emotional attachment of the citizens to the buildings. In 2010, after reading in the newspaper that the city planning department had told a federal politician that the Neustadt residents supported preserving the buildings, a citizen wrote an email to the city:

> [C]an it be true that [the city representative] justified [...] the non-demolition of the battered and long-vacant Hochhausscheiben [...] by saying that 'many here are attached to the Scheiben?' I have lived in Neustadt near the centre since 1971 and do not know any citizen who actually cares about the now deteriorated Scheiben. If they can no longer be used, they can only be demolished. (email, 02.09.2010)

Generally, citizens' doubts prompted the city to explain itself. Although the city aimed to preserve the buildings and find a use for them, planners were not necessarily in favour of unconditional preservation. They believed that putting the buildings back into use would preoccupy generations of planners to come (field notes, 27.05.2021). For those emotionally attached to and standing by the buildings, however, the prolonged uncertainty felt more urgent; their doubts deepened as no future had so far materialised. While these citizens legitimised the goal of revitalisation, they challenged the city's assumptions. In my view, the buildings' in-between state acquired a certain stability through the shared goal of revitalisation between the city and its citizens, as well as the shared recognition of the gap between this goal and its achievability. However, standby became politically unstable whenever citizens began to doubt the city's genuine commitment to its stated objectives.

Attention: Doubt, Alternatives and Expectation

> After the buildings became vacant, various attempts were made to bring the Hochhausscheiben to the attention of people interested in using them. Spectacular actions such as the Hotel Neustadt theatre project (2003) as well as demolition variants (2009) and interim uses (e.g. self-storage, climbing tower, solar cell installation) were discussed. [...] development possibilities for the Scheibenensemble [...], in addition to professional expertise, relied on the broad participation of the citizens. (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 4)

Directing attention to the Scheiben was a central strategy of the city of Halle in its efforts to turn the buildings into attractive objects for investment and use. Concepts and studies, along with workshops involving experts and citizens, played an important role of garnering the attention of investors, the broader public and politicians from both the state of Saxony-Anhalt and the federal government.

A number of concepts and events aimed to draw attention to the buildings in order to generate private investment. One example was the International Building Exhibition (IBA 2002–2010), which planned to include the Hochhausscheiben albeit without direct financial support for the buildings. At least, the city emphasised this point in a letter to an investor in 2005, reaffirming its commitment to revitalisation while stressing that 'attention' only could be generated – alongside the intention to pave the way for redevelopment and reuse (letter, 15.09.2005).

One of the IBA projects was the construction of a skatepark at the entrance to Neustadt's centre, at the foot of Scheibe E, celebrated nationally and even internationally. Yet this upgrade sharpened the contrast with 'the slowly decaying Scheiben' as planners wrote in a letter to the alderman. They 'appear even more alarming and represent not only an image problem, but also increasingly a functional and aesthetic burden for the owners and users of the adjacent buildings. It is practically impossible to experience this urban space without the feeling of a "city in decay".' (letter, 10.08.2011)

The city sought to leverage the attention that high-profile visits generated, including that of the Federal President, to highlight the buildings' deteriorating condition and promote them – once again – as suitable for state offices. Despite these efforts, hopes for state support were at a low point after the final decision not to use Scheibe C (see also Part I). According to the city, this may have stemmed from Neustadt's poor image. One planner stated that while the official explanation for abandoning the relocation of tax offices to Scheibe C was a financial decision,

> it is common knowledge that an important reason – perhaps even the real reason – was the resistance of the tax officials against a move to the centre of Halle-Neustadt (letter, 10.08.2011).

It became apparent that, although the site was gaining attention, the increasingly decaying appearance of the buildings evoked aversion. Following the IBA, the newly founded Competence Centre for Urban Redevelopment set itself the task of opening up 'new perspectives for urban development' – among them '[r]edefining growth and proposing solutions to various issues' (Kompetenzzentrum Stadtumbau in der SALEG, n.d.). The centre subsequently also took care of the marketing of Scheibe C.

In 2014, the state prepared an exposé and advertised Scheibe C to investors at real estate fairs. After these attempts to draw attention to the building initially failed, the centre was involved in organising an expert and a student workshop to develop ideas for the buildings. The aim of the international student workshop in 2014, entitled 'Re-Interpreting Utopia: HaNeu 3.0' (Kompetenzzentrum Stadtumbau in der SALEG, 2014b), was to show that a revitalisation was indeed possible and that the buildings had structural and architectural qualities. The master theses that final year students developed from the workshop were oriented towards open use, as no future use was foreseeable at the time. The posters summarising the ideas helped to find buyers at real estate fairs, as one of the professors leading the workshop in 2014 told me (interview, 27.11.2018).

Some of these ideas sparked heated debates, particularly a proposal to establish vertical farming in one of the Scheiben, which was dismissed by both the state and the Competence Centre (interview, 27.11.2018). The public also debated this proposal: under the headline 'Greenhouse of Ideas', a local newspaper highlighted vertical farming as a major international trend. In Halle, however, some of the workshop's proposals were considered 'crazy' (MZ Saalekurier, 25.03.2014). Asked about the controversial suggestion to turn the high-rises into greenhouses, a leading planner from Halle told the newspaper, this might be an interesting interim solution – and only an interim use – much cheaper than an actual reuse, as it wouldn't involve people directly (MZ Saalekurier, 16.05.2014). Generally however, planners feared that interim uses might distract from the long-term goal of permanent reuse. In a 2012 letter to the state, the city deliberately avoided mentioning temporary solutions. As one planner noted internally,

‘[i]f they answer that there will be no “real” use, we can bring up the intermediate solutions in a next letter and go into more detail. There is now a danger that our real goal will be diluted by the interim solutions.’ (note on draft, letter, September 2012)

When I asked about the role of concepts and possible futures, one planner told me that

> some concepts were only checking on the ‘general feasibility’ or developing ideas, others were realisable, but as always in Halle, things fail because of money – that’s sometimes also good, because it’s not creating million-dollar graves, but it’s just not the case that you can put money in your hands to experiment with other uses or the like. (field notes, 25.06.2019)

In fact, while interim uses were considered, the primary goal was to generate attention in the hope that promoting economic development would lead to new potential uses for the buildings. Hwang and Lee (2020, 540) describe this as a general concern of shrinking cities, namely the concern to find any use at all for vacant buildings, whereas in cities with tight housing markets, debates focus instead on what kinds of uses buildings should have. Concepts, including those for interim uses, form an important basis for illuminating possibilities, and the city commissioned such in order to draw attention to the buildings and open up spaces of possibility. While the concepts from the student workshop in 2014 demonstrated the ‘general feasibility’ of conversion and reuse, an actual feasibility check regarding costs, regulations, etc. remained pending. The subsequent study by Lacaton and Vassal (together with Fischer, 2015, financed mainly by the Competence Centre) also confirmed the general feasibility and demonstrated the economic feasibility of revitalisation for residential and office use. But again, the study’s primary role was to create spaces of possibility and act as a ‘device of interessement’ intended to generate publics and enable the ‘enrolment’ of investors (Callon 1984, 211). An article quotes the head of the Competence Centre saying that ‘[w]hen the study of the architectural office is available in June of this year, it could be used to solicit financiers – for example at Europe’s largest real estate trade fair Expo Real in Munich’ (MZ Saalekurier, 09.06.2015). The concepts were intended to draw the attention of ‘external’ (external to Halle-Neustadt and Halle) actors to the Hochhausscheiben and, ideally, to enable futures through private investment. Furthermore, commissioning concepts was simply one of the things that could be done. Concepts may prolong an in-between state, as they maintain potentiality and allow the city to buttress in/activity.

What’s the Problem? Looking for Alternatives

Citizens rejected what they considered ‘unrealistic’ proposals for temporary uses. In interactions between the city and citizens from Halle, concepts such as those produced by the students, and most notably the idea of turning one of the Scheiben into a vertical farm, suddenly took on a political role (Gomart & Hajer 2003, 54). Because the workshop ideas were intended to generate external publicity and present the buildings as spaces of possibility, citizens whose attention did not have to be generated or directed challenged them precisely for this reason. They perceived the gap between visions and reality as increasingly harmful.

In 2014, citizens demanded: ‘no more concepts!’. In an online forum, one user wrote: ‘this is bullshit and probably only serves to buy the mayor time’ (HalleSpektrum, 12.02.2014). In particular, citizens fighting for the buildings’ preservation turned increasingly critical towards concepts as these did not materialise. The workshops in 2014, two of them told me, felt like the tenth event of the same kind, without any progress. ‘Let’s be honest’, they said; using the buildings for sports, education or as a slide, ‘that’s not possible to realise there’ (field notes, 15.05.2019). The slide refers to an artistic vision by Kyong Park, proposing a huge transparent tube in which people could slide through and along skeletonised Scheibe A, transforming the buildings and Halle-Neustadt into a tourist attraction (Park 2004).

In the citizens’ view, studies and calculations also served the city to say that it was doing everything in its power, but that nothing was possible. The city’s argumentation in debates on ownership, demand and use was ‘deliberately heavy-handed’, the citizens were convinced (field notes, 15.05.2019). They saw the investors’ hesitation as related to the fact that the city did not do its ‘homework’ to make a revitalisation possible. According to one citizen, this included above all the development of a feasible and what they would consider a realistic concept. They told a local magazine that they see the reason for the reluctance of possible investors in the lack of a concept for the Scheiben.

> The city must name clear perspectives and commit to this location in the centre of Neustadt. But there is not even a preservation statute […] At the end of the chain of measures, there could also be an expropriation procedure if an agreement with the owners is not possible. But before that, the city has to do its homework. (HalleSpektrum, 13.02.2014)

A representative of another association was reported saying that what was needed promptly wasn't a utilisation concept but a marketing concept. They saw the 'big problem' in the situation on the real estate market in eastern Germany and the lack of investors that was to be expected for the next years. 'That is the real problem', they told the newspaper (HalleSpektrum, 19.02. 2014). Here, citizens were putting impossibility and the conditions of possibility up for debate. In conversation with me, citizens said they had initially supported the city's activities, such as workshops and commissioned studies, but then gained the impression that the city was allowing ideas to develop whose implementation was neither possible nor wanted (field notes, 15.05.2019).

They became impatient, participated in the debates and made suggestions themselves – pointing to what they perceived as alternatives. For example, one citizen sent a concept suggesting the establishment of research institutions for robotics in the buildings because 'the struggle over many years to preserve and renovate the Hochhausscheiben, including current international architects and student workshops' had not led to any solution (email, 15.10.2014). They called their concept: 'The Hochhausscheiben on the way back to the future? A future concept of use, shaped by the scientific change of modernity and the ever-growing demands of a rapidly developing automated society.' In the concept paper, the citizen asked:

> Would this simple citizen concept for a location, which is unfortunately still socially controversial in many minds, correspond to the ideas of the professors and future students? [...] is the state government really sleeping through the future now??? With these suggestions in the framework of the ISEK 2025,[40] this can certainly not be explained by a lack of ideas from the citizens! (concept, 14.10.2014)

The same citizen had developed a concept in 2009 suggesting the deconstruction of individual buildings. In their concept, the citizen saw major obstacles to a development of the buildings in their complex ownerships, in vandalism and decay, as well as in the fact that the city had no money and that neither the state of Saxony-Anhalt nor the federal state would help the city out. After identifying these obstacles, the citizen formulated 'solutions', including the '[i]mmediate expropriation of the owners of the Hochhausscheibe A, B, and E to eliminate possible dangers or sources of accidents' and '[i]nvolvement of the population, associations, organisations, institutions, etc. in finding a solution to the above-mentioned problem.' In fact, the expropriation they proposed was meant not only to stop the decay and accompanying security risks but to provide an opportunity to look for alternatives with the involvement of the entire urban society. They suggested that the city administration should compile all suggestions and take them to the City Council in order to make decisions (proposal, 2009).

Doubt and Expectations

As we have seen, citizens took action themselves in response to the city's perceived inaction. They proposed alternatives, offered suggestions and called on the city to actively engage in thinking about alternatives. Moreover, they expected the city to show a clear commitment to the Hochhausscheiben and set the conditions for their preservation, revitalisation and reuse. To them, the city and especially its administration were to blame for the dilemma of the Hochhausscheiben (field notes, 15.05.2019). They openly showed their dissatisfaction with the city because, in their eyes, decisions about the future of the city and thus also the high-rises were made by the city – a pattern also observed by Ringel (2014, 57) in the East German town of Hoyerswerda. In a letter from 2015 (quoted earlier), the citizens' association wrote to the city:

> The sincerity of the desire for preservation must not be limited to moderation alone [...] The citizens' association Stadtgestaltung would like to express two points of view in this regard:
> 1. it is not possible to save the Neustadt district centre without the use of municipal resources.
> 2. return-oriented investors will have little interest in Halle-Neustadt as a whole. There are many more profitable real estate locations nationwide. This illusion should therefore finally be abandoned. (letter, 30.03.2015)

Citizens refused the transfer of responsibilities onto corporations, as they did not believe that these would actually bring about or secure a future for the buildings. They also doubted the effectiveness of the city's actions. Their problematisation addresses a general trend accompanying neoliberal urban governance – namely, the delegation of responsibilities onto corporations and/or urban communities (see, for example, Hilbrandt 2019, 353).

The city could not, or only barely, meet their expectations. In fact, there was a mismatch between what the citizens expected and what the city planners themselves considered to be their role and agency (cf. Woolgar & Lezaun 2013, 12). The mismatch between what a city and urban planning are able to do and what citizens expect the state to do reveals ethico-political

40 The workshops and events organised by the city as part of the 50th anniversary of Neustadt served, as it were, to prepare the Integrative Urban Development Concept (Integriertes Stadtentwicklungskonzept, ISEK) 2025.

dimensions of standby. By challenging articulations of accountability, this mismatch, I suggest, renders standby's in/activity politically unstable.

In reference to existing literature on standby, one could say that citizens see the city as 'bystanding' instead of 'standing with.' There is, according to Baraitser (interviewed by Kemmer, Kühn, & Weber 2021, 28), in fact a 'double meaning of standby – of both active inactivity, but also standing by, or taking up the position of a bystander, someone who witnesses something without intervening'. McCormack (2021, 255–256) defines the bystander as 'a stubbornly human figure of ethical and political in/action'. While, in some way, the bystander in his conception '*stands with*, aligning and orienting themselves with others' (original emphasis), the bystander 'in standing by [...] also appears to fail to act. The bystander fails to respond to the ethical or political demands of the event or situation or circumstance as it unfolds insofar as it foregrounds the suffering of another.' He argues that

> the bystander reminds us of how, in certain situations, the in/action of the individual can become the focus for an insistent and unavoidable judgement. The possible in/action of the bystander embodies, in turn, the potential failure of standby as a condition of readiness to act. It is a prompt to ask about how standby as a mode of organizing makes action-in- the-event possible and about the conditions that make such action less likely. (McCormack 2021, 255)

An article in an architecture journal described the city of Halle as a mere 'spectator' amid ongoing speculation and resales. While the city debated how to deal with the Hochhausscheiben, it lacked ownership and thus remained on the sidelines (Scheffler 2016). Yet the citizens expected from the city that the future would be made within the city administration and the City Council – they saw it as the city's responsibility. As Ringel (2014, 58) observes, 'this is where the public imaginary expects binding future decisions to be made'.

Enacting responsibility would mean, in the view of some citizens, taking steps that could go as far as to expropriate the owners as a last resort, if owners were not caring for their properties. They were particularly disappointed with the municipal housing companies. It was incomprehensible to them that the municipal companies invested in new construction rather than taking care of the centre of Neustadt (letter, 29.08.2013). From their point of view, that would be their task as municipal companies. In a letter from 2012 the citizens wrote:

> In order to end the current phase of lethargy, lack of ideas for use, existing financing concerns and lack of initiatives, the respective owners must of course be addressed first. [...] [W]ho is supposed to understand that elsewhere in Halle, under far less favourable initial conditions, locations are constantly being sought for new building expenditure, even though the existing ones could be put to good use? (letter, 02.07.2012)

While the citizens' criticism was mainly directed at the owners, whom they viewed as responsible for maintaining the buildings, they held the city and the municipal housing companies accountable for their inaction. The planning department responded by explaining that municipal housing companies equally followed market demand – which was lacking in the centre of Neustadt. From the city's point of view, one of the problems of the buildings on standby was that high initial investment faced uncertain rentability (letter, 24.09.2013). But even uncertainty did not dissuade the citizens from seeing the city's duty to secure a future for the buildings. They kept questioning the city's in/actions and combined their own proposals with the demand that the city and the housing companies stand by their responsibility for Neustadt.

Claim and Commitment

The political pressure on the city to take the future of the Scheiben into its own hands kept growing. Engaged citizens accused the city of merely trying to persuade owners through words rather than deeds. From their point of view, as they wrote in a letter to the city, the city's 'voluntary renunciation' of measures going beyond the conversation actively contributed to and promoted 'the indifferent attitude of individual owners. [...] Conversation alone (as the past has shown) will not bring about much; rather, years of toleration may be one of the main reasons for the buildings' continued neglect.' (letter, 30.03.2015) As these doubts increased, claims that the city should at least use one of the buildings itself also became louder. A newspaper article quotes a representative of a citizens' association saying that 'this isn't a question of money but of positioning – does the city want to preserve the buildings or not?' (MZ, 25.02.2014). Citizens held politicians accountable, in particular the mayor, who had publicly shown their willingness to engage with the buildings as early as 2013 during the election campaign. A monthly magazine published a citizen's question that refers to the mayor's statement during an election campaign event: 'What is your position on this issue following your successful election?' (Zachow Magazine, 2013 edition).

In 2014, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Neustadt, the mayor of Halle then issued an ultimatum, which also became the main task for

the city planners: a solution had to be found within a year, or the Hochhausscheiben would be demolished (interview, 08.07.2020). A newspaper spoke of the buildings' 'grace period in the anniversary year' (MZ, 25.02.2014).

Events around the anniversary were intended to involve the public in the search for a future for the Hochhausscheiben. The mayor's statement, published in the newspaper, prompted numerous citizens to participate in the events, contribute to online forums and contact the city planning department in person. Public debates on possible futures for the buildings gained momentum. One of the mayor's staff members remembered that there had been an outcry among the population when they publicly brought demolition to the table in 2014. They were reminded once again that the Scheiben were truly the symbol of Neustadt and that this was an emotional issue – 'you wouldn't believe it', they said (field notes, 12.05.2021). In fact, letters from citizens included statements such as: '[t]he buildings must be preserved, as they belong to Halle-Neustadt "like the Händel monument to the market square"' (letter, 20.02.2014) or: '[t]he heart of an entire district beats here' (02.07.2012). Others pointed out: '[d]emolition would not be reversible' (letter, 30.03.2015). These examples suggest that standby does indeed generate publics. It provokes emotions and attachments that mobilise people and spark debate.

A Need for Resolution

The announcement by the mayor increased expectations and pressed the city to actually find a solution. In this context, the long-standing demand of citizens' initiatives that the city of Halle should engage more by using one of the buildings as a seat of administration received new impetus.

In a letter from 2013, a citizen proposed the relocation of the administration and assumed that this would mean savings in the municipal budget because numerous rented office spaces would no longer have to be rented (letter, 29.08.2013). In their response, however, a city employee, commissioned by the mayor to reply, wrote: 'In the course of budget consolidation, I do not see a political majority to buy this building that comes with very high renovation costs, especially since the city of Halle (Saale) has no further need for municipal office buildings' (letter, draft, September 2013). Indeed, a newspaper article from 2013 described the city's role in relation to the future of the Hochhausscheiben: '[t]he city cannot and does not want to step in – the budget situation forbids it' (MZ, 30.06.2013).

Political pressure grew, especially on the mayor who conversely put the city planners on the spot. According to the planners I interviewed, the mayor personally took initiative a year later, saying they wanted to do something with the Scheiben and would make it happen. A planner commented: 'we have a very dynamic mayor who prefers visible results to long-term consideration [...]; all of a sudden, the idea came up to establish an administrative centre' (interview, 02.10.2018). The planners saw relocating the administration into the building generally as an obvious and fairly common step. Strategically moving public services, they argued, could help revitalise not just individual buildings but entire districts (interview, 08.07.2020). The city of Halle had already taken a similar approach with its current offices in Halle's city centre: a private investor renovated the building, and the city moved in as a tenant (group discussion, 28.05.2021). However, as one planner explained, 'the Neustadt location isn't that easy, as you can see, it has a rather peripheral location in the urban area. And the city administration would be an important anchor point.' (interview, 08.07.2020)

In the 2015 resolution on the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben, the possibility to use the buildings as administrative office was the preferred option. It said: 'From an urban development point of view, such a use is to be supported, as it could sustainably improve the desired mix of living and working in Neustadt' (VI/2015/01130, 2015, 7). After the resolution, a series of studies in 2015–2017 confirmed the suitability of the building for administrative use, its economic viability and even the administration's increased efficiency through the move to Scheibe A. However, the proposal to use Scheibe A must be seen primarily as a political decision that promoted the prioritisation of revitalising the Hochhausscheiben (VI/2017/02799, 2017, 3–4). Accordingly, political debates on the proposal ensued. In a City Council debate, the buildings' suitability was questioned regarding their location for administrative services (VI/2017/03293, 2017). Other critical enquiries, undertaken after the city administration had already moved into Scheibe A in 2021, concerned the consequences of the move, notably the future of buildings that fell vacant as the number of locations had been reduced from twenty-six to seventeen (VII/2022/04284, 2022). According to one politician from Halle, the move was an intended impulse that they welcomed because nothing else had happened or was seen to happen. However, they pointed out that there were several vacant properties in Halle's city centre. They remembered that the vacancies were a contentious issue within the City Council, as the administration did not provide any conclusive information on these sites across the city that would fall vacant with the administration's relocation to Scheibe A (interview, 28.11.2018).

Circumvention and Alignment

The City Council's decision to relocate the administration, as proposed by the very administration, was postponed twice and then replaced by a citizens' referendum (Decision in principle on the construction of an administrative centre in a Hochhausscheibe in Halle-Neustadt, VI/2017/02799, 2017). In 2017, a group of citizens petitioned the City Council 'that the citizens of Halle decide for themselves on the matter of Scheibe A' (20.06.2017). As a

newspaper article noted at the time, the association was trying to pressure the city into renting one of the Scheiben (Du Bist Halle, 30.05.2017). They had managed to collect 7,700 signatures (7,500 were required) to request a referendum, which they had planned to be held on 24.09.2017 together with the federal election. The possibility of replacing a formal decision with a citizen referendum was controversially discussed in the City Council. One council member raised doubts about whether the collected signatures truly reflected the views of the broader population. Another emphasised that a citizens' referendum would carry the status of a binding resolution, precluding the adoption of any opposing resolutions. And a third council member questioned the legitimacy of allowing citizens to decide on matters involving the financial implications of moving into a tower – specifically, a maximum net rent of 9.90 euros per square metre per month for a period of thirty years (VI/2017/02799, 2017). Ultimately, the decision was postponed (minutes, City Council, 21.06.2017). As one of the planners explained, the different parties in the City Council were mostly in favour of the city's engagement in the revitalisation of the buildings but had different visions of the ways to achieve this. They remembered how, '[i]n the end, the mayor did not initiate the referendum, but they supported it very much and then their position was confirmed by the citizens. The City Council took a more critical view at this point.' (interview, 08.07.2020)

The decision over the future of Scheibe A was shifted onto citizens, as the council members could not reach a decision. The City Council found itself caught in a dilemma, because both a 'yes' and a 'no' vote regarding the move to Scheibe A could be problematic: approval and thus a prioritisation of the Scheiben would present a burden to the city's budget and risk vacancies elsewhere, whereas a rejection could be interpreted as a failure to take advantage of a unique opportunity and a neglect of Neustadt. The conundrum reminds me of what Gherardi writes about decisions surrounding 'artificial nutrition'. Gherardi (2017, 46) describes that doctors often refuse to take decisions and how they shift the responsibility to make decisions about the life and death of the patient onto relatives. For the domain of care, she shows how through 'non-decision-making' non-professionals get involved and see themselves in a role of taking decisions over life and death in the place of doctors. In the case of using Scheibe A for administrative purposes, the referendum posed a simple 'yes' or 'no' decision: 'Do you support that the city of Halle (Saale) rent the renovated high-risebuilding A in Halle-Neustadt as a new administrative location, at a net cold rent of no more than 9.90 euros per square metre per month, for a period of thirty years?' (Stadt Halle (Saale) 2018, 1). The administrative office responsible for reviewing the process approved the holding of the referendum, the first of its kind in Halle. It did so, but 'not without considerable reservations': The reviewing office stated that a 'plausible and comprehensible comparison of variants was missing. Furthermore, information on the costs for the accommodation of administrative staff was not deemed 'comprehensible for citizens.' (Du Bist Halle, 30.08.2017) The state administration therefore played down its concerns on the grounds that non-approval would jeopardise the potential for any undertaking – welcome in principle – to submerge in a long process of litigation. The state administration expected that, should the decision be positive, the subsequent decisions on actual implementation would respect the principles of economy and efficiency and that notification requirements of the Local Government Constitution Act would be followed. While the state administrative office still clarified the legal issues one month before the planned referendum and two months before a compulsory auction of the building, the city's mayor invited the press to a tour of the building in August 2017. A journalist reports how the mayor used the opportunity to advertise their plans. The mayor was seen holding a torch, and a handout from the city explained: 'A decision against one of the Scheiben is a permanent decision against Neustadt-Centrum' (Du Bist Halle, 28.08.2017).

In fact, on the election day of 24 September 2017, a majority of voters in Halle supported the use of Scheibe A, with over 57 per cent voting yes. The required threshold of 48,000 Halle residents was exceeded, as more than 58,000 ultimately voted in favour of relocating the administrative offices to Scheibe A (MZ, 24.09.2017).

The preservation of the Hochhausscheiben was the mayor's plan and that of those citizens who had been fighting for the preservation of the buildings ever since they became vacant. In 2018, one citizen sent me photos of an information stand for the petition and wrote: 'we had to fight democratically as a citizens' association and individual fighters for the preservation of the Hochhausscheiben' (email, 16.10.2018). The flyer of their initiative said: 'Your vote for the future of the Scheiben!' On its website, the Bürgerverein Stadtgestaltung stated that, after many joint consultations with the mayor, very good cooperation had developed over the course of eight years. This alignment between citizens and the mayor allowed them to advance the preservation agenda even though some councillors remained indifferent or sceptical. According to the Bürgerverein, the mayor actively supported their suggestions for revitalising the Hochhausscheiben, particularly by implementing the use of Scheibe A as an administrative location. Additionally, the association criticised two former mayors, who were in office between 2000 and 2012, for being too short-sighted to accept the state offer to take over and use Scheibe C free of charge (Bürgerverein Stadtgestaltung Halle, n.d.). The city had in fact been offered this opportunity several times throughout the 2000s, as the state did not intend to use the building for its own administration. However, this proposal would not have found support among decision-makers at the time due to budget restrictions and the prioritisation of developing Halle's historic centre and demolishing vacant housing stock in Halle-Neustadt.

The 2017 alignment between the citizens and the mayor enabled them to achieve their objectives behind the City Council's back, not least by emotionalising and involving the public. Clearly, forms of politics, in this case the citizens' referendum, generate and transform the public, or publics (cf. Gomart & Hajer 2003, 37). Indeed, public engagement and political campaigning accelerated the alignment and helped overcome the impasse in the City Council, enabling Scheibe A to be turned 'on'. This case illustrates how citizen-driven initiatives not only influence formal decision-making but also reshape the political and physical urban landscape by creating new forms of accountability and mobilising actors beyond established institutional channels. However, transferring responsibility onto citizens who may lack the necessary expertise to make such a decision – in particular with regard to the public-private partnership and rental commitments – is not entirely unproblematic and the mayor's actions are equally ambivalent.

At the opening of Scheibe A in summer 2021, the meanwhile former mayor – who had been suspended from office prior to the opening following a vaccination scandal during the Covid pandemic – said that '"[t]his is a great day for Halle-Neustadt". It was not the City Council that brought it about but the citizens. It is important that citizens believe in direct democracy. The mayor encouraged people to get involved and speak out to the City Council on certain issues.' The press commented that they 'put on [their] own show here together' behind the construction fence (as they had been suspended) together with the members of the citizens' associations (Du Bist Halle, 02.07.2021). This performance also reveals how the mayor, to some extent, instrumentalised the citizens' engagement in their broader conflict with the Council. The mayor's drive to present themselves as a problem-solver met the citizens' determination to preserve the building. Their persistent frustration with the political neglect of the Hochhausscheiben gained visibility – and political force – through their collective engagement.

At the event, their successor and acting mayor – speaking in front of the fence – similarly confirmed in their opening speech that 'the decision was essentially initiated by the Halle-Neustadt-Verein and the (currently suspended) mayor [...]. "So we see here and now how a citizens' decision can have a direct influence on the shaping of the city"', they are quoted as saying in another article on the event (Du Bist Halle, 01.07.2021). By holding policymakers accountable, following their actions closely, transforming their expectations into concrete demands and backing them up with proposals, citizens had in fact helped speed up processes. Their struggle to build networks that would enable a revitalisation finally proved successful in the case of Scheibe A.

This study has traced how, in the case of buildings, standby is sustained through ongoing encounters, administrative entanglements and emotional as well as speculative attachments. It has shown that standby is not a neutral or passive condition but a contested mode of urban existence. What distinguishes buildings on standby from other vacant buildings is that they do not live a quiet and little-noticed life in ruination, but that many possible futures have been un/made for them. Buildings on standby are sites of debate about the city's future, challenging and affecting those involved in its production.

Since the Hochhausscheiben in Halle-Neustadt fell vacant around the year 2000, their possible futures have been continuously un/made – through bringing the past and future into the present, in confrontations with the buildings' materiality and through interactions with a range of people and things. These actors often escaped fixity, disconnecting and detaching themselves instead of aligning with one another – falling out of sync and turning standby into a struggle of un/making possible futures. The buildings were neither demolished nor renovated, in part because the future was kept open through the recurrent un/making of possible futures and the maintenance of the buildings' potentiality. Their persistent presence, their material obduracy and the absence of a shared (e)valuation prolonged their in-betweenness. Future-making on standby emerged as a struggle over the conditions and modalities of the im/possibilities of urban planning after socialism.

That one of the buildings was eventually reactivated in 2021 didn't happen because all the obstacles had been removed, but because new questions were asked, priorities shifted and alliances re-formed. Yet whether this signals a more durable future for the remaining buildings remains open.

Tensions

Standby can generally be understood as an in-between state permeated by tensions spanning between 'on' and 'off' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 1; Wiedemann 2021, 44) across stagnant time and cyclical time, material stability and fragility, connectedness and disconnectedness. Yet the in-between is not only defined by opposites, rather these tensions are produced by opposites and merge into what I call in-betweenness or standby. Standby finds its form in 'ongoingness' (Berlant 2011, 99), as challenging object and configuration of 'loose relations' (Kemmer et al. 2021, 14).

In the case of the Hochhausscheiben on standby, time seems to have stood still, as none of the possible futures were realised over the period of more than twenty years and no prospect of a future nor an idea for the future had been in sight. The planners involved in repetitive searches for possible futures felt stuck but kept going, escaping bottlenecks and dead ends by developing other locations.

Buildings on standby are challenging objects because of their material presence, their resistance to possible futures and material ruptures that oblige people to get engaged. They resist simple classification: materially present and enduring, yet decaying and fragile. Standby is geared towards potential reactivation, which also distinguishes buildings on standby from ruins. The buildings are maintained in a state of potentiality, kept available through various forms of 'standing by' (Kemmer & Simone 2021; Wiedemann 2021). That there are people who deal with the buildings' future and maintain their potentiality points to the fact that they are – unlike ruins – not fully 'dropped from stabilizing networks' (Edensor 2005b, 313).

Still, relations within standby are inherently loose (cf. Kemmer et al. 2021, 14; Beveridge et al. 2022, 285). This looseness is embedded in reconfigurations after 1989/90 and the hope for a future through private investment, but owners repeatedly evaded commitment. The city had lost control over the buildings and contact with their owners, actors could not find alignment in the realisation of a possible future. Alignment is, however, a prerequisite for the materialisation of a building's future. The city, for its part, maintained a deliberately distanced relation and struggled with the self-assigned role as a mediator. The resulting configuration is one of detachment and partial engagement – an unstable choreography that holds the future suspended.

Frictions

Standby is not a pause, but a non-linear process whose rhythms are determined by the trajectories that possible futures take. Possible futures are introduced in one moment, discussed, calculated and negotiated in different projects and networks; they may then disappear and be brought back to the table after some time. One such trajectory of a particular possible future, traced between 1999 and 2009, revealed different effects of events – some even losing their eventfulness – on the process and how the possible future outlasted networks. Repetition, gathering, parallel and asynchronous actions and voices, rupture and acceleration form the rhythm of standby. Time, in standby, is out of joint (Ingold 1993, 161).

The out-of-jointness also becomes tangible in the struggling within standby. It is not a struggle for something but over conditions of im/possibility. Funding programmes and regulation acted as dis/connectors, as they have the ability to 'help bring actants into association with each other' (Rydin & Tate 2016, 8) but also to keep actors at a distance. Standby is a site of constant reordering and disordering (cf. Knox et al. 2015, 12) – a shifting terrain of half-connections and unresolved negotiations. The process itself resists closure, not because nothing happens, but because the conditions of im/possibility remain unsettled.

In/Actions

Archives materialise standby through archival documents that give evidence of its in/activity: they store visions that never came to life, shaping how the past is harmonised in order to enable collective future-making. I identified three central modes through which planning responds to the uncertainty inherent in standby: scenario building, navigating and the production of indeterminacy. Over time, scenario building changed from attempts to shape the future to a practice embracing the futures' unknowability. Furthermore, planners navigated between long-term visions and short-term measures when translating visions for the centre of Halle-Neustadt into action. Finally – in order to work towards a revitalisation and to welcome the future – the present of the buildings was rendered indeterminate, transformed into an in-between space and realm of potentiality and opportunity, opening it up to future possibilities (cf. Ringel 2018b; Dzenovska et al. 2023).

The buildings themselves were caught in contradictory (e)valuations and their worthiness was debated: planners saw in them Neustadt's greatest problem due to their 'emptiness', yet also valued them for their distinctive form and historical significance. While vacancy was viewed as an obstacle to development, the buildings were simultaneously seen as important landmarks, embodying potential. For years, the city remained undecided – neither investing in their reuse nor preserving them. As a result, the Hochhausscheiben were simultaneously performed as problem and value. It is this ambivalence that contributed to their prolonged in-between state.

Buildings on standby are objects of public debate and an arena for expressing doubt and negotiating accountability. Citizens' doubts forced the city to explain its in/actions, as citizens started to question the lack of demand for the buildings. Furthermore, concepts generated attention but also doubt, which was then turned into expectations, the search for alternatives and demands towards the city. Eventually, this pressure – channeled through committed citizens and an ambitious mayor – led to a referendum. As a result, the city agreed to move into Scheibe A, and both the City Council and the administration defined and implemented the concrete steps that translated this possible future into material reality, finally switching one of the buildings 'on'.

After Socialism: Standby

The standby mode of the Hochhausscheiben is shaped by reconfigurations after 1990 – at a time when both present and future were uncertain, the buildings were abandoned and the state was in search of a new role for itself. Viewed through the lens of standby, their story becomes one of urban transformation after socialism – defined not by rupture alone, but by loosening, deferred futures and by the slow, layered processes of stitching the post-socialist cityscape.

Their in-betweenness resonates with the experience of people and things in other places after socialism (cf. Dzenovska 2020, 11). Standby proves to be a useful analytic lens to capture socio-material entanglements in particular. The notion directs the gaze to the non-linear, open process of engagement with the buildings in changing presents: to the energy that flows, to the connections that still exist and to what standby does to those who participate in it. Once introduced to describe an 'ongoing and uneven process of transformation' (Cima & Sovová 2022, 1370), the concept of 'postsocialism' is increasingly rejected. In recent years, scholars have questioned the utility of the term, arguing that it may overemphasise the past or fail to reflect ongoing complexities, suggesting that an entire region cannot get rid of its past (Müller 2019, 537). In my approach, post-socialism serves as a temporal marker ('after socialism'), while standby describes specific configurations, processes and tensions that have characterised this period. From this perspective, the Hochhausscheiben are defined less by absence or gaps ('no longer, not yet') than by the specific qualities of standby – a provisionality that has become chronic and productive in its own right.

Tracing the tensions and rhythms of the Hochhausscheiben, it becomes clear that non-linearity and uncertainty are precisely the defining qualities of the present and that frictions between decay and potential as well as unresolved claims continue to shape their existence. Standby gives shape to these qualities – it draws our attention to the fact that the provisional is a lived reality that has been extended (Dzenovska 2020; Kemmer et al. 2021, 6).

The ambivalences of post-socialist cityscapes are not inert; they shape public trust, civic engagement and the political terrain of urban planning in East Germany and beyond. Things and people on standby – those for which there is no present demand – can be ignored for quite some time. However, they might begin to haunt with increasing decay whenever the gap between expectations and reality grows too wide. Here, standby clearly emerges as a post-socialist mode with significant political implications. We have seen how trust in the (local) state can be undermined when the city fails to meet citizens' expectations and properly maintain the built environment. What are often perceived as exaggerated expectations on the part of citizens in post-socialist East Germany partly manifest in debates over urban spaces such as the Hochhausscheiben. In this way, the book contributes to current debates on neoliberal urbanism in post-socialist cities, the role of the state and the social meaning of material neglect. Little attention has been given to buildings and spaces caught between demolition and preservation – sites that inhabit the often painful dissonance of societal transformation, where expectations and realities diverge.

By following the buildings' trajectories, I have shown what prevents the realisation of possible futures. I highlighted the energy that has flown and continues to flow into the Hochhausscheiben and is stored in them. Standby as a concept enabled me to focus on the commitment of those who have been involved in the search for possible futures for over twenty years with all its ambiguities and ambivalences.

The Beginning of the End?

Since 2015, the trajectory of the Hochhausscheiben has shifted. Demolition was ruled out and reactivation seemed increasingly likely. Was this the beginning of the long-awaited end of standby?

That year, the City Council passed a resolution that marked both a symbolic and practical turning point. It identified four key conditions for preservation and reactivation: political commitment, a goal, funding (in particular public funding) and a change in ownership. Furthermore, it envisioned the relocation of part of Halle's city administration into one of the buildings (VI/2015/01130, 2015).

Conditions were found to be unprecedented: the low interest rate, a stabilising population and strong political will – all required elements seemed to come together. Crucially, the city recognised that without its own initiative, this momentum would quickly fade. 2015 thus also signalled a shift in how the city related to the buildings' future. This included the aim to regain control so that planners could finally take proactive steps. As one planner explained, they could now state their own actions first and then encourage others to contribute – rather than only reacting to external conditions (interview, 25. 10.2018). They started weighing up the possible paths to the preferred future and looked for a suitable middle way between freedom, incentives for private investors, control and the city's own commitment.

When I began my research in 2018, only Scheiben B and E were still 'completely hanging in the air' (field notes, 23.07.20218). But things remained volatile. Although renovations on Scheibe C began, costs exploded only a few months later, funding was withdrawn and legal disputes followed. Hopes for Scheibe B were dashed again in 2021. Only Scheibe A was actually renovated and parts of the city administration – including the planning department – moved into their new offices in the summer of 2021. The alderman hoped for new impulses, expected new ideas and engagement for Halle-Neustadt to emerge from planners working on-site (interview, 28.05.2021).

Yet, one planner predicted that generations of planners will have to deal with the Hochhausscheiben as struggles for their revitalisation, use and maintenance will continue as long as they stand (field notes, 27.05.2021). For planners, an end to standby would mean an end or at least a remarkable decrease of their own engagement with the buildings. Standby would only end when the buildings were clearly 'on' or 'off'.

'Everything changes while all remains the same': this is how one of the planners described what was going on within the planning department. Not just the buildings but also the administration underwent a period of transition during the years of my research. Several leadership positions had to be filled, a vacuum emerged with people leaving and new ones to arrive, with much ambiguity regarding pending responsibilities. Until it became clear what would actually change, if that was what would happen, everything would remain the same for the time being, people would work together with those they usually worked well with, follow processes and routines as usual, even if these were about to be questioned. The feeling that everything simultaneously remained the same and changed constantly seemed to have taken hold of both the administration and the buildings and continues to do so. The future will tell whether 2015 really was the beginning of the end of standby for the Hochhausscheiben. While an iterative process began in 2015, with steps once considered impossible to be taken before the years of my research, planners met in 2023 to discuss whether they needed to abandon the goals they had formulated due to the hopelessness of realising them. Under certain circumstances, this would also mean undoing or changing resolutions and concepts.

Today's long-thought impossible dynamics prompt us to ask: could putting buildings on standby become a deliberate strategy in stitching cityscapes? After all, another future may always emerge later and something new can arise from the in-between. Given the sometimes painful experiences associated with standby, it is worth rethinking standby beyond waiting for growth, private investment or gentrification. Standby is not a neutral condition or pause; it affects everyone who engages with it or is enrolled. If we are to consider standby as a strategy, we must also recognise the energy it consumes – money, emotions and work spent on the buildings, maintaining their latent potential. Could this energy be redirected more productively or distributed differently? Could the funds currently used for securing vacant structures instead support temporary or low-threshold uses that stabilise them? Could property owners be compelled to take more responsibility or municipalities be given new tools and mandates to care for buildings in alternative ways?

Investigating buildings in an in-between mode is highly relevant today as vacancies will globally increase in areas beyond (big) cities and debates over how to deal with them are on the rise. Planning departments in many eastern German municipalities, for example, again expect rising vacancy rates in large housing estates. Their plans include further demolition but also the designation of certain buildings as 'observation properties' – a category for which only basic maintenance is carried out in principle (Röding et al. 2017).

In these cases, one could probably speak of a waiting mode into which the buildings are put. There is much to suggest that there will be many buildings in the coming years whose future as envisaged in plans and concepts does not arrive. It can be assumed that the future of numerous buildings will continue to be fought over and that they will become objects on standby. In the context of urban transformation and efforts toward sustainable urban development, the transformation and reactivation of existing stock is crucial. While architectural discourse promotes reuse – not least due to a growing awareness of sustainability issues – the conditions for reuse vary greatly in different places. If our goal is to 'change the existing' and 'prolong the life of existing buildings' (Licata 2005, 17), we should address the conditions for their reactivation. An engagement with experiences of maintaining the potentiality of reactivation but also resistances is likely to remain highly relevant in the future. The Hochhausscheiben reveal much about the un/making of possible futures, showing both the conditions that allow buildings to persist and those that prevent certain futures from materialising. Studying why the Hochhausscheiben have neither been demolished nor renovated provides insights into the life of buildings and can inform our understanding of how cities beyond capitals and growing metropoles are organised.

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All German sources listed here have been translated by the author.

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Fig. 1
Hochhausscheiben A—E. Photo by Dorenkamp 1974. Bauverein Halle & Leuna, Geschichtswerkstatt Halle-Neustadt

Fig. 2
Hochhausscheibe E, south view. VE(B) Wohnungskombinat Halle 1970. Halle City Archive

Fig. 3
Hochhausscheibe B, west view. VE(B) Wohnungskombinat Halle 1971. Halle City Archive

Fig. 4
Map of Halle (Saale) and Halle-Neustadt. Neuordnungskonzept für den Stadtteil Halle-Neustadt. Schultz 2001. Halle City Administration

Fig. 5
Site plan. Office for Planning and Architecture 1970. Halle City Archive

Fig. 6
The opening of Hochhausscheibe E. Liberal-Demokratische Zeitung 1971. Halle City Archive

Fig. 7
Photo by Dorenkamp ca. 1971. Bauverein Halle & Leuna, Geschichtswerkstatt Halle-Neustadt

Fig. 8
Hochhausscheibe A—D. Schlesier et al. 1972, 120

Fig. 9/10
Postcards of the Hochhausscheiben from the 1970s. Bauverein Halle & Leuna, Geschichtswerkstatt Halle-Neustadt

Fig. 11
The Hochhausscheiben. Early draft n.d. [late 1960s]. Halle City Archive

Fig. 12
Bird's eye view, concept before 1970. Schlesier et al. 1972, 114

Fig. 13
Halle-Neustadt Centre. Photo by Dorenkamp 1972. Bauverein Halle & Leuna, Geschichtswerkstatt Halle-Neustadt

Fig. 14
Overview of the buildings with dates. The author

Fig. 15
Front elevation, Bayer, Morgner & Partner 1991. Halle City Administration

Fig. 16–19
Towards an economic and sustainable development of Hochhausscheibe C. Preliminary Study. Lacaton & Vassal + Fischer 2015

Fig. 20/21
Possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben. Graul, Hermann & Valentiny and Partners, Morgner & Partner GbR

Fig. 22–24
Structural Concept Neustadt District Centre. Schönborn Schmitz Architekten 2018

Fig. 25/26
Scenarios for the Hochhausscheiben. Halle City Administration n.d. (early 2000s; 2009)

Fig. 27
City centre design draft KNY + Weber, Wörle and Partner 1992

Fig. 28
Entrances to the centre. KNY + Weber, Wörle and Partner n.d. (1992)

Fig. 29
Kolorado. raumlaborberlin 2004

Fig. 30
City centre design draft. KNY + Weber, Wörle and Partner 1992

Fig. 31
Sorting things out

Fig. 32
Archive in Hochhausscheibe A (under construction)

Fig. 33
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Fig. 50
Possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben. Graul, Hermann & Valentiny and Partners, Morgner & Partner GbR

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Photos by Eiko Grimberg

Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs are by the author (2021).

Acknowledgements

This book is based on my doctoral thesis, defended at the University of Lausanne in June 2023. It has been substantially revised for publication.

This work would not have been possible without the trust and openness I encountered in Halle and especially its city administration. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the planning department staff for allowing me a deep insight into their everyday work life and giving me access to their archives. In addition to the city administration, I would like to thank the staff of the Geschichtswerkstatt, Halle's city archive and all the people I met and interviewed, as well as those who shared photos with me, such as the operator of the website spiel-mit-halle.de. Thank you also to the architectural offices for allowing me to include their images.

In addition to my informants, I would especially like to thank my supervisor Professor Jean Ruegg, my colleagues at the Institute of Geography and Sustainability of the University of Lausanne and the staff of the institute's administration and the directorate.

Thanks also to all the people with whom I was able to discuss and exchange ideas, who gave me inspiration, support and advice during committee or individual meetings, as well as at conferences and workshops. Alexa Färber, Felix Ringel, Ignaz Strebel, Stephan Lanz, Matthias Bernt and Hilmar Schäfer (†) are particularly to be mentioned here. Thank you also to Virginia Rounding and Anna Richter for copy-editing, Kathrin Wildner and Oliver Gemballa from adocs and Timo Grimberg and Eiko Grimberg for graphic and photographic support. This publication was made possible by the generous financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Special thanks to my family, friends and my partner. I dedicate this work to my grandparents, who simultaneously know a lot and astonishingly little about Halle-Neustadt.

Imprint

Buildings on Standby
Hendrikje Alpermann

Published by	adocs Produktion und Verlag gGmbH Annenstrasse 16 20359 Hamburg Germany www.adocs.de
Text and Image	© Hendrikje Alpermann, 2026 © adocs Verlag
1. edition 2026	
Copyediting	Anna Richter
Image Editing	dpi Factory, Krefeld Carsten Humme, Leipzig (p. 30, 100, 156—182)
Graphic Design	a r c Timo Grimberg
Font	Aktuell + ABC Monument Grotesk
Paper	fine's pure rough Mistral Stucco Tradition
Print	Europrint Medien, Berlin
ISBN (print)	978–3–943253–96–2
ISBN (PDF)	978–3–69113–000–3
DOI	https://doi.org/10.53198/9783691130003

This publication is listed in the German National Library (Deutsche Nationalbibliothek);
detailed bibliographic data is available at https://dnb.de.

Product Safety Information	adocs Produktion und Verlag gGmbH Oliver Gemballa Annenstrasse 16 20359 Hamburg Germany info@adocs.de

Published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

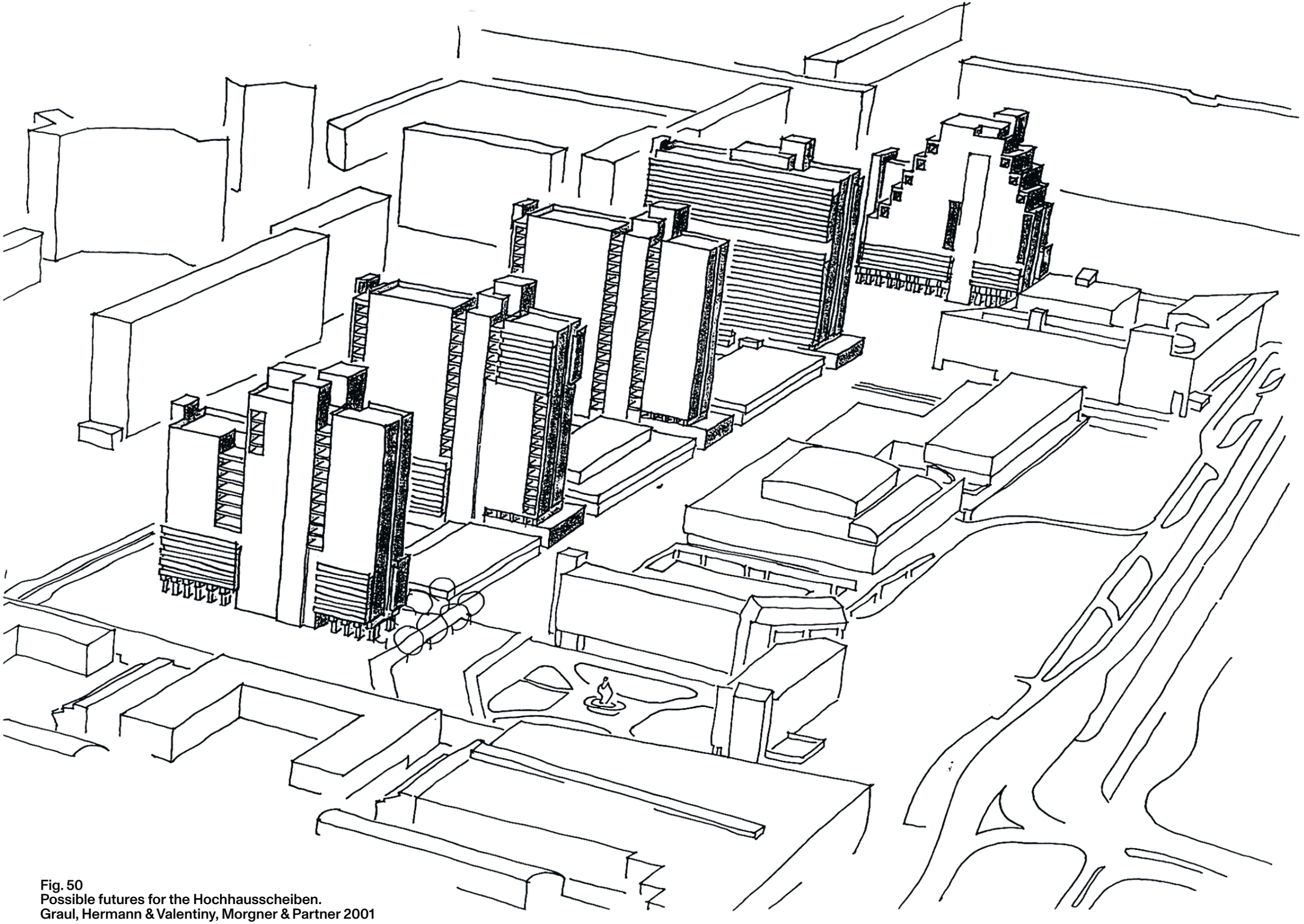

Fig. 50
Possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben.
Graul, Hermann & Valentiny, Morgner & Partner 2001

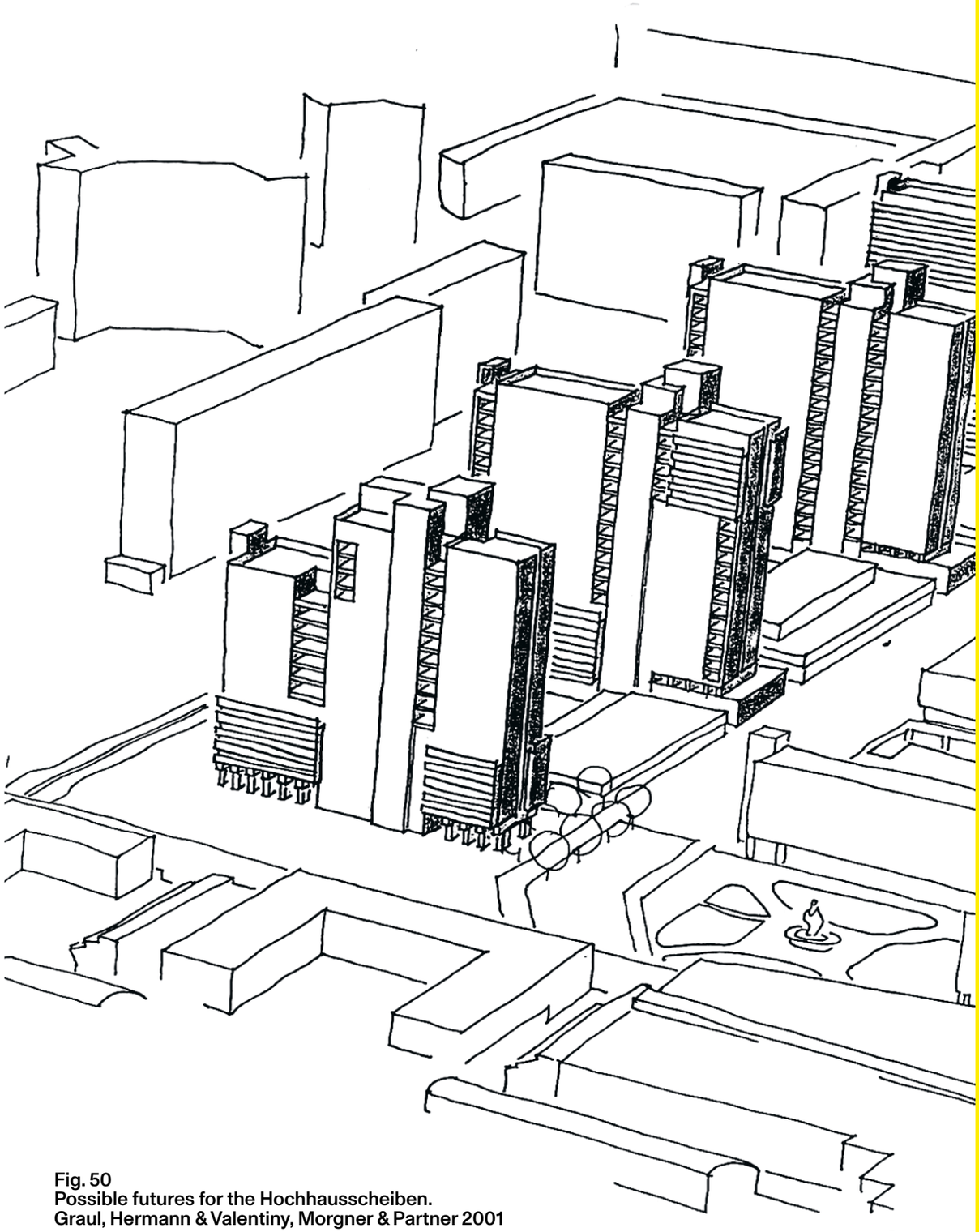

Fig. 50
Possible futures for the Hochhausscheiben.
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Hendrikje Alpermann is an interdisciplinary urban researcher, curator and project coordinator. She studied ethnology in Leipzig, Halle (Saale) and Tbilisi, sociocultural studies with a focus on urban studies in Frankfurt (Oder) and Paris and completed her PhD at the University of Lausanne's Institute of Geography and Sustainability. Her work explores architecture, everyday urban life and the temporalities and entanglements of the built environment, planning and society. Her research into demolition, regeneration and urban futures developed through her master's thesis on demolition and new construction policies in Lyon and continued in eastern Germany, shaped by her work at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space in Erkner and her biographical background. Alongside her academic work, she has held coordinating and administrative positions, was a fellow of the Schader Foundation in Darmstadt and co-curated the transdisciplinary festival *wohn_komplex* to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Halle-Neustadt.

Buildings on Standby offers a detailed study of the planning, politics, materialities and temporalities that have shaped the life of vacant high-rise buildings in Halle-Neustadt, East Germany. For more than twenty years, four of the five Hochhausscheiben A—E have remained on standby, existing between shutdown and availability, with their possible futures repeatedly un/made. The book examines the iconic towers as sites of debates over the city's future and the im/possibilities of urban planning after socialism. It shows how a variety of people and things come together and fragment in ways that prevent futures from materialising, thereby revealing the paradoxes and ambiguities of urban vacancy and transformation with careful nuance. Drawing on innovative ethnography and inter-disciplinary perspectives, *Buildings on Standby* offers fresh insights for scholars, planners, architects and anyone interested in shrinking cities, interstitial spaces and urban transformation.

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