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Village Life
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Fischenthal

Strengthening the Village in the Valley

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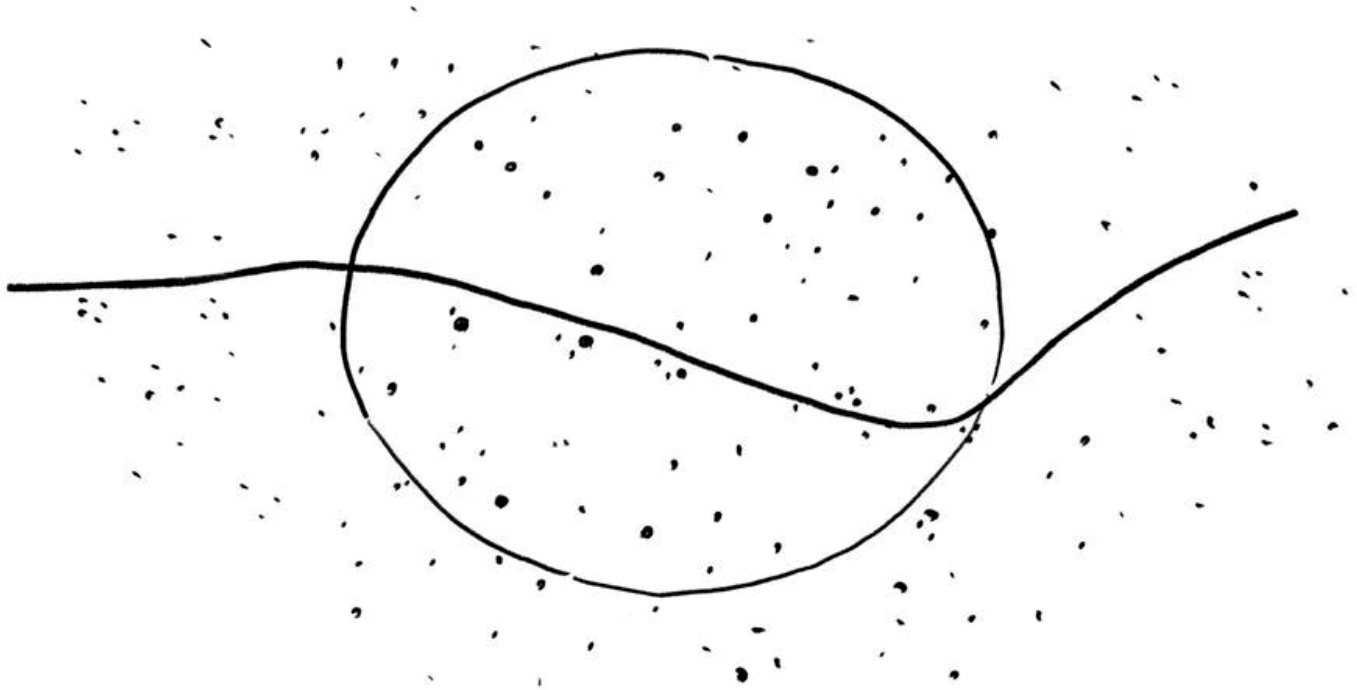
Fischenthal is a municipality in the Oberland region of Zurich at the border to St. Gallen. It has the largest area of the Canton's rural communes, but the settlement is concentrated in a line along its main valley. Its population growth over the last few decades was concentrated in the north and south respectively, turning the commune into a commuting village caught between two poles. The local government and population collaborate to counter the outwards pull and bring the people together. Strengthening the linear center of Fischenthal could bring these social efforts into the territory of the village.



FISCHENTHAL, ZH

Elevation: 740 m.a.s.l.
Surface: 30.2 km^2
Population: 2,501 inh.
Population density: 83 inh./km^2
Population growth: 9.2 %
Average yearly income: 65,685 CHF/yr.
Population over 65 years old: 15.6 %
Share of foreign poulation: 14.6 %

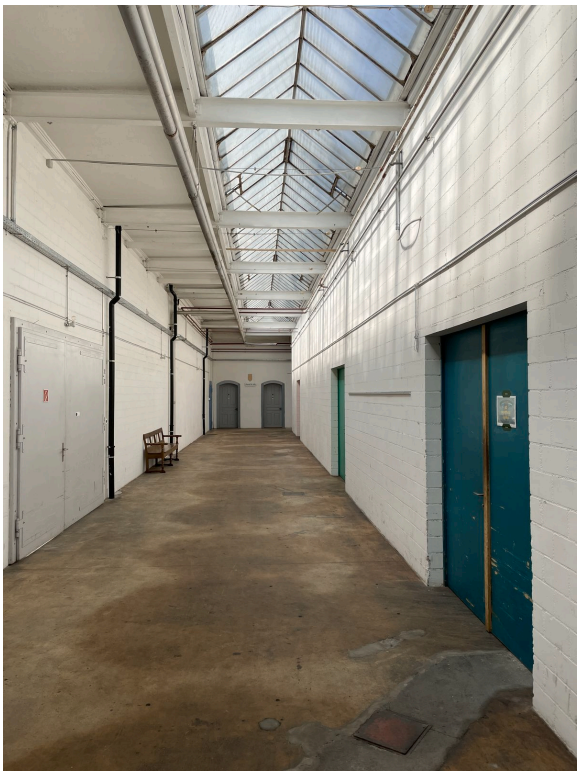
From the Hillsides to the Valley Floor



In the 18th and early 19th centuries, cottage industry was an important auxiliary source of income for the agricultural population of Fischenthal. The new textile factories that were distributed along the valley industry thus pushed these people out of agriculture, often to more industrialized centers such as the neighboring Wald.



Reused factory in Steg, Fischenthal



The old factory building has been repurposed to accommodate small businesses.



From an art studio...

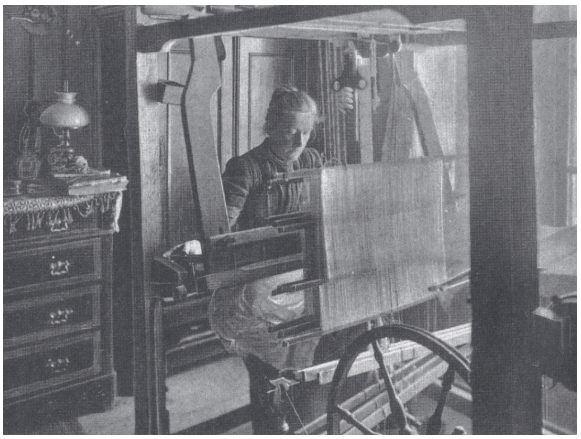


...to a specialized bike workshop.

Up to 1820 Fischenthal relied on the cottage industry. 60% of Fischenthal's population is estimated to have been dependent the home cotton spinning industry.



Spinning as cottage industry in the Zürcher Oberland during the 19th century. Source: Heimatspiegel 10/1998 [https://chronik.fischenthal.ch/chronik/docs/pdfs_jpgs_1988/881002_Heimindustrie.pdf].

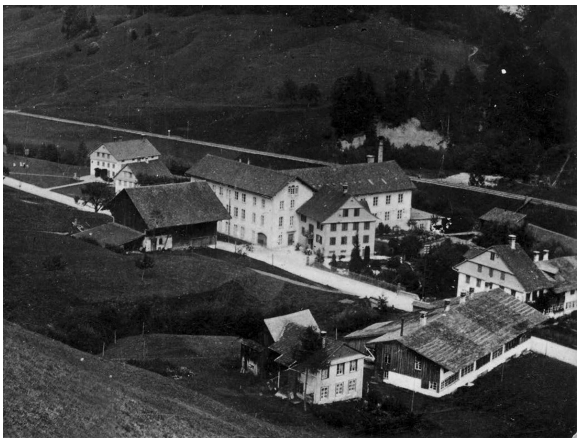


Silk weaving in Leiacher, Fischenthal in the 1860s. Source: Heimatspiegel 2/2000 [https://chronik.fischenthal.ch/chronik/docs/pdfs_jpgs_2000/000201_Heimweberei.pdf].

Propped up by the cottage industry, the population of Fischenthal appears to have peaked just as industrialization reached the valley. Even this isolated commune was not spared by the forces of industrialization, and in the early 19th century, the road leading through Fischenthal from Rüti to Winterthur was built- soon the first textile factory followed suit. At the peak, seven textile mills were in operation.



Former embroidery factory Egli near the station of Steg, around 1934. Source: Tiefbauamt Kanton Zürich



Egli weaving mill in Mühlebach, Fischenthal around 1925. Source: Fischenthaler Chronik.

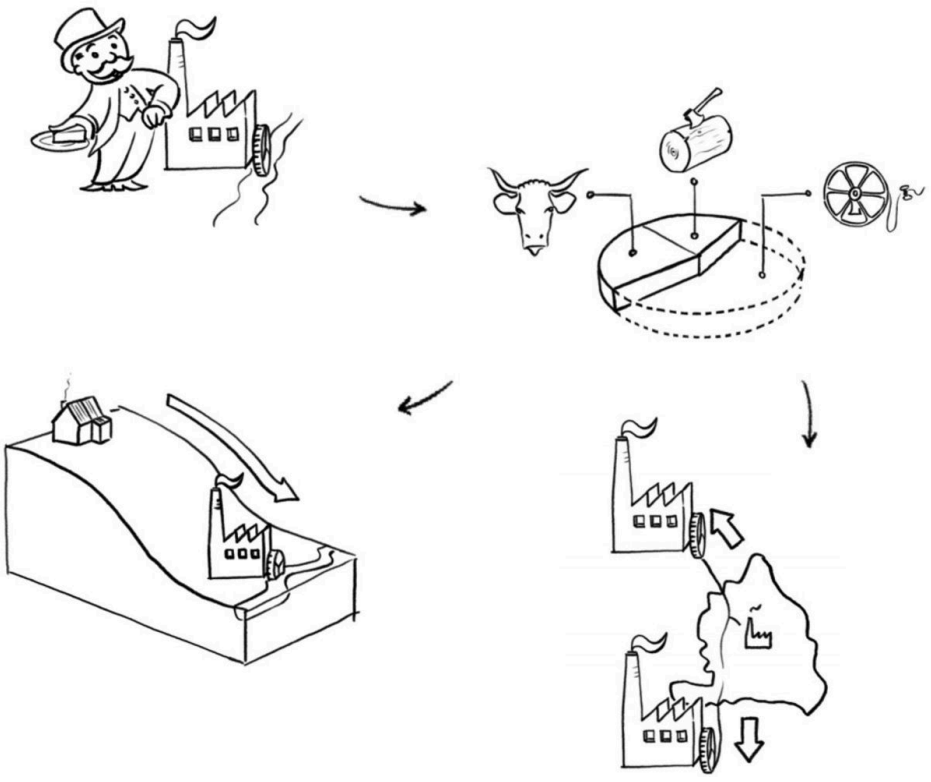


Gibswil around 1938, with the spinning mill Figi on the right side in the Background. Source: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv [https://www.e-pics.ethz.ch/index/ETHBIB.Bildarchiv/ETHBIB.Bildarchiv_74189.html].

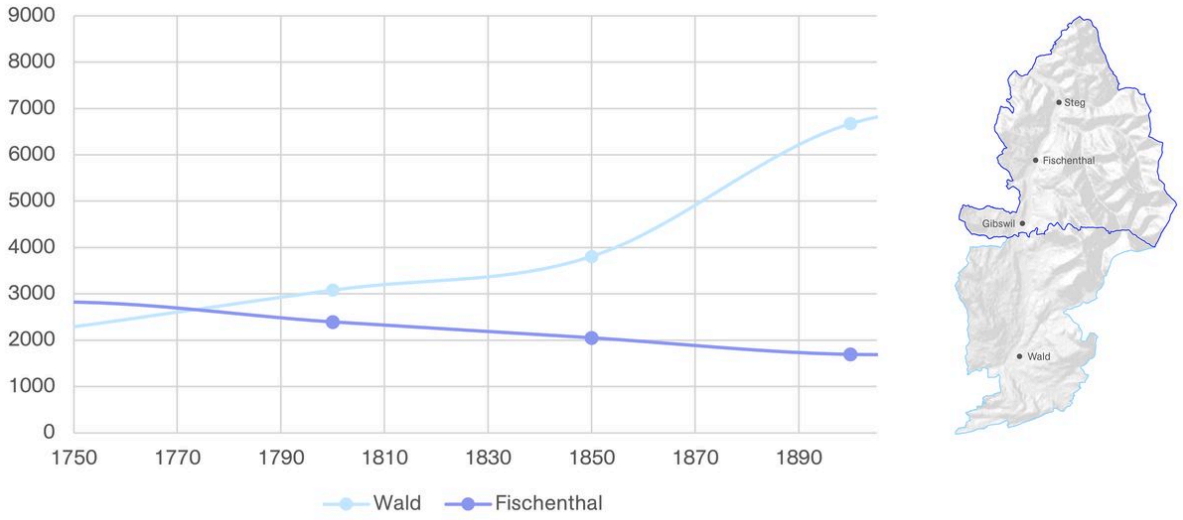


By comparison, industrialization in other areas around Fischenthal was far more intense. Here, the commune of Wald in 1948. Source: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv [https://www.e-pics.ethz.ch/index/ETHBIB.Bildarchiv/ETHBIB.Bildarchiv_524221.html].

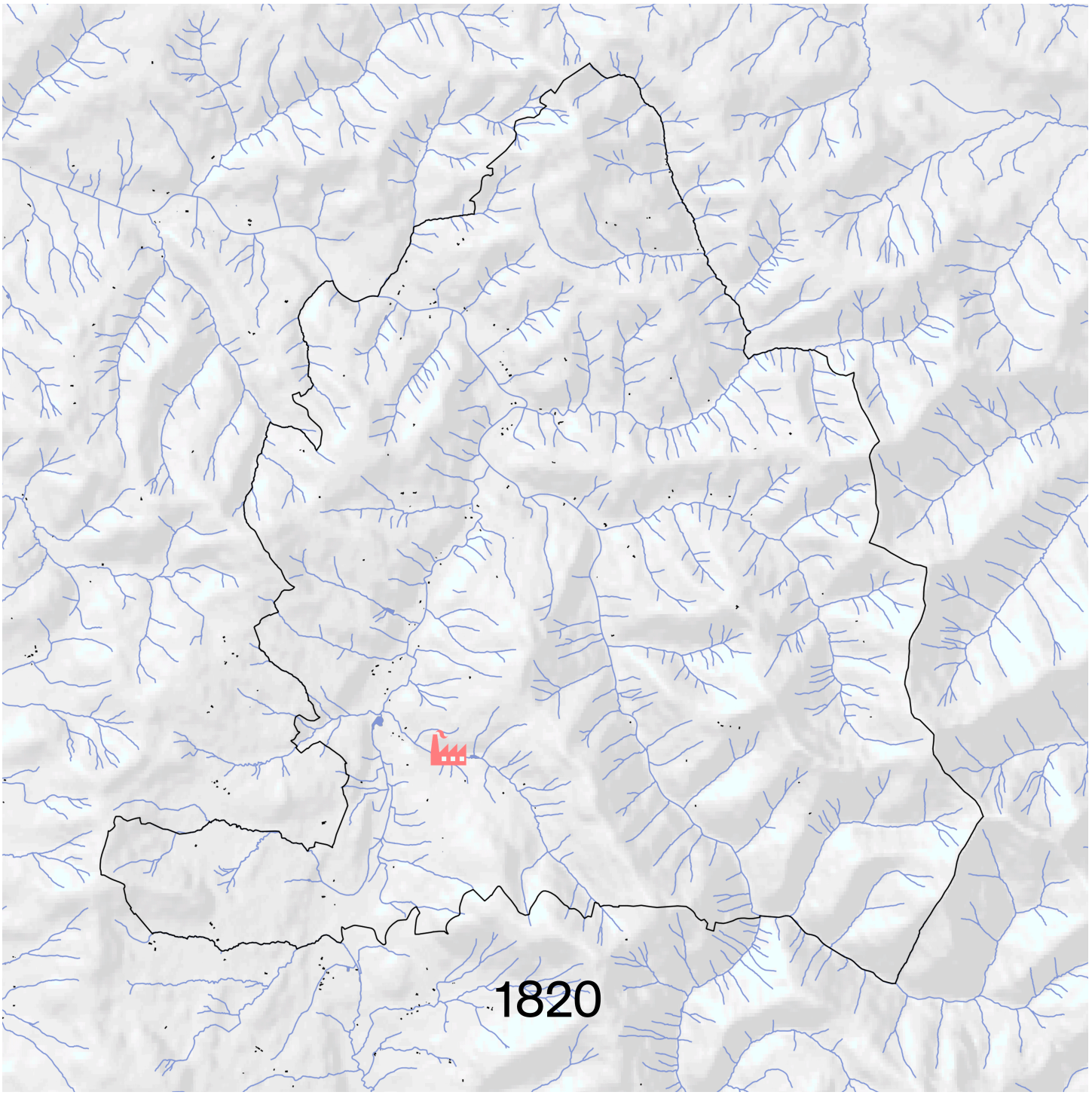
The industrialization in the Töss valley and beyond exerted strong forces on the commune that triggered almost a century of declining population. Many farmers were pushed out of agriculture after losing their auxiliary income from cottage industry to the factories in the valley. The factories in Fischenthal were able to offset only some of these lost livelihoods, and many were drawn to more industrialized areas, such as the neighboring commune of Wald. The pull of such communes can be inferred by comparing their population growth during this period.



The loss of income from the cottage industry is caused by the emergence of textile factories and leads to migration into the valley and away to larger industrial centers such as Wald.



Population graph comparing the two neighboring communes Fischenthal and Wald in the 18th and 19th centuries. Source: Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz [https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/000086/2012-08-23/]

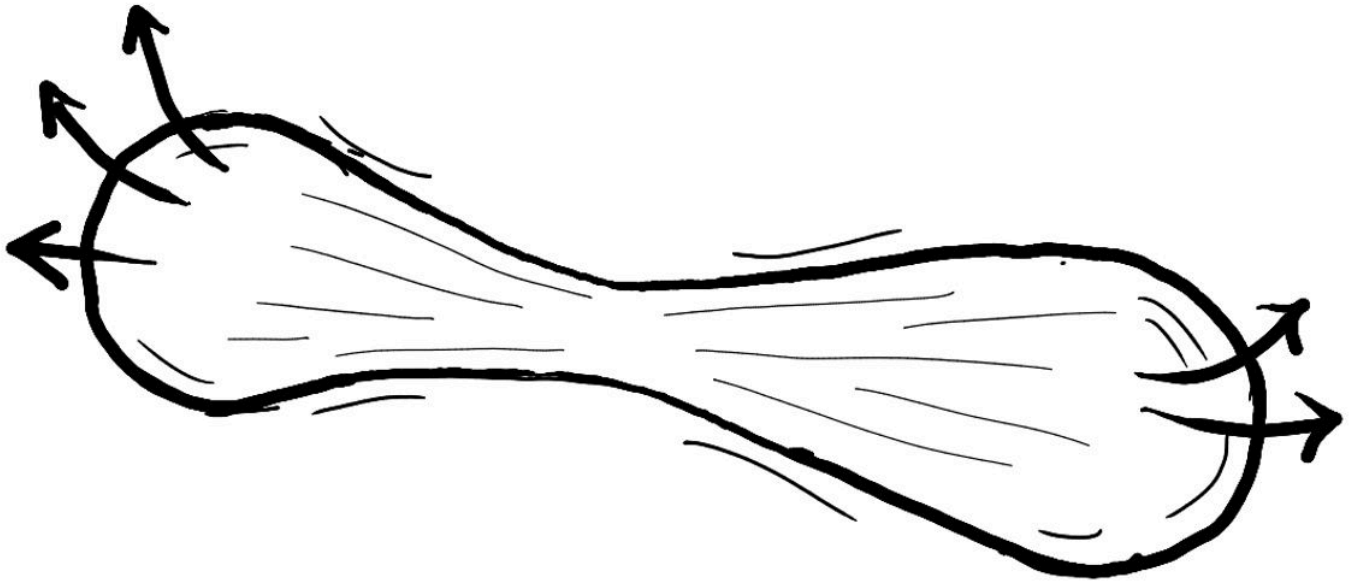


Spread of Factories across Fischenthal over time. Data Source: Fischenthaler Chronik, 3. Teil.

Textile factory

Defunct or repurposed textile factory

Pulling Apart



With the population recovering after the 1980s, two poles emerge at opposite ends of the valley. An influx of commuting residents in Steg and Gibswil shifts everyday life away towards more urban centers.



10 am mid week in Gibswil,
the streets are tranquil.



While walking up the slopes, there is a shift
in building mass towards single-family homes.



The streets are empty, rarely is there
someone working in the garden.



The last open plots are covered with
building makers for further construction.

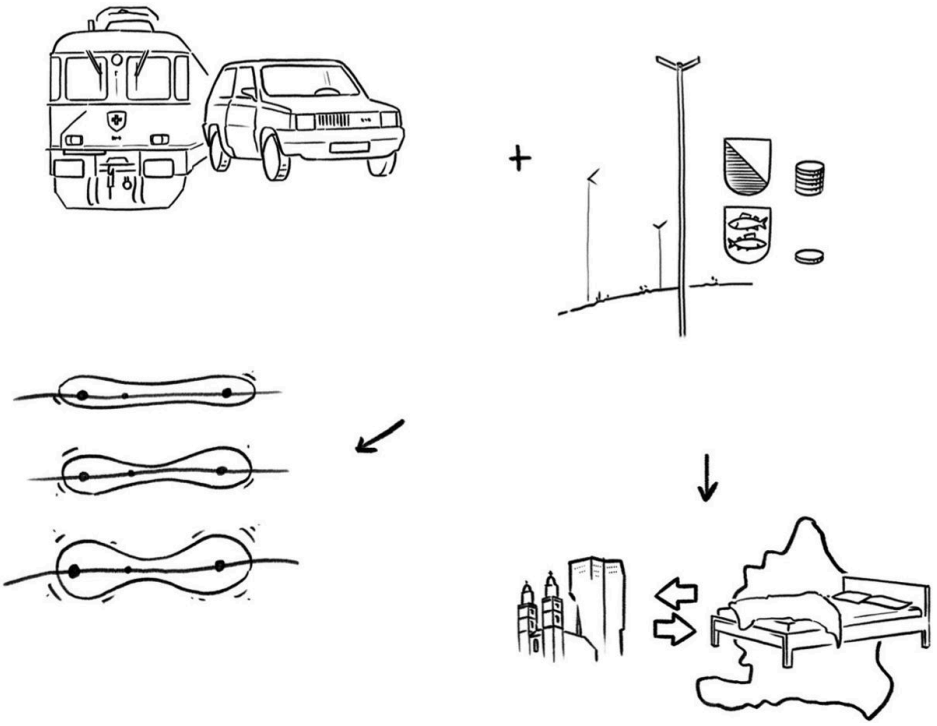


On the other end of the commune, in
Steg, new developments are also ongoing.

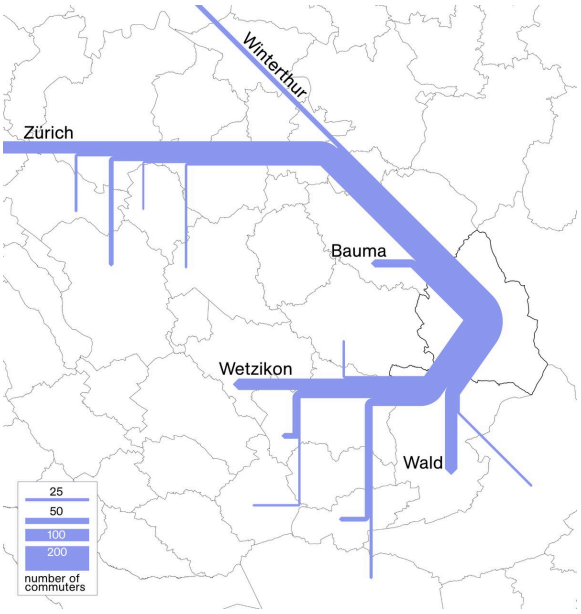


The results are mainly detached or
semi-detached single family homes.

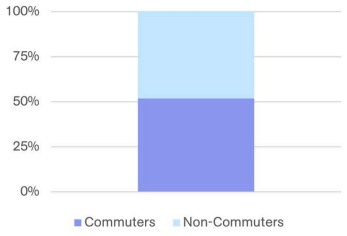
Two poles were forming in the north and south of the commune, where land was not yet as scarce. These two parts at the borders of Fischenthal experienced waves of development from the 90s onwards, bringing in many young families with children – mainly commuters. While they lived in Fischenthal now, there was an outward economic pull. Many of the new arrivals worked in the larger municipalities of Wald (to the south of Gibswil) and Bauma (to the north of Steg), or the cities of Wetzikon and Uster. Despite Fischenthal's relatively remote location, even the city of Zurich was not too far a commute for many. Was Fischenthal destined to become a bedroom village, torn into two parts with nothing in between?



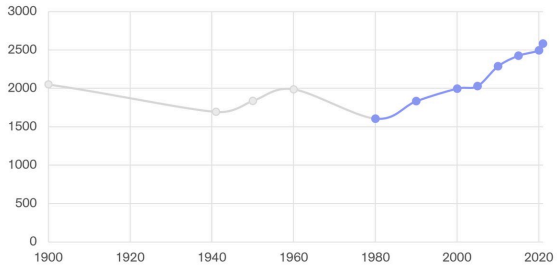
Commuting options and low land prices have led to growth in the two "poles" where space was available.



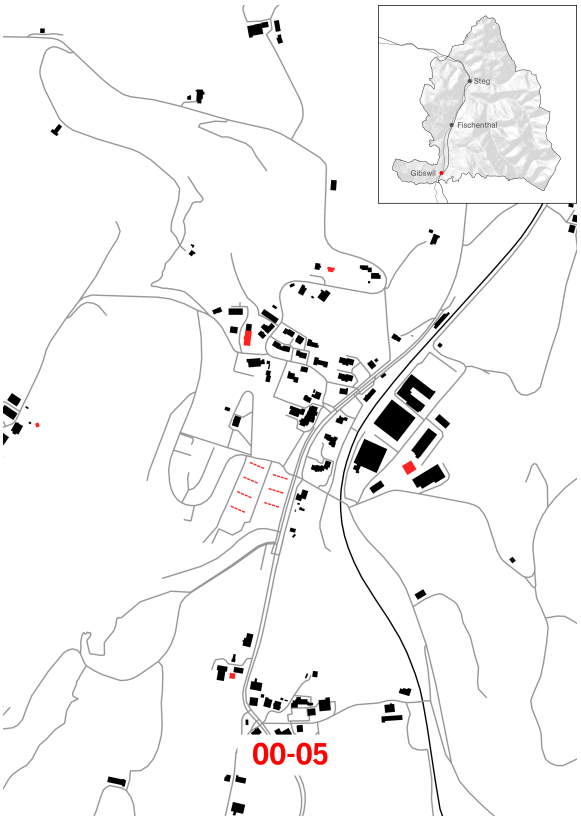
The pull of commuting: outgoing commuter flows from Fischenthal. Source: STATENT [https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/mobilitaet-verkehr/personenverkehr/pendlermobilitaet.assetdetail.14940261.html]



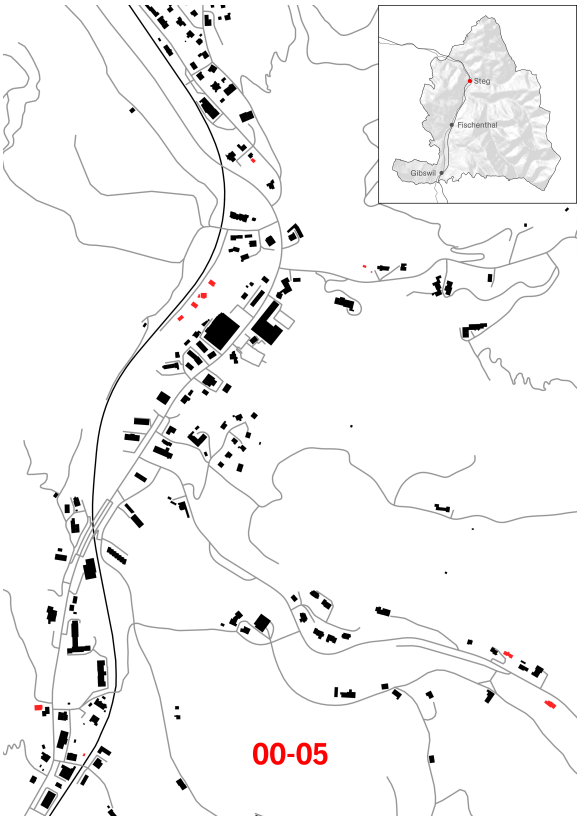
Percentage of commuters among the total population of Fischenthal. Source: STATENT



The population of Fischenthal recovering and growing after 1980, mainly in Steg and Gibswil. Source: Statistisches Amt Kanton Zürich.



Gibswil from 2000-2022.



Steg from 2000-2022.

The government and population of Fischenthal recognized the challenges that a fissure would bring to the municipality. The president of the commune launched a participatory project – the so called “Werkstatt F” - that aimed to bring the people from all parts of the commune together. The results of these efforts have only recently begun to show. The projects that resulted from the “Werkstatt F” included a volunteer network, project teams tackling local issues such as biodiversity and sale of agricultural produce, as well as a professional youth work outfit. On a social level, Fischenthal seems to be moving together. The question that remains is how the territory of the village can reflect and encourage this development.



Samuel Mischler
lives in Gibswil
works in Zürich and Bern
in digital heath at the Swiss Post
activ in the volunteer network
Image Source: Tössthaler



Felix Eger
lives in Hörnli
works in Steg
owns the bike shop Haso-Velo
participant in the Projekt F

„People realized that the commune's problems can only be solved together.“
Samuel Mischler

„If you start something, usually enough people show up to make it worthwile.“
Felix Eger

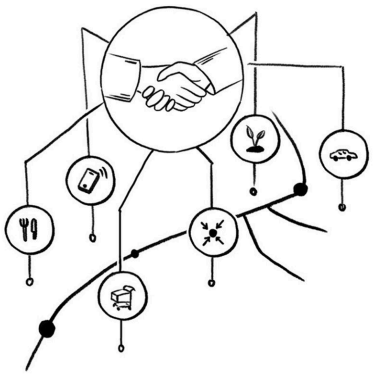
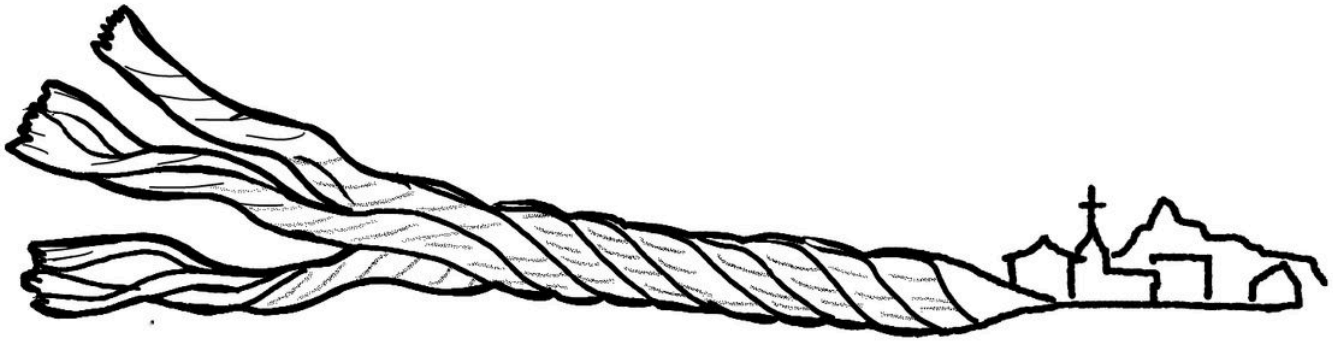


Illustration of coordinated social network to bring Fischenthal together.



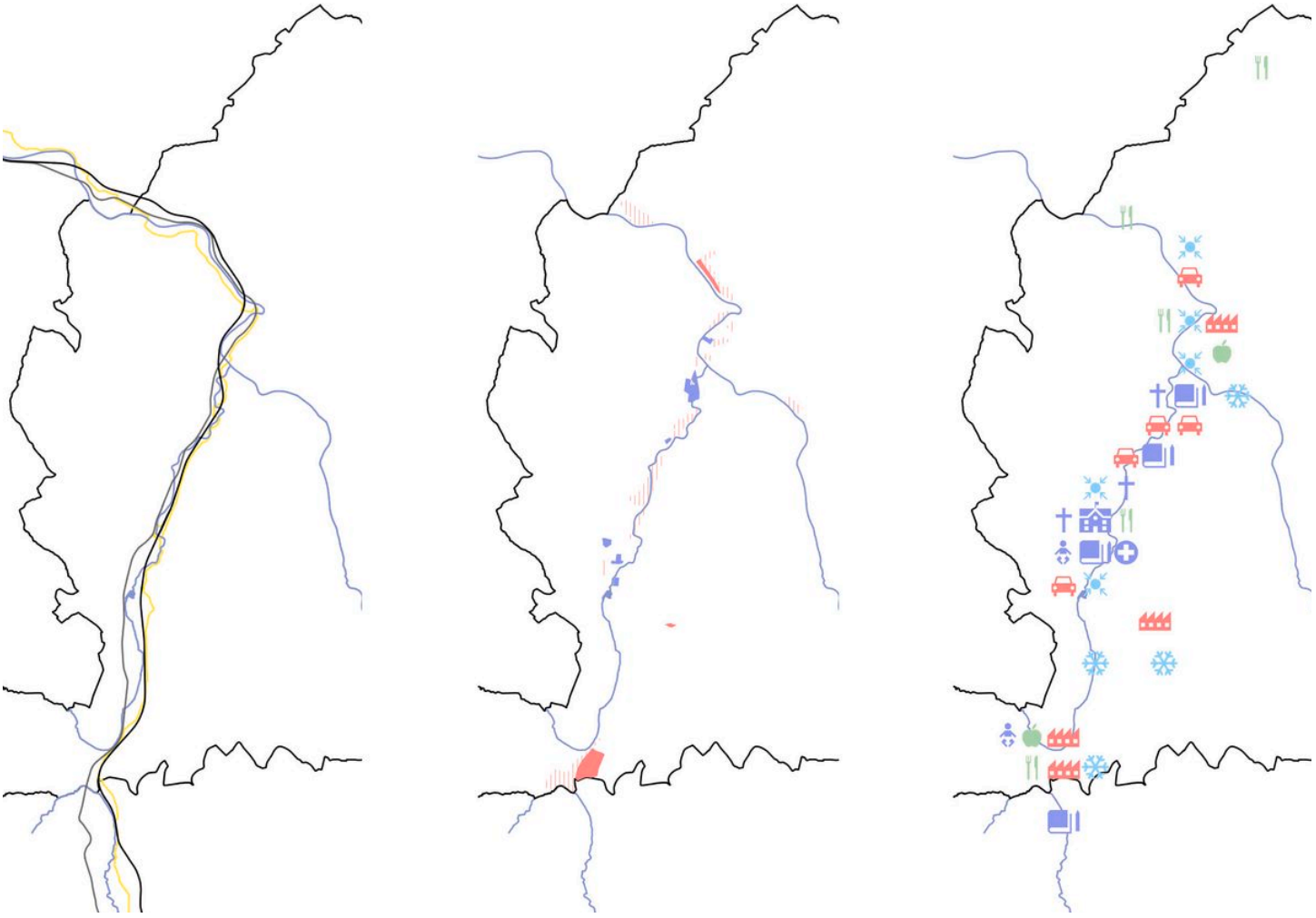
One of the projects that emerged from "Werkstatt F". Source: Fischenthal spring market [https://m.facebook.com/marktfischenthal].

The Strands of the Village Fabric



The historic and industrial development of Fischenthal left it with different functions dispersed evenly along the valley. What role does the middle segment play between the two poles? A closer look can tell us more.

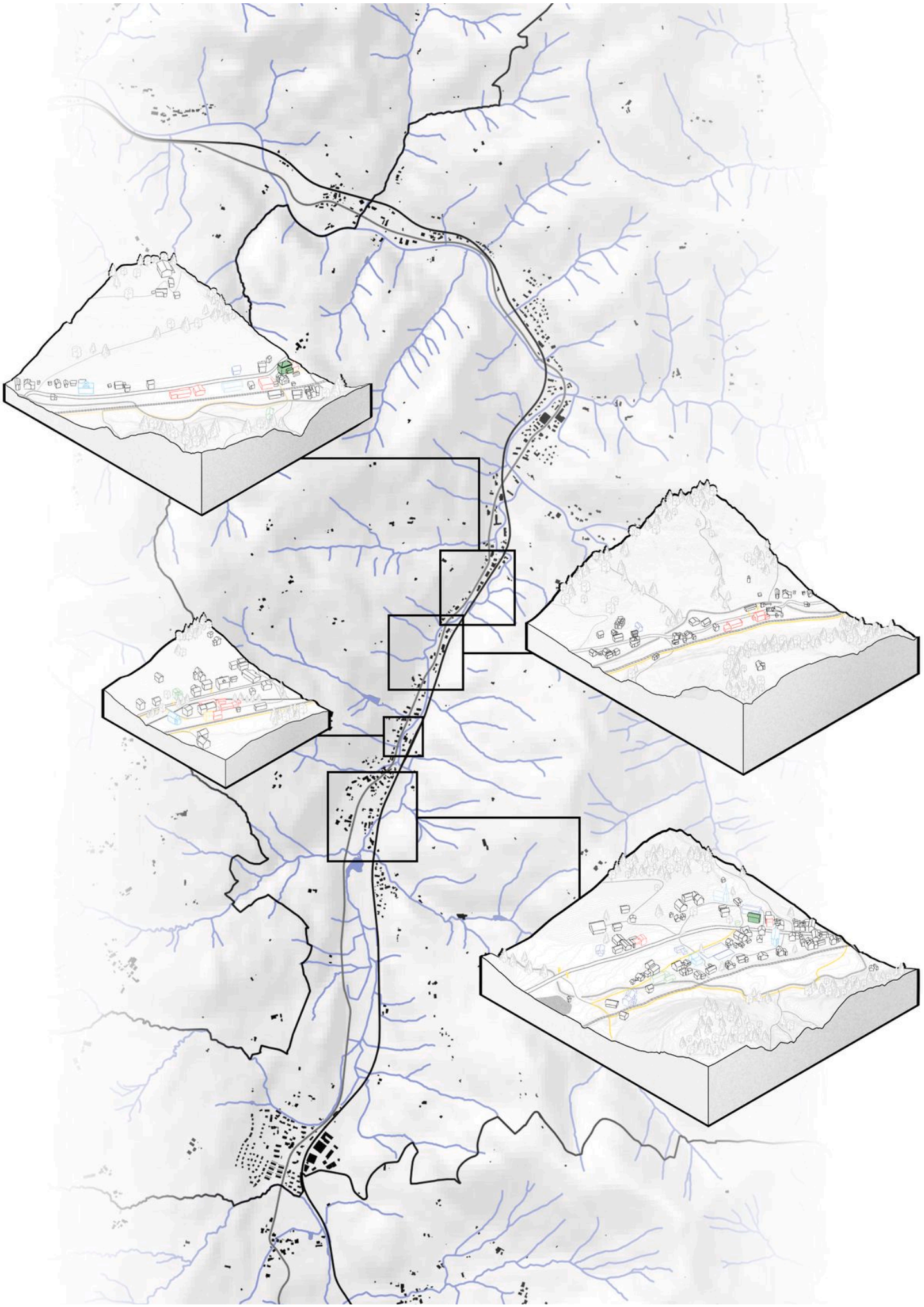
The legacy of the municipality's industrial past lies less in its factory buildings (most of which have either been demolished or repurposed) and more in how it may have influenced the zoning. With the exception of one site in Gibswil, the areas around former textile factories are today all mixed-use zones. Thus, these areas are just as evenly distributed along the valley as the factories once were. A linear settlement in and of itself is nothing new – many such villages and towns exist. But it is its specific disposition that makes Fischenthal unique.



Lines – areas – dots.

- Footpath
- Train
- Car
- Public zone
- Industrial zone
- Mixed zone
- Grocery
- Restaurant
- School
- Kindergarden
- Doctor
- Church
- Local government offices
- Meeting spots
- Winter sports
- Production
- Garage or gas station

The linear disposition of Fischenthal offers a long stretch of transport infrastructure: train, car, bicycle, pedestrian. These lines overlap, intersect, and diverge at different points along the village. We can discover key locations where we can create interactions that enrich the inbetween.





Overview of zoom ins

Mobility
Commerce
Civic
Social
Food

Sleepy Oasis of Social Functions – Oberhof



Entering from the nature protection zone, Oberhof offers the look of a village as we expect.



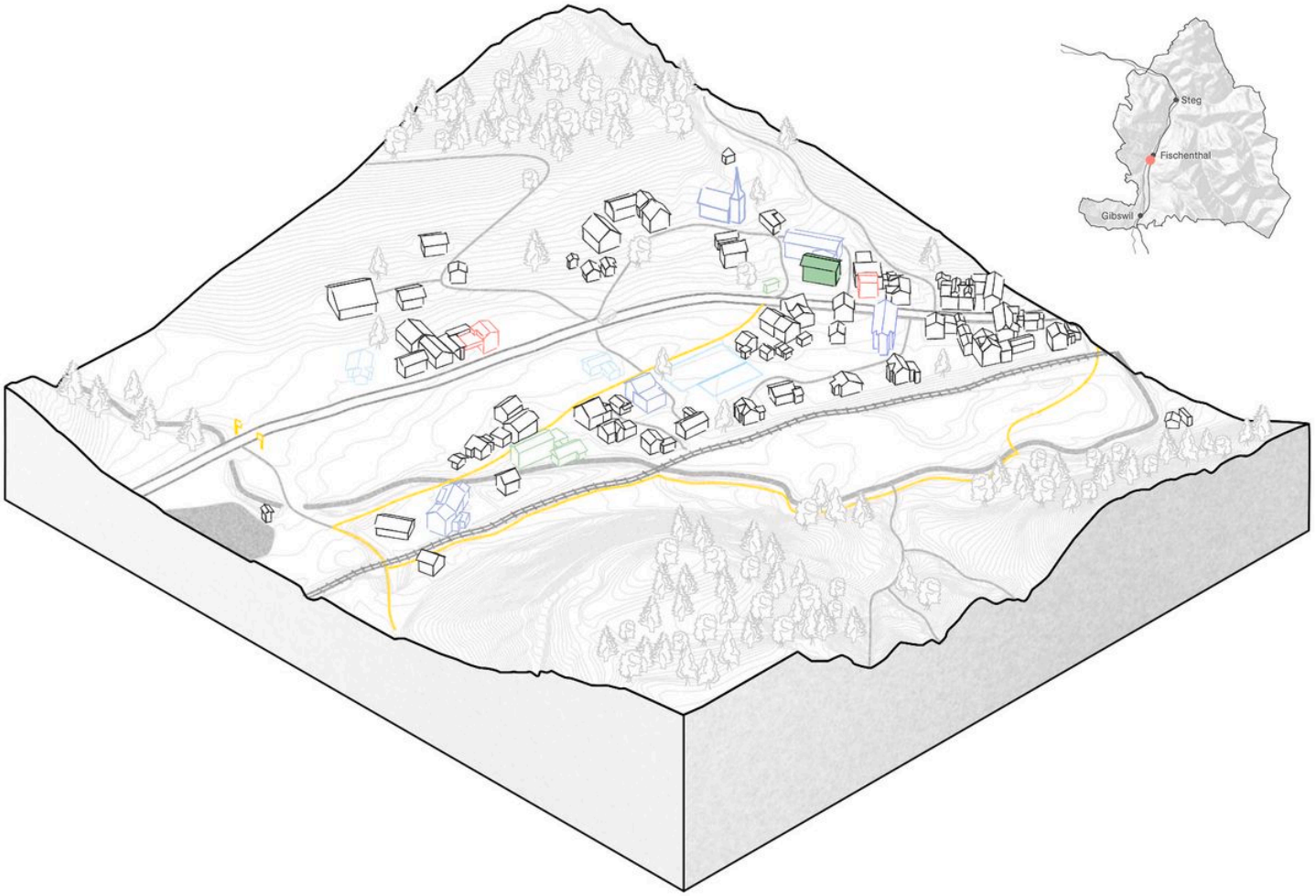
The hiking trail offers an alternative entry separated from the dominant road.



Twice a week, you can buy regional dairy products here.



On weekends and holidays, cyclists race through - Oberhof is usually just a distance marker to them.



It lies in the middle of the commune and has a concentration of civic functions. But it is not quite as lively as a village square – can the planned reuse of the restaurant Blume change this?

Mobility
Commerce
Civic
Social
Food

Not as the Name Suggests – Bahnhof Fischenthal



The train station is hardly a place to stay, only a departure point for commuters and hikers.



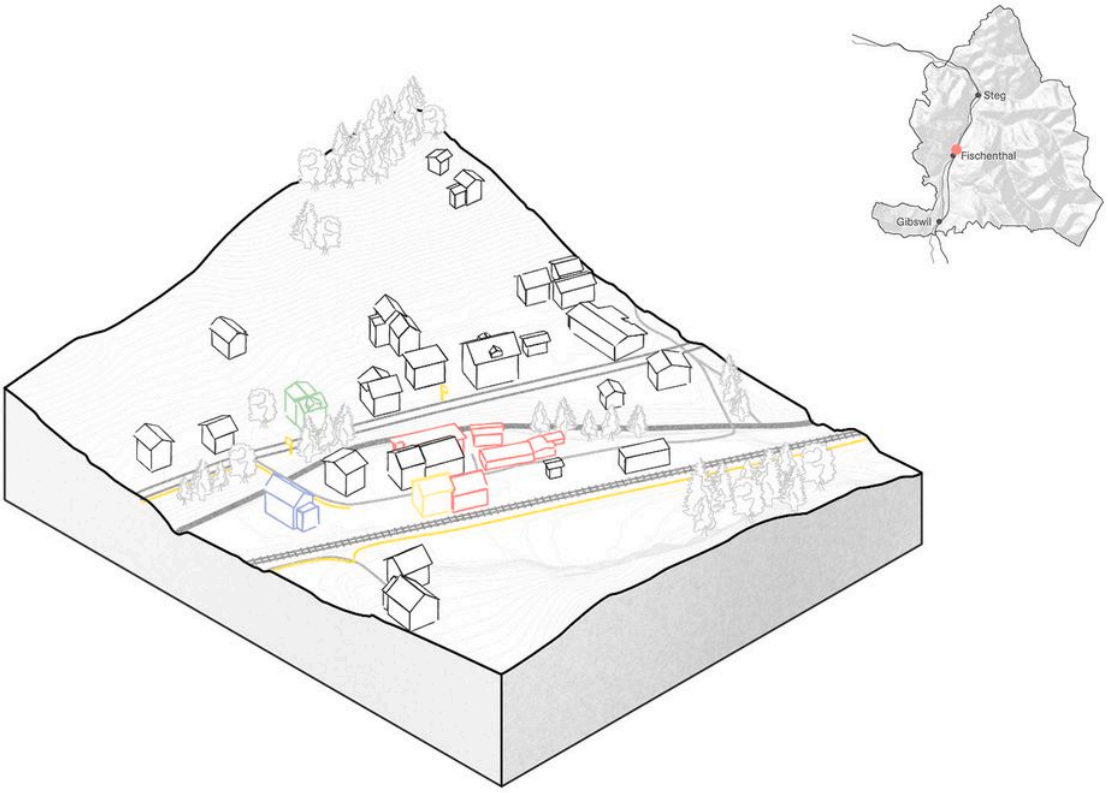
The restaurant Linde may look unused at first glance, but is still running.



Around the train station there are businesses such as scaffolders who need more space...



... as well as underused buildings.



The middle one of three railway stations in the commune. The hiking trail starts here. Could this segment become a node for local mobility?

mobility
commerce
civic
sozial
food

Mixed-Use Bottleneck – Bodmen



Mixture of garages, electronics store and apartment buildings.



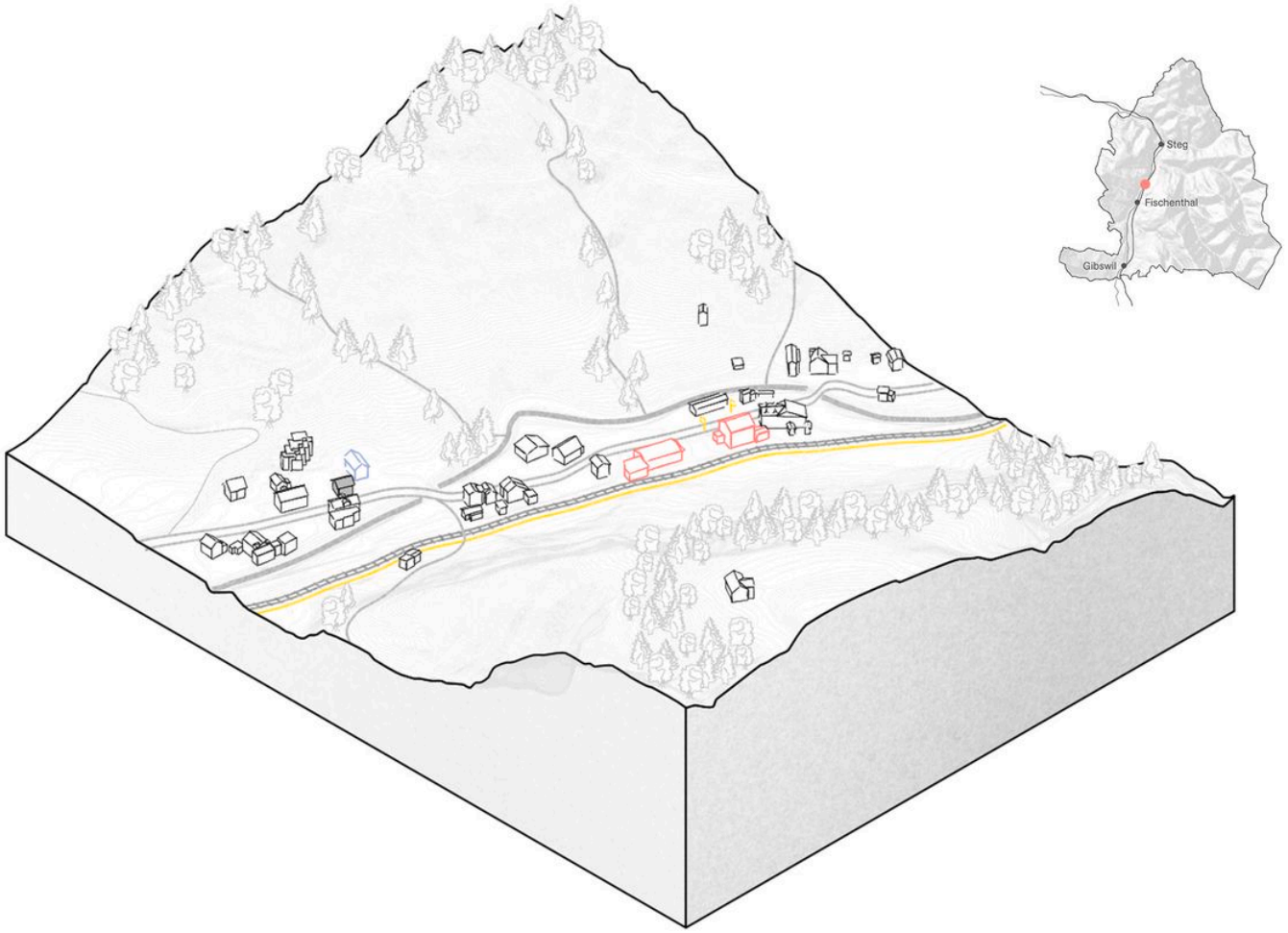
The spaces in between are not suitable for buildings – and are thus simply used for parking spaces.



The bus stop operates from 20:30 - the train is only scheduled until dinner.



The long, narrow section of the valley does not always allow for a house on either side of the road.



This is the bottleneck of the linear village, where settlement from both sides fizzles out.

mobility
commerce
civic
sozial
food

The Abandoned Forecourt – Schmittenbach



Firefighter's headquarters follow reused factory buildings.



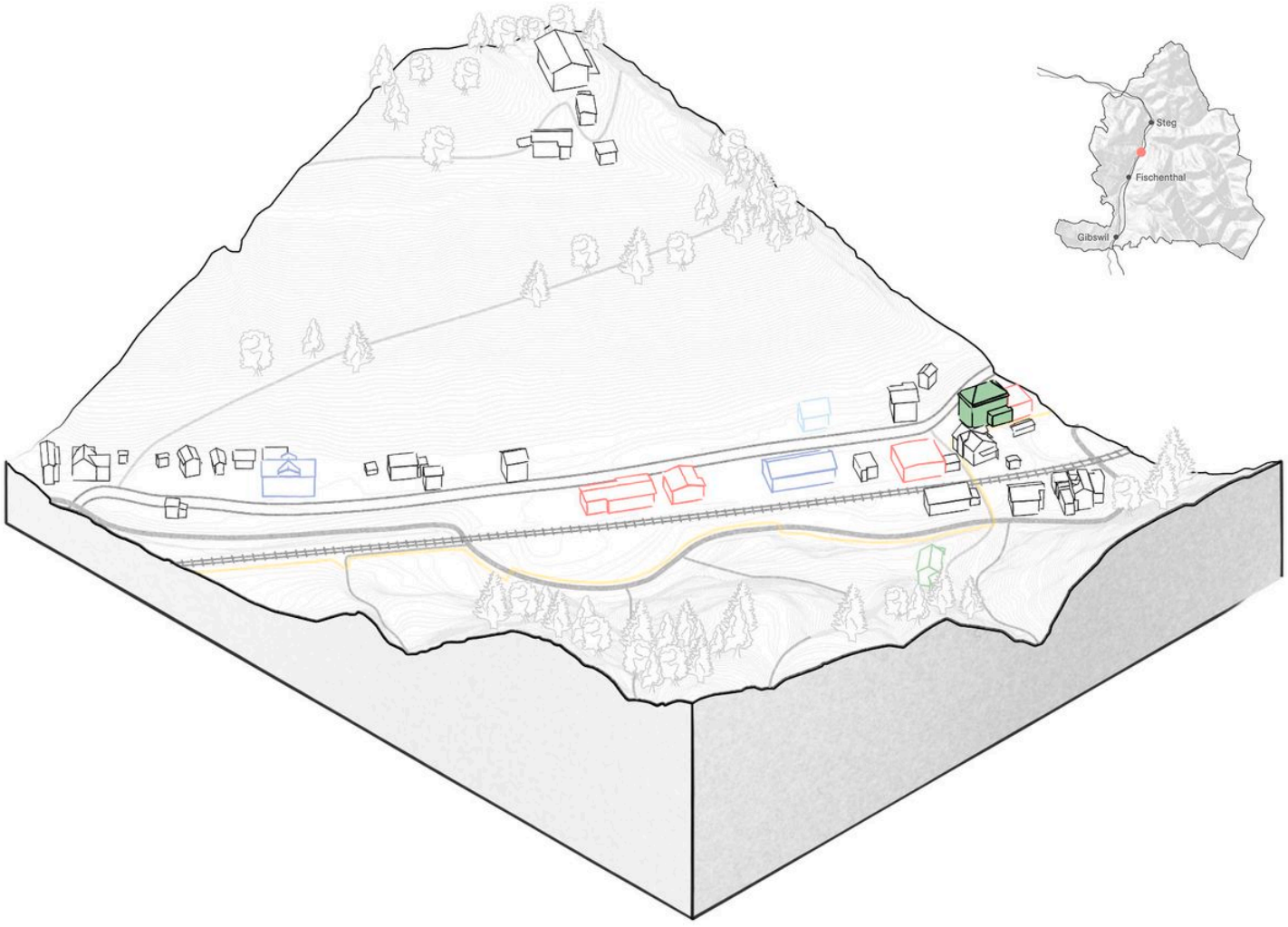
One of the few empty plots along the center of Fischenthal.



The empty restaurant Stop comes into view.



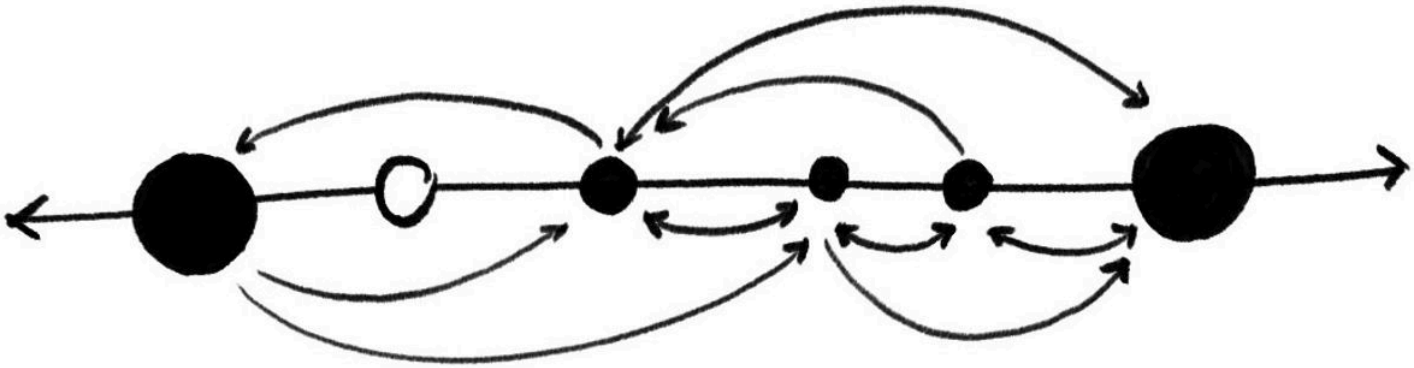
A rare setback from the street creates a space.



Here, the overlap of recreational mobility, agriculture, civic functions, and an empty building waiting for reuse are symbolic for the potentials in Fischenthal's linear centre.

mobility
commerce
civic
sozial
food

Tying It All Together



A set of principles could give physical spaces to the social connections that the commune has been pursuing: Incentivizing the full use of existing mixed-use zones, encouraging overlaps, creating space for initiative, and improving local mobility.



Two types of commerce can thrive in the middle segment of Fischenthal: Businesses that target the local population, or specialized production and services that has a pull beyond the borders of the commune. The mechanics at the Stop workshop work exclusively on classic cars, and Naef Flugmechanik AG in Wasserfels produce an extremely specific type of hydraulic motors. And what appears to be an ordinary bicycle repair shop has customers as far away as Geneva: Haso Velo in Steg makes customized bicycles for people with special needs. But for these things to work in the context of Fischenthal, a certain frequency has to be achieved. This can be done by incentivizing the full use of mixed residential areas throughout the linear center, creating spaces where multiple uses overlap in time and space, and improving local mobillity between the three railway stations in the commune.



Create physical spaces for local initiatives and village innovation: The commune has already begun providing a social and political platform for locals to initiate new projects for the municipality. Underused buildings and areas along Fischenthal's linear center offer the opportunity to give these ideas physical space. The planned reuse of the restaurant Blume is a good example.



Make full use of mixed zones: A lot of plots along the middle that would allow for mixed use – residential and commercial – only have one or the other. By creating incentives for property owners to make full use of the "Gewerbeerleichterung" (eased regulations for commercial activities in buildings), these areas could be improved by providing opportunities to work and consume locally. By concentrating diverse production and commerce in key points along the line, the required frequency of users can be achieved even in Fischenthal.



Improving the last mile: Access to mobility has improved for many locals with the introduction of a volunteer pickup service. The bike is a good way to get from one end of the village to the other, although very close to the cars on the main road. Better access to public transport could be achieved by providing a bus service between the three train stations during the day. The bust stops already exist, and a service would help physically bring the stretched-out village together.

The physical spaces to apply these principles already exist within the center: Empty or underused buildings can be used to create space for commerce and trade. The existing bus stops that are currently only in use in the evenings could serve as stations for a local shuttle bus. Tying in these proposed physical spaces with the existing social and volunteer network could help strengthen the in-between and make Fischenthal a commune that draws its population in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Samuel Mischler, Gibswil

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