

ARCHITECTURE OF  
TERRITORY  
Concrete Utopias

# Agritopia



## BUILDING A MODEL for Zürich Nord

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## *Be realistic, demand the impossible*

During the summer weeks we used to prepare this semester, apocalyptic news of forest fires, migrant tragedies and war dominated the media. The manifold crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing social inequity have left many disillusioned, while others call for prolonging the status quo through solutionism and technofixes. We lament the limits of Western democracies, state failures and the power of the Big Tech, but comprehensive action addressing the climate agenda is still lacking, in Switzerland and other countries. Some say that we have settled into a “long defeat” in which there is no room for optimism left. As designers we are always oriented toward the future; but, how to approach the future when our collective capacities to imagine and to act seem to be depleted? Younger generations today represented by activist movements like Fridays for Future, and others before them, have shown us that faith in a better world is necessary, if we are to move forward. As Henri Lefebvre put it, summarising the experiences of the 1968 movement: “In order to extend the possible, it is necessary to proclaim and desire the impossible. Action and strategy consist in making possible tomorrow what is impossible today.”

We thus recognise a need in our design studios to “demand the impossible” by exercising our collective imagination, to increase our capacity to act as designers and tackle the causes of manifold crises. We are therefore initiating the new studio series CONCRETE UTOPIAS, based on the notion *Konkrete Utopie* by philosopher Ernst Bloch, where we return the notion of utopia—not as a mere fantasy, but as a concrete potentiality of change grounded in the real, socio-economic and political conditions of a given context. Countless actions and initiatives have been realised as concrete utopias, showing potential for wider and far-reaching transformations based on democratic orientation and environmental agenda—like the *Zone à défendre (ZAD)* at Le Mormont, the *Rote Fabrik* in the city of Zurich, the *Halen Estate* by *Atelier 5*, the community project at *Vrin*, and community-based agriculture projects all around Switzerland. These and other examples have inspired shifts in the discourse and practice and led to positive change.

Our first concrete utopia will be an AGRITOPIA. We believe that the crisis of our imagination is reinforced by the separation of the urban and the rural in our culture. To imagine a different urban future for Zurich, we will therefore

work on agricultural territories that lie at the city’s edges. They form vital support to the city with water sources, clean air, various materials, land for food and energy production. Only by radically reimagining territorial organisation and land use practices in ways that are currently often disqualified as utopian and impossible, can we divert ongoing tendencies of agricultural intensification accompanied by soil degradation, water pollution and biodiversity loss. Designing sustainable biophysical relationships reflects in urban life itself, and will enable us to address issues of consumption, of commodification of land and labour, and even of housing crisis.

The place and time for AGRITOPIA are the agricultural fields of Zürich Nord beyond 2050, in a world of future generations. A five-minute walk from our studio in Oerlikon toward the north, the view opens onto an agricultural landscape connecting the city of Zürich and the communes of Rümlang and Regensdorf, with Katzensee and its adjacent wetlands at its core. It constitutes the largest non-built area in the immediate vicinity of Zürich’s centre, but without encompassing plans for its future use. Agricultural activities here vary from conventional farms, over organic farming, and community-supported agriculture, to Switzerland’s largest agricultural research facility *Agroscope*. In the studio, we will form groups to tackle specific topics and potentials of the site—from local food production and distribution, to future of agricultural work, the water and nature preservation, to cooperative organising and common ownership. We will develop a concrete agritopia based on close observation and analysis of the existing qualities of the landscape and the pioneering practices that make them possible.

Large-scale models have been used, again and again, to negotiate and represent future visions of space and social organisation. Intuitive and suggestive, models prefigure a different reality and help imagine a possibility of moving from the here and now, to there and then. A large-scale model of the site in Zürich Nord (approx. 4x3 m), will be the tool of our collective project—both our final result and our working tool throughout the semester. Our sparring partners in the process will be scientists, designers, policy makers, farmers and activists currently working on site. We will work with diverse materials and techniques, and in a range of scales from 1:100 to 1:2000, exploring and visualising relationships between human practice and the territory and negotiating scenarios with each other.

### CONCRETE UTOPIAS

Concrete Utopias (based on the notion of *Konkrete Utopie* by Ernst Bloch) is a studio series at the Architecture of Territory dedicated to anticipatory, future-oriented and collective design projects exploring forms of building, territorial organisation and social reproduction based on social and environmental justice and equality, as alternative approaches addressing the manifold crises. The studio series is affiliated with the ETH EPFL MAS in Urban and Territorial Design. Citizens, experts, fellow designers and artists accompany us in the process.

### PROCESS AND RESULTS

The semester consists of investigative journeys and intensive studio sessions. Architecture of Territory values intellectual curiosity, commitment and team spirit. We are looking for avid travellers, motivated to make strong and independent contributions. Students will apply a range of methods and sources pertaining to territory, including ethnographic fieldwork, large-scale drawing techniques, model making, literature research, essay writing, and online publishing. Students work in groups of 2 to 3.

### FIELDWORK

Investigative fieldwork is a crucial part of the project. During common days in the field in Zürich Nord agricultural pioneers and experts will guide us through the territory, including visits to several hamlets, farms and community farming projects. Throughout the semester, students will also conduct independent fieldwork in the respective student groups, exploring and documenting the landscape, and interviewing locals and experts.

### CREDITS

The semester offers a total of 17 credit points: 14 credits for the Design Studio and 3 credits for the Integrated Discipline (Planning).