

FROM WASTELAND TO SUNKEN CITY

***DAS STÄDTEBAULICHE UND ARCHITEKTONISCHE
POTENZIAL DES KLYBECK-AREALS IN BASEL***

TEXT

FROM WASTELAND TO SUNKEN CITY: REGENERATION OF URBAN GROUND

Switzerland comprises around 38'000 contaminated sites, of which 4'000 are to be cleaned, as stated by the Federal Environmental Agency. Up to 49% of this number are former and current industrial sites.

More than any other city in Switzerland, Basel's origins are deeply rooted in industrial production. In the second half of the 19th-century, aniline-dye production flourished as a byproduct of the resident silk industry. Those newly established companies, named Ciba (Chemical Industry of Basel), Geigy, and Sandoz, would soon change focus to chemical products due to the collapse of local silk production. A hundred years later, they merged to Novartis, a world-leading pharma- and life-science-corporation. With the shift from production towards research and development in the late 20th century, previous industrial sites along the Rhine river became obsolete.

In 2019, one of those vestiges, the Klybeck-Area, owned by the aforementioned Ciba-Geigy and BASF (Badische Anilin- und Sodafabrik) had changed ownership and went over to two pensions funds. Their aim for the coming years is to open the area to the public and transform it into a vibrant new district with a high number of housing, offices, and public programs. Diverting from the common opinion of the investors, the following proposal deems one key aspect of paramount importance: historical documents and soil samples, analysed by Ärztinnen und Ärzte für den Umweltschutz (doctors for environmental protection), clearly show the necessity of a preceding purification of the site's soil, as happened in contemporary decontamination processes of comparable areas in the city of Basel.

If these claims are considered to be true, the current visions and masterplans have to be reevaluated due to a large-scale excavation resulting in a total shutdown of the area.

Lasting for decades, the soil decontamination evokes excessive numbers of masses, movements, and technical measures. After hermetically sealing the site to prevent volatile pollutants spreading into the air, around 500 million cubic tons of soil are unearthed by dozens of high-security machines and specially equipped workers: Under the thin membrane of the tent, a consistently generating, stalker-esque landscape emerges.

In an evolvingly globalised logic, nowadays the contaminated material is shipped abroad, up the Rhine river, to Germany or the Netherlands, where it is thermally-treated at waste plants, like ATM in Moerdijk, running on residue oil scraped from super-tankers. Once stripped of hazardous substances, the clean soil is used for landfills, such as dykes — reacting to the rise of sea levels.

700 kilometres South, in the Klybeck-Area, a gigantic hole remains — a 100 thousand square metres negative form depicting all previous actions. Past projects crudely answer this issue by a refill with clean material from other excavation sites in order to forget and level out the past, like at the site of Novartis Campus where only the finest gravel from the French Alsace was imported.

From Wasteland to Sunken City takes the form of a speculative design research, where the pit endures within the city, tackling the questions of above and below split by a new horizon, resulting from the remaining structure of the gigantic tent. Based on the soil's pollution, the project accepts the givens of common remediation and excavation processes and transnational material flows — the design bases on the local implications of said drivers.

During one decade a seemingly endless roof covers large parts of the Klybeck-Area. The plane introduces a division into two dichotomous worlds, a dystopian underworld, and a flat urban surface above. In the hermetically sealed environment, a gigantic hole slowly emerges — its shape defined by the extent of contamination as indicated in bores from recent years. A series of mounds and pits filled with groundwater describes the negative form, that is left from the material transported afar.

On its surface, a gridded system of decks provides continuity of the cities fabric. A sequence of ramps at its ends reaches down to the adjacent streets. They anchor the megastructure in its surrounding context and link the North of Klybeck to Matthäus in the South. At the junction of Klybeck- and Gärtnerstrasse, an infrastructural knot for tram and the newly planned suburban train station serves as an entrance and catalyst for the new public space in Basel. In this transitional phase, the tent offers an extensive area to be used as public space. A variety of programmatic characters for leisure, sports, culture and events are playfully distributed across the roof, while the preserved buildings, offer interim uses at the periphery of the structure. Some of these actors strictly belong to the upper world, others create visual, thematic and atmospheric interactions with the below in the form of a visitor centre, a museum for colourful soil samples or a tank room. The lightweight structures gently rest on the firm structure. Their ephemeral character depicts the temporality of the process.

Once the on-site remediation is finished — the area freed of hazards — the plane makes way for the future development into a city district. The secondary structure upholding the roof in the previous stage is erected at the intersections of the grid, converting into primary elements of the slim, 100-meter tall office and apartment towers. As part of their facades, they project the foregoing processes and the area's history. The supports they rest upon just lightly touch the sole.

In the pits, the newly won wetland allows a landscape park to establish, many specific plants to grow and endangered animals to settle within the city. Through its detachment from the urban sphere, it is given space to develop: The ecological succession is left to nature's own principles. The Petite Camargue, only six kilometres from the site, in the French Alsace, serves as an example for the characteristics of the park. A specific series of plant societies envelop the shore of the ponds, gradually changing towards the borders of the pits. External elevators run along the facades of the towers and link the upper levels to the decks and the beauty that lies below. At their arrival points, the two worlds reconnect. Pockets carved into the topography open the view to the beauty of groves, fields of reeds and ponds covered in water lilies.

Klybeck's ground transforms into a vast, flourishing green landscape. The needle-like towers stand still in the ever changing fields of a park, mediating between the two realms.