Frankensteinization in Architecture

Moritz Fahrni

The modernization and redesign of historic buildings is increasingly driven by economic interests. Often these transformations resemble the resurrection of Frankenstein.

Abbildung 1: Entrance of the revitalized Bahnhofstrasse department store in 2024

Recently one of Zurich´s most well established retail institutions the Manor department store at the *Bahnhofstrasse* has appeared in the local newspapers, with headlines such as, „Will the tenant now have to move out?“[1] First, one is tempted to think that it is just another one of many property disputes. However, the department store, its renovation and the dispute, become interesting once one takes a closer look. The building, which dates from the 19th century, was being renovated from 2020 until 2023. It is six stories high, occupies the space of a small city block and is supported by a skeletal grid structure, made of industrially produced cast iron. In terms of its expression, it has a neo-gothic stone facade. Nothing out of the ordinary and at first glance, it fits in the city and the street it is placed in. More than anything else, it is its location which stands out. Located on Zurich's

Bahnhofstrasse, one of Europe's most famous shopping streets, the department store has become part of a business-driven transformation that changes its architecture as well as its social function.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

Surprisingly, unlike other Swiss cities, Zurich is less known for the *Niederdörfli*, its old town, than for its comparatively large-scale boulevard connecting the train station to the lake, the *Bahnhofstrasse*. If you take a look around Switzerland, you will find that most Swiss cities have a medieval city center that serves as the iconic image of the city. In Zurich however, it is mainly the *Bahnhofstrasse*. An image made up mostly of 19th century facades built in the post industrial revolution era. The origin of this industrial surface can be traced back to Paris. A Paris, which had just been rebuilt by Haussmann, who worked for Napoleon III.[2] It was these famous Haussmann axes, that showed how to solve the architectural problems of a growing, bursting city. Inspired by this transformation of Paris, Swiss architects redesigned Zurich, where the population with the years of the industrial boom had more than quadrupled from 41585 inhabitants in 1850 to 168021 in 1900. Zurich developed a need to reinvent itself, and Haussmann's vision was adapted, resulting in the famous *Bahnhofstrasse*.[3]

However, unlike in Paris, where Haussmann's axes were part of a large-scale urban renewal project that connected various monuments, such as war memorials, cathedrals and operas, in Zurich the architects linked the lake, its original natural resource, and its industrial spark of prosperity, the railway station. This took place during the so-called *Great Building Period* and represents the unprecedented architectural boom in Zurich between 1860 and 1889.[4] Whole districts were built from scratch, and many buildings came and disappeared within just a few years, merging with each other or being given a new facade, either neo-classical or neo-gothic. The transformation of these buildings took place over just a few decades. A single block could change several times, house by house, before merging to a single building, called a Classic-European building. These urban palaces sometimes served as hotels, banks and often department stores.

Reading the historical plans of the time in the gta-Archive at the ETH Zurich, one can see that in the case of my object of study, the department store on the *Bahnhofstrasse*, which initially was called the *Brann Building*, took about three decades to develop into its final shape.[5] The architect, Otto Pfleghard, had just begun in 1899 to rebuild the first part of the rectangular block of flats.[6] Ten years later, this building was expanded again, taking up half of the entire block. At the same time, a separate department store was built on the same plot from the opposite direction. One residential house, called *Madame Nörr's*, was left behind and squeezed in between. In 1924 *Madam Nörr´s* house too was merged with the other buildings, so that in the end everything became one single building. The neo-gothic facade pattern, which originated from the first part of the *Brann Building* from 1899 until its completion in 1924, covered more and more in a homogeneous manner. There was one small exception, the other department store, which retained its original facade. Now apart from the homogeneity of the surface, the same thing happened structurally inside. The walls that had previously separated the individual residential plots were removed and replaced by a single open grid structure, made possible by the achievements of the Industrial Revolution. The architect Otto Pfleghard had incorporated several industrial inventions, such as the elevator and the refreshment room, which was essentially a restaurant. He also included air conditioning, one of the first and most important

inventions to make the modern department store possible.[7] At the entrances, the architect placed shoe polishers, and in the center of the mall was an atrium with a gallery, similar to famous department stores such as *Lafayette* in Paris. The building was full of high-tech, but still had a historicist facade.

REVITALIZATION

Almost 100 years later, the department store is being renovated again. But this is not just one of the many transformations as they have taken place throughout its history. What was once established as a department store is now being questioned to its very core. If you look at the floor plan of the renovation project, one notices that there are suddenly a lot of red lines indicating walls on the vast white sheet of open space grid structure.[8] This renovation project, from the second floor upwards, is in fact a cutting and dividing of space. Dividing walls between countless new tiny boxes, office-sized rooms, then two courtyards that cut deep into the flesh of the department store's body, dividing the open space with courtyard facades, and among all this, a lot of new infrastructure and circulation, and at last an additional partition at the back of the building that defines a narrow entrance hall cuts vertically through the floors from the ground to the roof, where an escalator used to be. So, after the great construction period more than 100 years ago, when the individual houses were joined together to form a single department store, that stretched from one side of the block to the other, we go back. Now it is divided into small geometries that are reminiscent of medieval times.

The first thing to be said about the current project called *Revitalisierung Bahnhofstrasse 75&79* is, that it is currently being led by Swiss Life, one of Europe's largest providers of comprehensive life insurance and financial solutions, which hired local architects for the renovation of the department store, who are not particularly known for their outstanding quality in working with listed buildings, which often requires immense expertise and knowledge. Rather than historical knowledge, these architects are known for their efficiency and consistency in producing profitable real estate. Against this background, the tenant, Manor, the largest department store chain in Switzerland, took Swiss Life to court in an attempt to exceed the terms of the contract. In order to win, Manor commissioned several reports from historians and conservationists, aimed at protecting the function of the department store.[9] However, these efforts did not bear any fruit. In essence, the preservationists failed to defend a function within a building as part of a building's essence. After losing the court case and a failed attempt to buy the property, Manor left the building and the CEO gave interviews to local newspapers, blaming Swiss Life for the miserable situation.

In the end, the department store chain received a lot of public support, which had to do with the fact that the tenant, Manor, was actually doing quite well, according to its visitor numbers – six million customers a year.[10] To call the redesign of such a lively department store a revitalization, seems a little out of place. In the language of architects and economists, revitalization means adapting historic substance to contemporary use, in order to infuse it with new life.[11] In other words, the idea is to adapt existing architecture to a more popular function. How is this adaption evaluated? Of course mostly in economic terms, which means in terms of annual income, regardless of its architectural functionality or popularity. In short, it is less an architectural concept than an economic one, and instead of bringing new life to the object, it is an increase in profit that counts. A positive image is created, when in fact the term has a completely different meaning, far from public

interest. At the same time, a link is made between the term revitalization and the widely discussed contemporary phenomenon of the retail-apocalypse, according to which phenomena such as the digitalization of retail is forcing more and more traditional shops to close.[12] It is also assumed that retailers are now in the midst of the rise of internet shopping and need to reinvent themselves as customers no longer come to the shops. Therefore, the large amount of space taken up by the retail sector is becoming obsolete. But is this really what happens on Zurich´s *Bahnhofstrasse*?

In fact, the *Bahnhofstrasse* Manor was thriving until the end of Christmas 2019, when it had to move out. Just before Christmas the 137000 square meters of retail space on *Bahnhofstrasse* generated 30% of Manor´s annual turnover of 2.7 billion Swiss francs. The desire of retailers and brands to represent themselves on this street is correspondingly high. A street that is not only frequented by locals. „Zurich [...]", says Hublot CEO Jean-Claude Biver, „[...] is not a Swiss City, it is a world city and one of the 20 relevant shopping cities all around the globe.".[13] Since 2006, rents on the *Bahnhofstrasse* have literally skyrocketed, and driving forces behind this development are tourists from the Middle and Far East, especially Russia and the Gulf states. Biver spent more than two years looking for a location on this luxurious shopping street. He calculated that the annual rent for a 100 square meter boutique would be around 350000 Swiss francs, and where Biver wants to move in, someone will have to move out. In that case, he will have to pay the tenant a so-called key fee, which he estimates will cost him another three to five million francs. So it comes as no surprise that Swiss Life's *Agenda 2021* postulates that the company aims to increase its real estate capital by acquiring large amounts of property on *Bahnhofstrasse*. [14] The value of properties increases every year, and the value of some of these buildings are estimated at 1000 million Swiss francs.[15] In relation to the increase in the value of the buildings, Manor had in fact enjoyed a generous rent under old contracts. So when Manor refused to pay higher rents, Swiss Life essentially revitalized the property and got rid of Manor. Manor was one of the last shops on *Bahnhofstrasse*, offering moderately priced products and a restaurant on the top floor that was well frequented by families and elderly people.

QUESTIONING REVITALIZATION

The geometric architectural integrity of a building and the cultural value of a department store for the municipality of Zurich were among the main arguments used by preservationists to defend the specific function of the department store in the *Brann Building* against the planned revitalization. Here I quote Hans Peter Bärtschi, one of the protectionists and founder of the foundation *Industrie-Kultur*, which develops various concepts for the protection of industrial history. Bärtschi shows that the project authors claim that „The planned use structure corresponds to the original building typology." Yet according to Bärtschi the opposite is the case, as „[...] the generously designed halls with their – for the time – pioneering column structure developed by the building's architects can only be seen in historical plans. The substance of the building, with its more than 115-year tradition as a warehouse and, even by today's standards, generous spatial concepts, would be sacrificed to a small-scale conversion. After such a conversion, nothing would be left of the importance of the department store as a meeting place for the city's inhabitants, as a cultural-historical anchor for the city's development and as an initial spark for the modern city along the Bahnhofstrasse."[16]

Bärtschi points not only to the geometric intervention that violates the integrity of the building, but also to the importance of the building and its function for the city and its people. This leads to the conclusion that the classical European department store from 1900 is not dead at all. The echoing warning of an impending retail apocalypse has not yet reached pedestrianized city centers. The cultural and historic city center, be it medieval or industrial, serves as a meeting place for local residents and not just as a luxurious shopping mile for tourists. The fact that the density of bars and restaurants in some of these centers was at an all-time high just before the current Corona crisis, shows that, despite living in the age of the internet, the very basic social aspect of getting together remains.[17] However, this social function of a shopping mile is neither recognized nor taken into account by the architects hired by Swiss Life, who are revitalizing the former Manor department store by introducing more space for offices, luxurious products and branding in order to generate more profit instead of a space for exchange. This is not a new issue of course, and has been raised by various scholars and books, such as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* by Jane Jacobs, in which she describes the decline of urban neighborhoods as a result of rationalist urban planning policies.[18] What is particularly interesting today is that architects and economists recently seem to have learned from the planning mistakes of the past, claiming to revitalize urban space. However, if we take a closer look at how this revitalization is achieved architecturally, we realize that not much has changed since the 1960s in terms of creating a vibrant urban space. Therefore, when it comes to projects such as the Manor department store, it is more accurate to speak of de-vitalization rather than revitalization.

FRANKENSTEIN

In order to better understand what is going on in current revitalization projects, such as the department store on *Bahnhofstrasse*, I will now introduce the concept of ‚Frankensteinization'. A concept that I developed away from Switzerland, during a study trip to Rome. During this trip, my fellow students and I stayed in Airbnbs in the city center, where I encountered a lot of historical substance. What stood out to me was the precision, with which this substance was treated. The historical substance was modernized and cut out almost with a scalpel, like body parts in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, precisely where the old was iconic. [19]

This production and presentation of historical substance in a specific way, almost like a tool, reminded me of the revitalization project in Zurich. In Zurich, the architects had used the stained glass from the building´s existing staircase as a fragment to not only lighten but redefine the space as an entrance hall. After the renovation, the stained glass brightens up the entrance hall and ‚authentically' reflects the building´s historic identity. In Rome, for example, the medieval plaster wall is placed next to a stainless steel wall. On one side, the steel tells the 21st century tourists that they are enjoying a modern lifestyle, traveling around the world in a globalist sense. On the other side, the crumbling plaster wall reminds the tourists, that they are still in Rome. In Zurich, in the outlet object, it is the stained glass that reminds the visitors, as a historic fragment, that they are still in the same old building. In fact, it has changed a lot. All these iconic surfaces have become clichés in architecture.

Abbildung 2: A photograph of the department store in 2024, showing the remaining historic stained glass in a completely transformed architectural setting.

In order to better understand the phenomenon of Frankensteinization architecturally, back in Zurich, I began to make bricolages of images of AirBNBs, cutting out everything in the image that belonged to the aesthetics of the global tourist industry, leaving only the surface that belonged to the original architectural substance. This meant removing televisions, Ikea furniture, steel and glass furniture, concrete walls, stainless steel walls, steel structures, steel staircases, plastic plants, many modern kitchens and pretty much everything that was shiny with paint. What was left were red bricks, stained glass, wood walls, crumbling plaster and cobbled walls. In making these bricolages, I found that not much history was actually needed to create ‚authentic' architecture. Most of the surface, often two-thirds, as in the case of the AirBNB *Palazzo Rhinoceros* in Rome, designed by

Jean-Nouvel[20], is a stainless steel wall and only one-third of the surface is actually crumbling plaster. Or in the case of the department store in Zurich, the stained glass takes up about a quarter of the surface. These historical fragments are exhibited in a white box, almost like Duchamp´s ready-mades. Architectural objects are placed like a spectacle in a modernized new order by this phenomenon of revitalization. These architectural elements are produced, as in the sciences of anatomy, by dissecting the existing; and the architect, in the end, believes, he/she has given a breath of new life and calls it a revitalization. With Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in mind, this process of dissection could also be called Frankensteinization.

„I became acquainted with the science of anatomy, but this was not sufficient; I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body. [...] I collected bones from charnel houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials. [...] It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs."[21]

As in Shelley´s *Frankenstein* in order to modernize and maximize luxury, the substance is reduced and fragmented into iconic elements that are out of place in the new consumer-friendly space. Former integrity is lost and the building becomes absurd. It is reminiscent of an organ transplant, not of one organ but of many, and then the sudden electric shock that reveals itself as a short-lived consumer behavior. It is in this aspect of Frankensteinization that the field of interest lies. Death and life, is old substance being reanimated? Is the facade a picturesque skin of Swiss city centers, one of many selected fragments, iconic enough to become a commodity, in a society where all that is visible is the world of the commodity? Why are we attracted to this surface?

SURFACE

The answer to this question lies in the extreme transparency of contemporary culture, as Janet Ward points out in *Weimar Surface*: „Our culture of the copy without original, that is of the simulacrum or the hyperreal – as the most extreme prophet of postmodern neocapitalism, Jean Boudrillard, has adapted Plato's term – induces us, quite naturally, to feel a nostalgia for the real. We turn, then, from our technologized surface culture to look not for metaphysical origins but for a time when surface played a different, more dynamic, meaningful role in mass cultural formation."[22] Ward links contemporary consumerism to 1920s Weimar Germany, a moment when surface was a determinant of taste, modernity was still modern, and spectacle was still spectacular. This fascination with the ‚real', a time when surface had a more meaningful role, is what we tend to see on the surface of historical architectural fragments. The plaster, the stained glass, the bricks are all links to the original building. This connection to that time seems real because it was real, authentic, of undisputed origin. It explains why we are fascinated by this surface and why architects ‚revitalize' countless Frankenstein monsters.

Yet it is only a repositioning and reordering of fragments. A construct no longer held together by its original social glue but, as in the case of Airbnb, by the global tourist industry. It is an act of selling authenticity of the past to tourists in search of something real. An escape from the completely transparent city, similar to the phenomenon of the ski-alpine tourist of the 1960s, who escaped from the modern city of cars. Today it is not a visit of nature, as it was the case with the Alps in the 1960s, but, a visit of our past. These fragments and Frankenstein monsters can be found wherever there is history to be found.

Autor*in
Moritz Fahrni is studying for a Master's degree in architecture at ETH Zurich and is about to graduate, having already completed his Bachelor's degree there. He has been working as an architect for Peter Moor Architekten ETH/SIA in Zurich since 2023.

Seminar
Dieser Text entstand im Entwurfsstudio Studio Panorama, Frühjahrssemester 2019, ETH Zürich.

Redaktionell betreut von
Bernhard Böhm, Monique Ligtenberg & Christina Tuggener

Abbildungsverzeichnis
Abbildung 1: Entrance of the revitalized Bahnhofstrasse department store. Photograph by Moritz Fahrni, September 2024
Abbildung 2: Photo of the remaining historic stained glass in a completely transformed architectural setting. Photograph by Moritz Fahrni, September 2024

Literaturverzeichnis
[1] André Müller: „Swiss Life zieht Manor-Urteil ans Bundesgericht weiter", in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/manor-bahnhofstrasse-swiss-life-zieht-urteil-weiter-ld.1441549?reduced=true (4. December 2018).
[2] Jean de Cars, Pierre Pinon: *Paris Haussmann*, Paris: Picard / Pavillon de L'Arsenal (1991).
[3] „Zürich Gemeinde", in: Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz HLS, https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000171/2015-01-25 (25. January 2015).
[4] Camille Schneiter: „Dä Chratz „Züri West' des Mittelalters", in: *Zürcher Geschichten,* https://dlf.uzh.ch/sites/zuerchergeschichten/2019/05/20/dae-chratz-zueri-west-des-mittelalters (20. March 2019).
[5] Otto Pfleghard, *sections & floor plans*, in gta Archiv / ETH Zürich, Pfleghard & Haefeli (1900 -1928).
[6] Von Oberning, E. „Erweiterungsbau des Warenhauses Brann und Umbau des Pfauentheaters in Zürich" in: Schweizerische Bauzeitung (23. April 1932), S. 217.
[7] Chuihua Judy Chung & Tae-Wook Cha: *Harvard Design School guide to shopping*, Köln: Taschen (2001), S. 108.
[8] SPPA Architekten: „Revitalisierung Swiss Life Brannhof,
Zürich" https://sppa.ch/projekt/revitalisierung-swiss-life-brannhof-bahnhofstrasse-75-79-zuerich/ (2023).
[9] „Urteil: Fehlende Möglichkeit einer Unterschutzstellung einer bestimmten Warenhausnutzung", Endentscheid vom 14. Juli 2016, Verwaltungsgericht des Kantons Zürich 1. Abteilung/1. Kammer, http://www.entscheidsuche.ch/kantone/zh_vwger/VB-2015-00362.html
[10] Manor AG Corporate Communications: „Manor sieht sich gezwungen, den Standort Zürich Bahnhofstrasse zu schliessen", in: *Medienmitteilungen,* https://mynews.manor.ch/content/news/article/5d873acef3e584d15cd57645 (23. September 2019).
[11] Mein Wirtschaftslexikon (ed.): *Revitalisierung*, https://mein-wirtschaftslexikon.de/r/revitalisierung (02.05.2020).

[12] Sophie Schimansky: „Amerikas Malls sterben schneller“, in: *Deutsche Welle*, https://www.dw.com/de/amerikas- malls-sterben-schneller/a-39142156 (16. June 2017).
[13] Marc Kowalsky and Andreas Güntert: „Mythos Bahnhofstrasse“, in: *Bilanz das schweizer wirtschafts Magazin*, https://www.handelszeitung.ch/unternehmen/mythos-bahnhofstrasse-118977 (16. November 2012).
[14] „Swisslife ist auch ein Immobilienriese“, in: *Schweizerisches Radio und Fernsehen*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV83V5yXA98 (3`20), (2014).
[15] „Swatch kauft Prestigebau an der Bahnhofstrasse“, in: *Handelszeitung*, https://www.handelszeitung.ch/unternehmen/swatch-kauft-prestigebau-der-bahnhofstrasse-704554 (27. November 2014).
[16] Hans-Peter Bärtschi, „Zürich Warenhaus Bahnhofstr. 75-79: Eine kulturgeschichtliche, städtebauliche und architektonische Dokumentation“, Winterthur (2013). Quote translated from German into English by text editor Bernhard Böhm.
[17] Marlies Czerny, „Lokal-Augenschein: Wie is(s)t Solothurn?“, in *Solothurner Zeitung,* https://www.solothurnerzeitung.ch/solothurn/stadt-solothurn/lokal-augenschein-wie-is-s-t-solothurn-ld.1920524, (29. May 2012).
[18] Jane Jacobs: *The Dearth and Life of Great American Cities*, US: Random House (1961)
[19] Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones (1818)
[20] Jean Nouvel The Ateliers, *rhinoceros / Fondazione Alda Fendi – Esperimenti*, https://www.jeannouvel.com/en/projects/rhinoceros-alda-fendi-foundation-esperimenti
[21] Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones (1818) , S. 69.
[22] Janet Ward: *Weimar Surfaces: urban visual culture in 1920s Germany*, Berkeley: University of California Press (2001) , S.2.