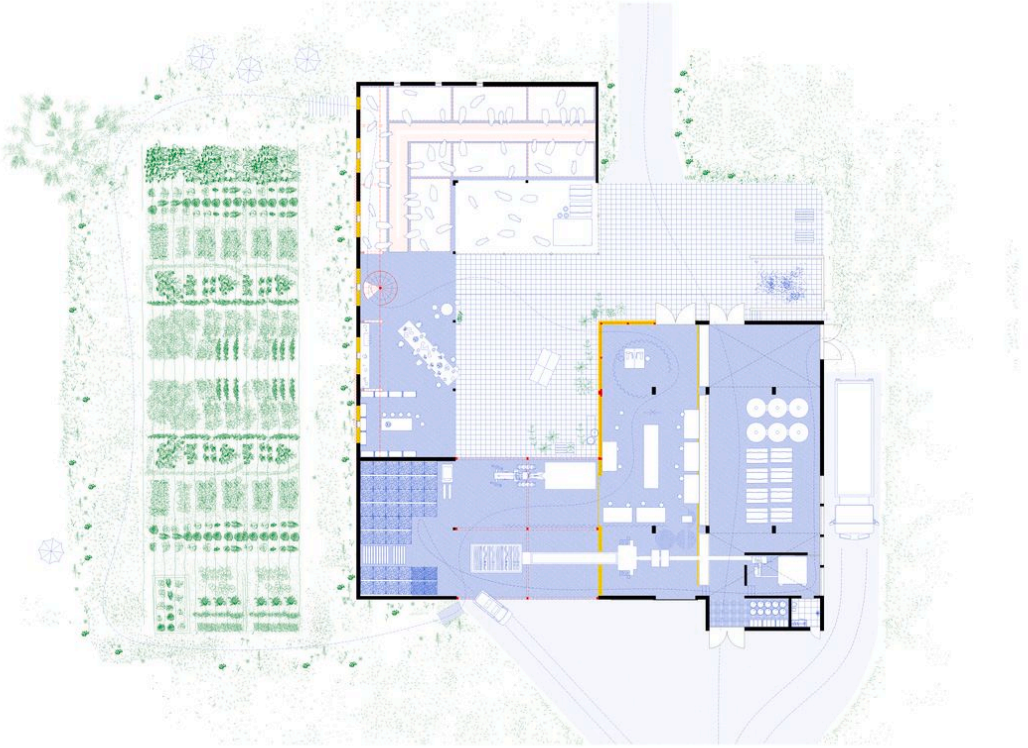
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Agrarian Project
Spring 2023

Zumikon

The Last Farmer: The Transformation of Walter Senn's Farmstead into a Communal Farm

Sofia Gloor and Till Blaser



Walter Senn, the last farmer of Zumikon, belongs to a generation that witnessed the transformation of Zumikon from a farming village to a sprawling residential settlement of wealthy citizens. In 2018, Walter Senn was forced to retire because he is no longer allowed to draw subsidies necessary for the business after the age of 65. This marked the beginning of an uncertain time for Walter Senn and the future of his farm.

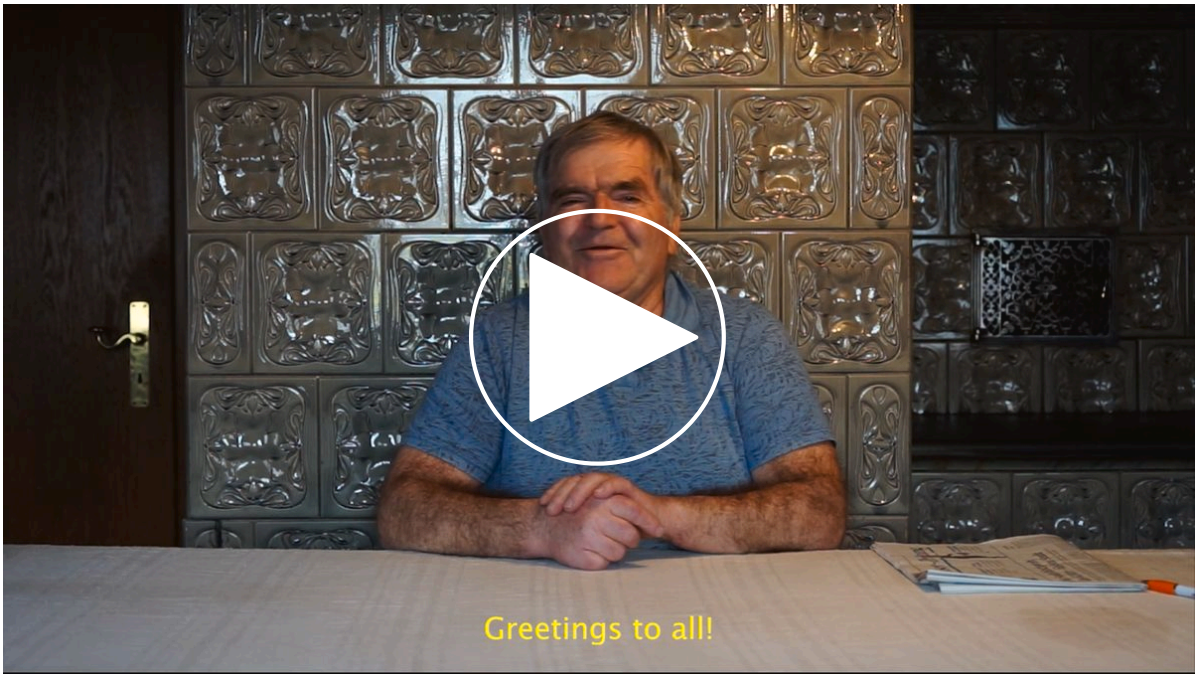
We ask ourselves: how could Walter stay on his farm? The communal farm, a project that interweaves different actors and uses, such as, agroforestry, an educational centre and a housing project, might offer the possibility for Walter to continue to inhabit and work on the farm.

The Last Farmer



Walter Senn is the last remaining farmer of Zumikon. Walter runs a farm with 12 cows on 20 hectares of land. He is skilled at his craft and enjoys working with machines and his animals. Subsidies, which in Switzerland usually make up a large part of a farmer's income, are no longer available to farmers over the age of 65. Without direct payments, farmers are financially forced to transfer the farm to family members or other eligible farmers. Since Walter has no children, he has to give up his farm.

It is March 23, 2023. We, two students, visit Walter Senn in his house to get an insight into the agricultural practices in Zumikon. We ring the bell. An old man opens the door with a shy smile on his face. He invites us in. In the room is a large stove with charming ornaments. The room is tidy and sparsely furnished. An armchair, a wardrobe, a dining table and a small side table with his computer on it and on the wall hangs an image of Zumikon as it is today.



Walter Senn introduces himself.
https://youtu.be/ZwYz4Eq00r8

Walter Senn inherited the land from his parents, who had been farming in Zumikon for generations. He cultivated a total of 20 hectares, where 5 hectares are owned by him and 15 are leased from the municipality or private land owners.
His farm is relatively small compared to nearby farms with 40 to 50 hectares of land, located outside the commune of Zumikon. Walter Senn's land is surrounded by residential houses and he shares a direct border with the backyards of his neighbours.



Map of agriculture in Zumikon. Walter Senn's land is strongly integrated into the settlement fabric of Zumikon. Compared to the neighbouring farms, his land is smaller and is not used as arable land.

- farms
- important buildings
- cropland
- pasture
- meadow
- biodiversity area
- forest

Walter is not only the last farmer in Zumikon, but also the last of his family living and farming on this land. Having no children, he needs to think of a suitable successor. Which brings us to the following question: “Where lies the special relationship between family and farming?” Family farms that are abandoned because the farm manager retires are the exception rather than the rule in most industries, where this is very common and these days a trend in the agriculture branch of Switzerland.

The retirement of the farm manager on family farms often leads to abandonment if it can’t be taken over by a family member. This phenomenon can be explained by the long and complicated handover of the farm. The farming practice cannot be handed over simply by signing a contract; it takes years to become familiar with the land and the infrastructure. Moreover, life on the farm is hard work and yields little profit. One needs a reliable and stable network of helpers who can step in or step out when needed. As we can see, the critical phase in the life cycle of family farms is the time when the old farmer wants to retire or is forced to do so by agricultural policy regulations. In Switzerland, direct payments are no longer granted to farmers over the age of 65.



Walter Senn on his property with his farm in the background. Photograph: Sofia Gloor and Till Blaser, 2023.



Walter Senn shows us his property with the five remaining high trunk fruit trees. Photograph: Sofia Gloor and Till Blaser, 2023.

While Walter shows us around his vast lands, he tells us that he had leased his land to Erik*. Erik grew up in Zumikon and helped Walter as a child and later attended agronomy school. We observe that the relationship between Erik and Walter is almost familial. Walter leases his land to Erik for free and Erik moved in with Walter. His successor looked after and cared for the 12 cows for five years. In order to watch for signs of distress of the animals during night, he used to sleep in a trailer next to the farm. Unfortunately Erik had to take a step back due to personal reasons and he had to give up the practice last year.

*name changed



For the past year, the land has been tended but no longer farmed and the cows have been sold to neighbours. The land stands still and holds a tension between the settlements.



Striving through the fields of Walter Senn.
https://youtu.be/zYaoDVhclhA

Walter Turns 65! What Happens to His Farm After Retirement?

The question of succession arises again and in this case the land is usually sold or leased to neighbouring farms. Farmers are constantly trying to grow because it usually means more gain with the same efficiency. Walter has an impact to whom the lands are handed over but we observe an indecisiveness because of the lack of a fitting option. In a discussion with him about the future of the lands he showed an indifferent face regarding the coming changes of the farm but we suspect that there is an attachment. The Farm has been his workplace for so long and he would have to leave the place. Even though he doesn't live in the farmstead, he has a workshop area with many tools, a big collection of screws—Walter is a bricoleur—and he still enjoys taking care of the farm and hanging out there. If this would not be the case, he could have already passed the leasing on to other farmers.

What would have to change to guarantee the practice on the farm, without Erik and Walter leaving? Can Erik and Walter stay without direct payments when they are a big share of a farmer's income?

Zumikon’s Transformation: from Orchards to an Urban Settlement



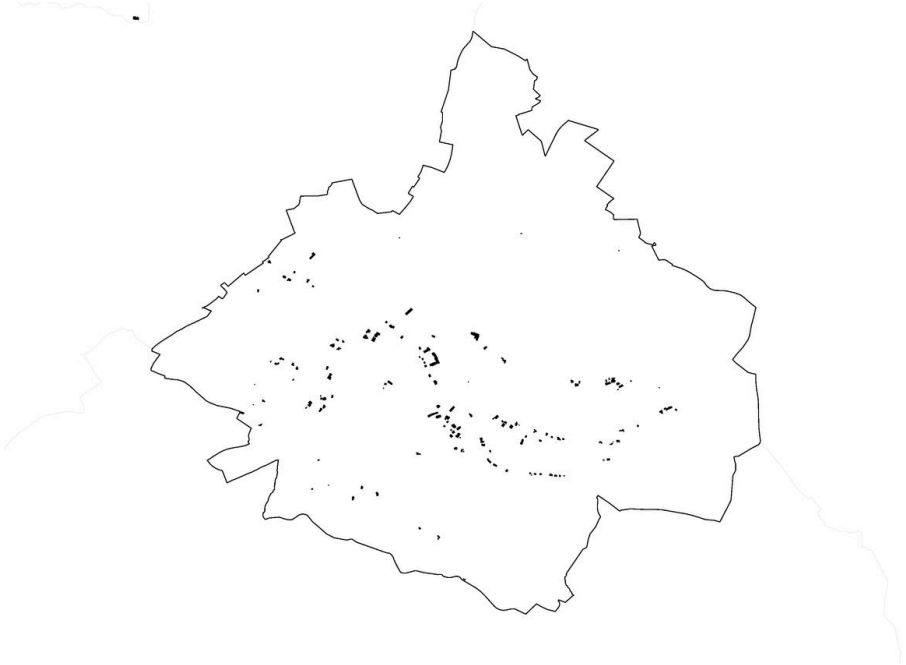
In the 1950s, many agricultural zones were rezoned into building zones by the municipality of Zumikon. This development led to a mass sale of farms along with their land. As a result, the former scattered orchards had to make places for the new houses of the new residents, city dwellers who were looking for a rural retreat close to the urban centre of Zurich. Many single-family houses with gardens were built, and little by little Zumikon transformed into a landscape of houses, streets, front gardens and swimming pools–an urban settlement. Once building plots facing the open landscape were all gone, houses were built around a few remaining fields in order to retain a rural atmosphere. Votes on building projects in recent years indicate that the people of Zumikon hold on to the idea that Zumikon is a village.

1900–1980



Built environment and location of Zumikon around 1950.

Zumikon is a municipality in the district Meilen in Zurich. The village was known for its beautiful natural surroundings with green landscapes and breathtaking views on the lake and the distant alps. The combination of a quiet atmosphere and the proximity to the city makes Zumikon an attractive place to move to for families and individuals seeking a balance between nature and city life.



The built environment of Zumikon in 1950 consisted of some farm buildings along the main street. Source: QGIS, 1950.

In 1900, Zumikon had around 600 inhabitants. The landscape of the region was mainly characterised by meadows and fields, which were cultivated by small family farms much like Walter Senn's farm. When we were promenading on Walters land, the knotty trees catched our attention. Very few old trees are lightly scattered over his fields and as we understand now, they are the last remaining survivors of the radical tree cutting action in the 1950s.



Aerial photograph of Zumikon, taken from an altitude of 500 metres. Photograph: Walter Mittelholzer, 1923.



Agroforestry in the past; Orchard meadow in Waltikon with view of the church in Zumikon. Photograph: Wilhelm Keller, 1929.

Like in many other regions in Switzerland, one of the traditional agroforestry techniques was the so-called scattered orchard. Scattered tall fruit trees, including apple, pear and stone fruit trees, of different ages, species and varieties were planted. The scattered orchards were mainly for growing fruit, but because the trees were spread out, the areas also served as grassy fields. These fields were used either to make hay by mowing the grass or as grazing land for the cattle. These idyllic scattered orchards attracted visitors.



Golf & Country Club [https://www.gccz.ch/club], Zumikon, 1920.

In 1913, the Forch railway was built and Zumikon became easier to reach from the city. Postcards from that time document that Zumikom had become a tourist destination. With the construction of the golf course in 1920, Zumikon finally became a local recreational area for Zurich's upper class.



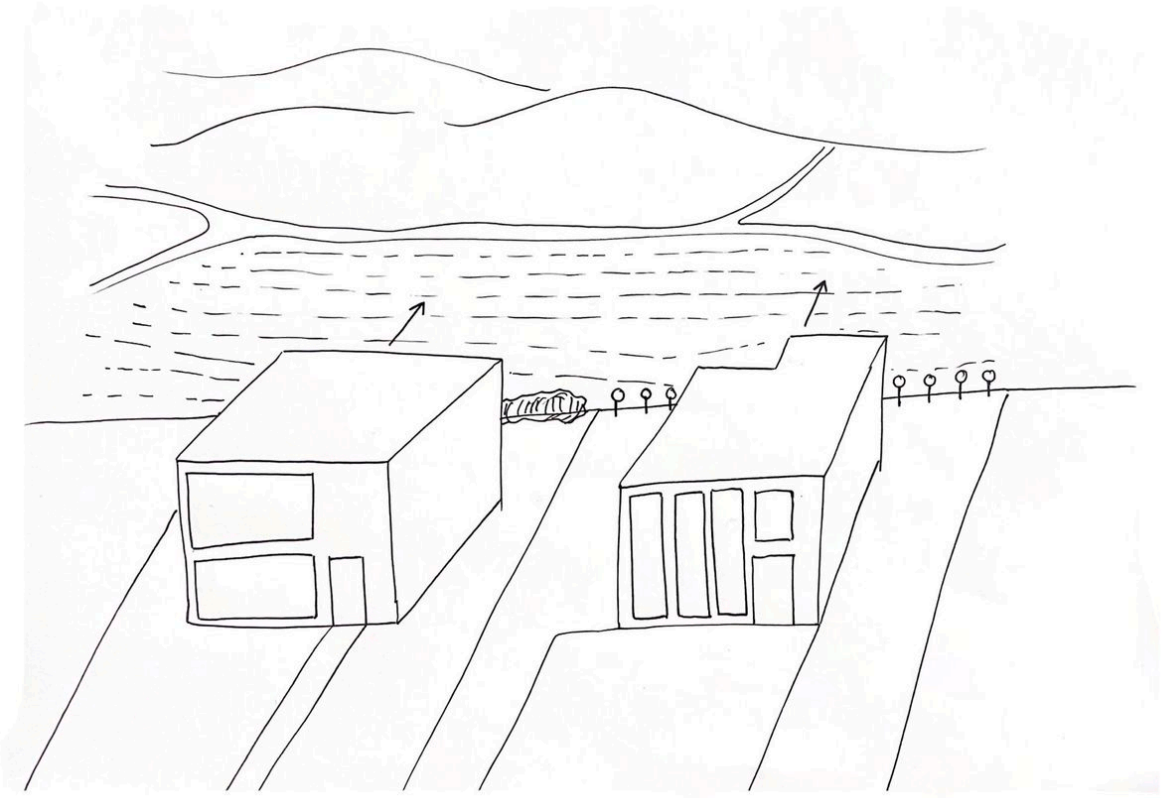
Downfall of the fruittreearea; A historical photograph of the tree felling action in the mid-1950s in Thurgau.

Around 1950, the decline of the fruit tree landscape began. Due to the high consumption of spirits, the state of Switzerland ordered the so-called tree felling campaign, during which 11 million trees were felled. The aim was to curb spirits consumption and pave the way for more rational fruit production.



Home of the artist Theo Schmid, Zumikon, 1953.

The municipality of Zumikon started changing agricultural areas into residential zones. This was more profitable for the municipality because they received taxes on every land sale. As a result, farmers whose land was no longer classified as agricultural, where prices were fixed, began selling their land to wealthier residents from Zurich. Many of these new landowners were intellectual Zurich upper-class people who thus realized their dream of a home in the countryside.



Orientation to the open landscape: the dream of a family home close to nature with a big garden and a view.

The houses of this time are facing towards the open landscape. They have a view over the fields to the alps. There is almost no house in sight, maybe an old farm house but other than that you get the feeling of an untouched calm idyllic surrounding. But this situation is only a momentary snapshot. More and more people move to Zumikon to build there family homes.



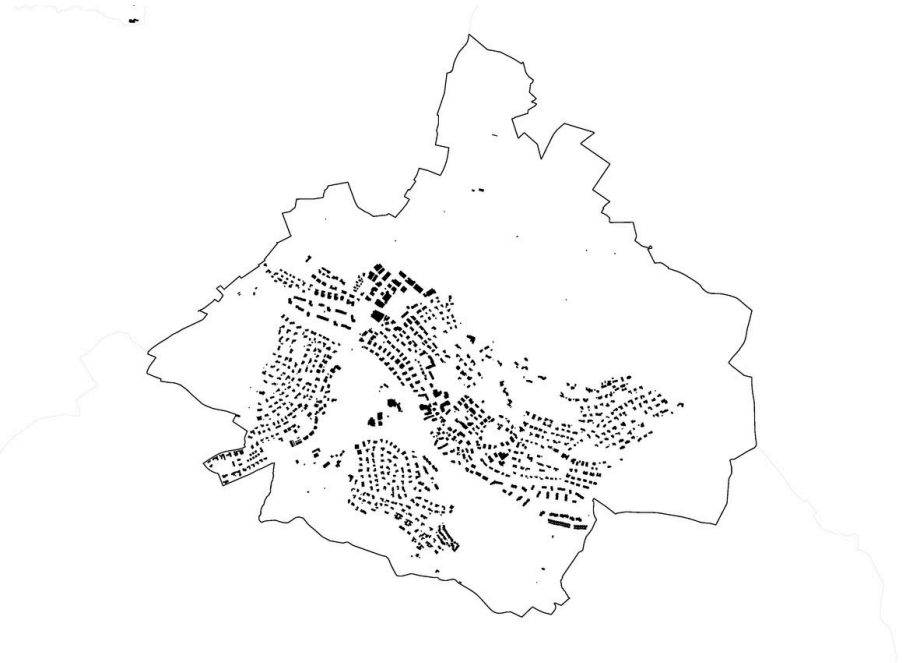
Growing like a city, In der Gand Nneighborhood, built 1969.



Densification with traditional village look, settlement "Seldwyla", built 1960.

As a consequence, Zumikon began to grow rapidly in the 1960s. In addition to single-family houses, a number of apartment buildings were built. Zumikon became denser. In 1967, the settlement Seldwyla was built. Conceived as an “urban village,” the settlement focused on a more traditional look with the gable roof. They tackled the demand of privacy by making use of the topography and a complex arrangement of the units. It made it possible to live in a single family house but in a denser way and with the acceptance of the old Zumiker.

1980 Until Today



Buildings until 2023–after the zoning plan changed. Source: QGIS, 2023.

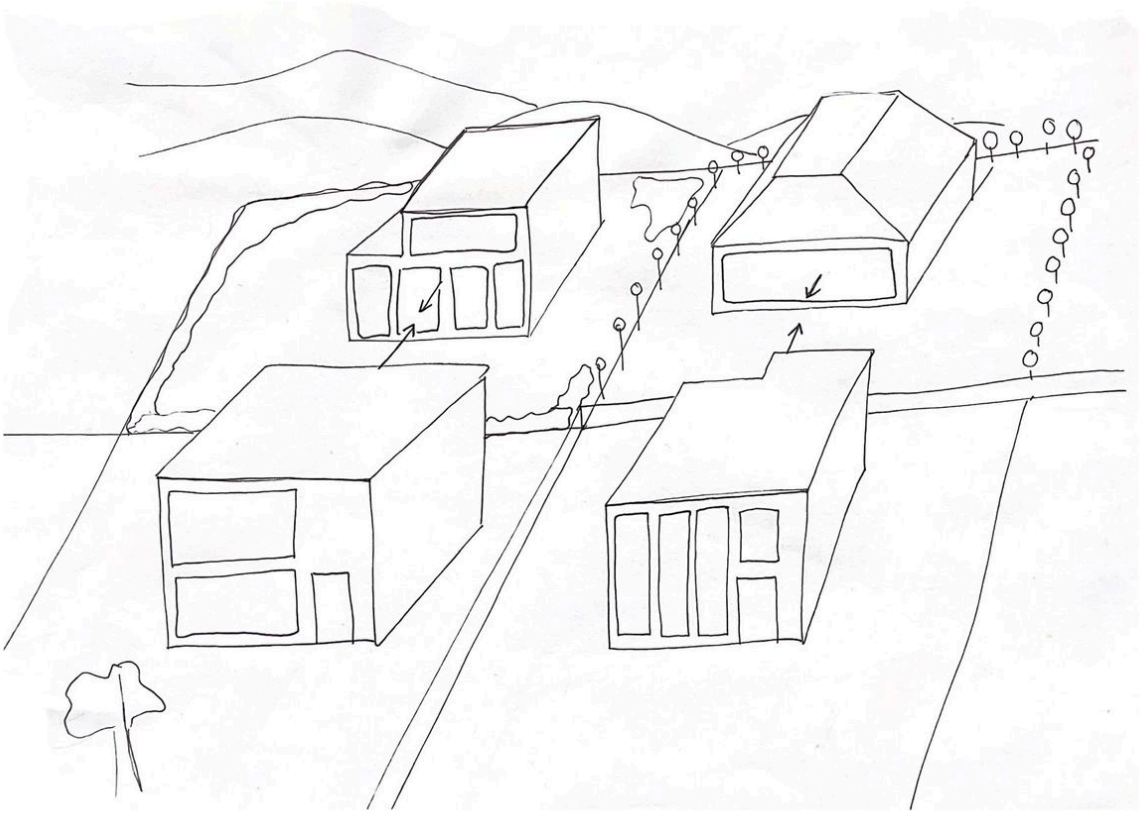
As we see today, the plan of the municipality worked. in only a few years Zumikon went from a farmers village to a suburban landscape. Due to the tax revenues though land sales, the commune built a number of modern facilities, including schools, sports centres and community spaces. Today, the wide range of social infrastructure and proximity to the city of Zurich are the reasons why Zumikon continues to attract a high-income earners. However, prices have risen and it is difficult to find empty building land. Particularly young families have increasingly difficulties to affords housing in Zumikon, while the existing population ages, Zumikon has an ageing problem. Last year it became known as the oldest municipality.



Walter Senn in front of his neighbour's building, a former farm. Photograph: Sofia Gloor and Till Blaser, March 2023.

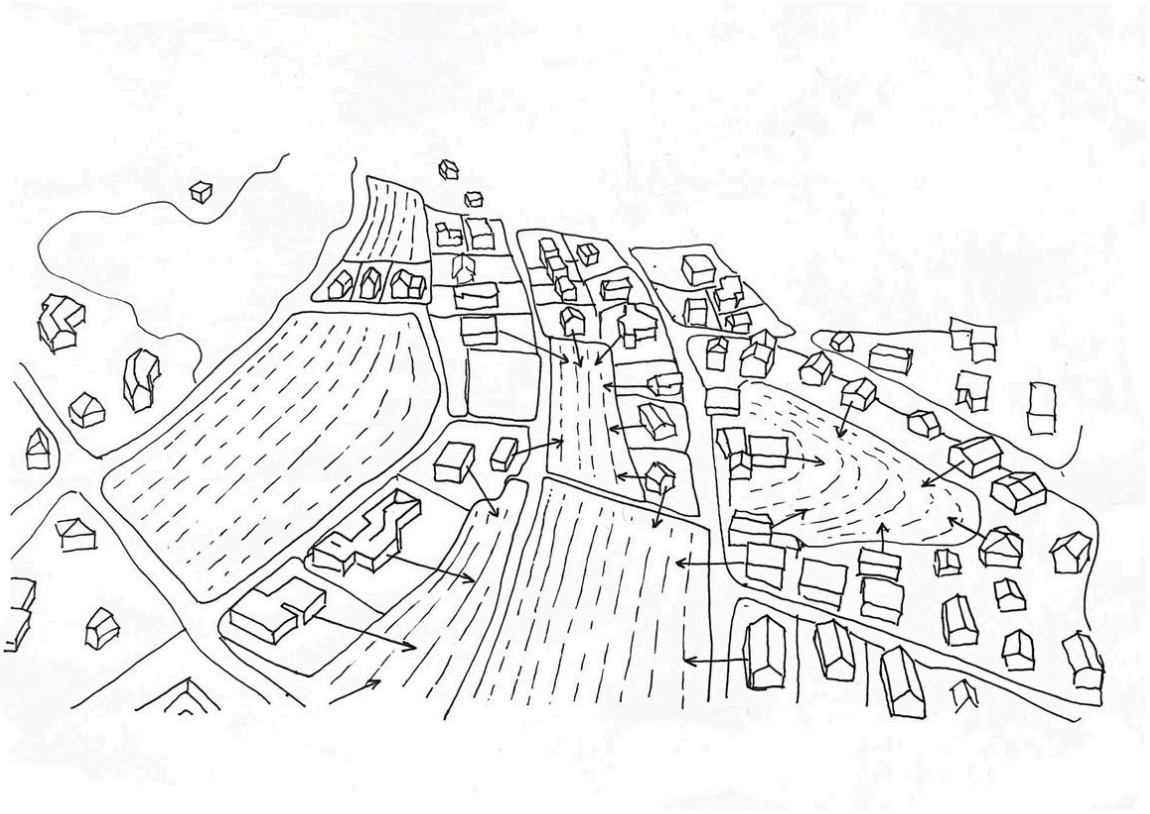
Of course these developments have also affected Walter as a farmer in Zumikon. While the residents enjoy the view of the fields, the proximity to the residential houses is not desirable for the farmers. In Walti, there are always complaints about odour nuisance and reports from the police about littering on the streets. With the departure of his colleagues he also loses a network of help and a community.

Over the years Zumikon changed and we need to question the image which is brought to the outside and take a closer look at the urban fabric of Zumikon today.



Housing reality today: outside the garden is the neighbour's garden.

Many single-family houses with large grounds are built, and little by little Zumikon is transformed into a dense landscape of front gardens and swimming pools. The settlements have increasingly encircled the remaining fields and meadows.



Where to turn to when there is no outside anymore: Outside-in instead of Inside-out.

More and more often, the houses can no longer face the open landscape, but are placed around the remaining fields in order to still retain remnants of the rural atmosphere.



Rendering Chirchbüel, ZSZ, 10.05.2021.

The older generation of Zumikers has followed the development of the village with a critical eye. While they are annoyed by the single-family houses, the Zumikers find the municipality's attempt to generate a mixed population a step too far. The fear of urbanisation is strongly felt in the past votes. The municipality has tried to attract middle-class families through various initiatives over the past two decades. Every attempt failed.

In 2011, the electorate rejected an initiative for rent subsidies. The Ankenbüghl housing estate on the edge of the village took twenty years and Swiss Life as an investor before it could be realised. Last year, in a much-discussed debate, the electorate rejected the Chilchbüehl housing estate, which adjoins the lower edge of the village square. The project failed primarily because of the density, as the four-storey development disturbs the view over the lake.

Whereas the residents seem to enjoy the view onto the fields, the proximity to the residential houses is not desirable for the farmers. Walti explains that neighbours have complained about odour nuisance and have reported to the police that farmers would pollute the roads with their vehicles.

This leads us to the question how we can use these historical and present informations to help Walter’s future

The First Public Farm



Walter is still fit for his age but of course we want to consider that this might not be the case forever. We imagine him as a flaneur through his lands, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends and colleagues. We want to build a community where these two can share their park with others but also find their peace in going after their own activities. Walter should be able to handcraft and repair his beloved machines, Erik should be able to look after his animals. We believe they have the right to exist on this land. What needs to be done to realise this vision? What are the potentials of this place?



- farm Walter Senn
- elderly home Zumipark
- daycare Rietacher
- indor- outdoor pool and sauna Juch
- public primary school Juch
- bill house
- studio houses Ernst Gisel
- cascades Chliweilibach
- municipality Zumikon
- social services office Zumikon
- café Fischhuhn
- public school Färifängli

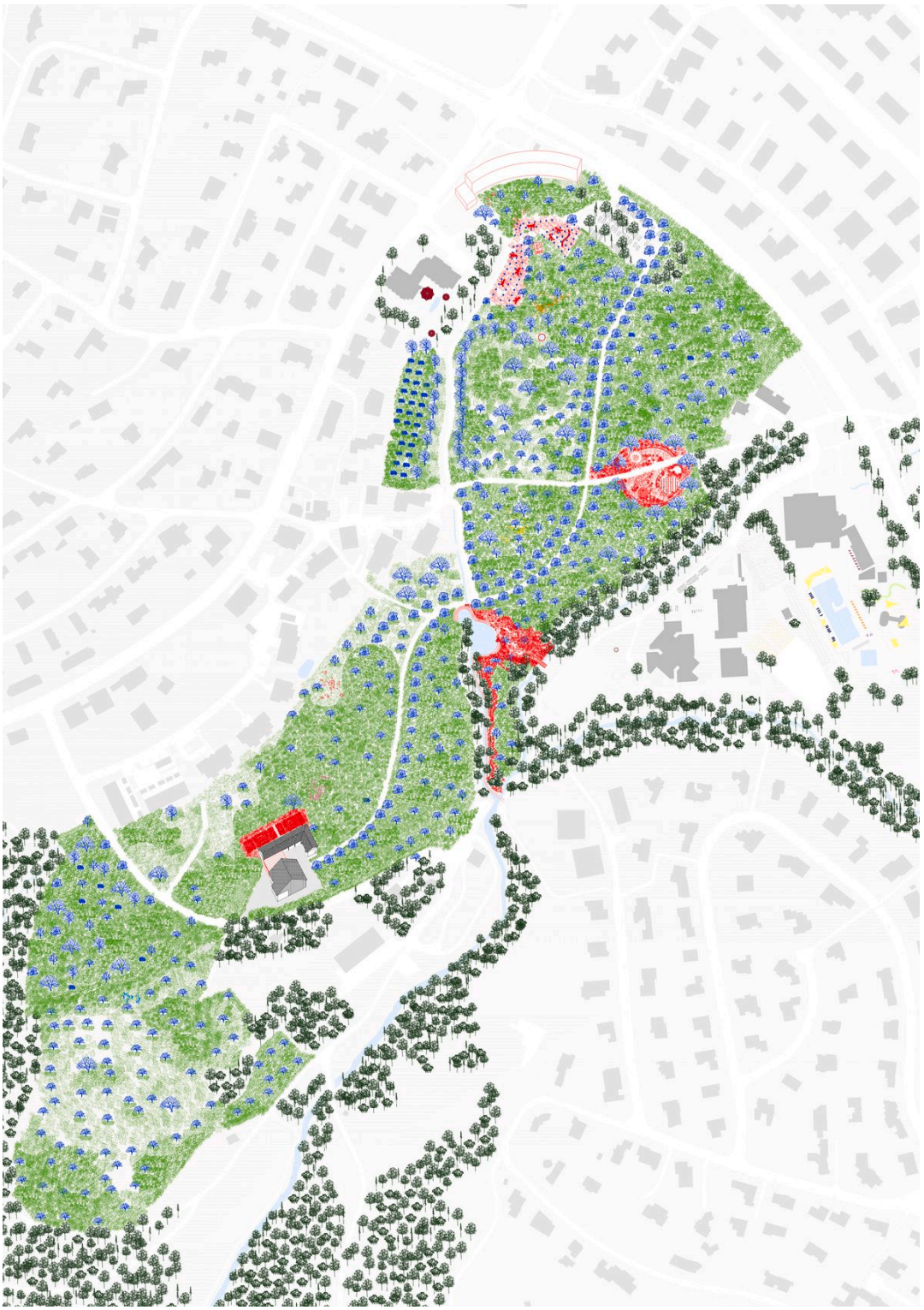
Lets take a look on the territorial situation: The area is an elongated field with terrain sloping down to the south, facing the watercourse flowing through it. The area is intersected on one side by the river in the upper part and on the other side by two roads. It is connected to a forest to the east and to a settlement area to the west.

The area is surrounded by various social facilities, such as the Zumipark old people's home, a crèche, the Juch school and swimming pool, and the village square with primary school above the motorway. On one hand due to the connection to the urban fabric and on the other hand due to the proximity to various social facilities, We believe a community could be formed if the institutions cooperate with the farm. Walter's life's work is going into the next round.

The Park—How Can the Immediate Surrounding Be Included and the Area Reactivated?



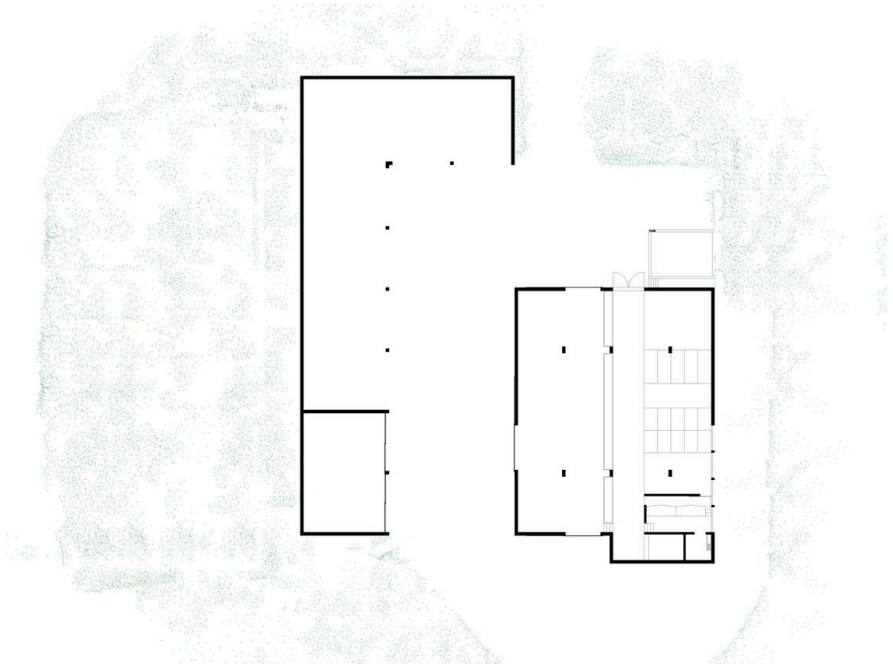
It offers itself to restore the former fruit tree landscape. Agroforestry is very sustainable and at the moment rediscovered for its positive environmental aspects for various species. We suggest a multiple usage of the fields: The orchard for fruit production, on a lower level we would have the sheeps cutting the grass and them together resulting in the park for Walter, Erik, the school kids, the parents, the teenagers, the elderly and many more to enjoy.



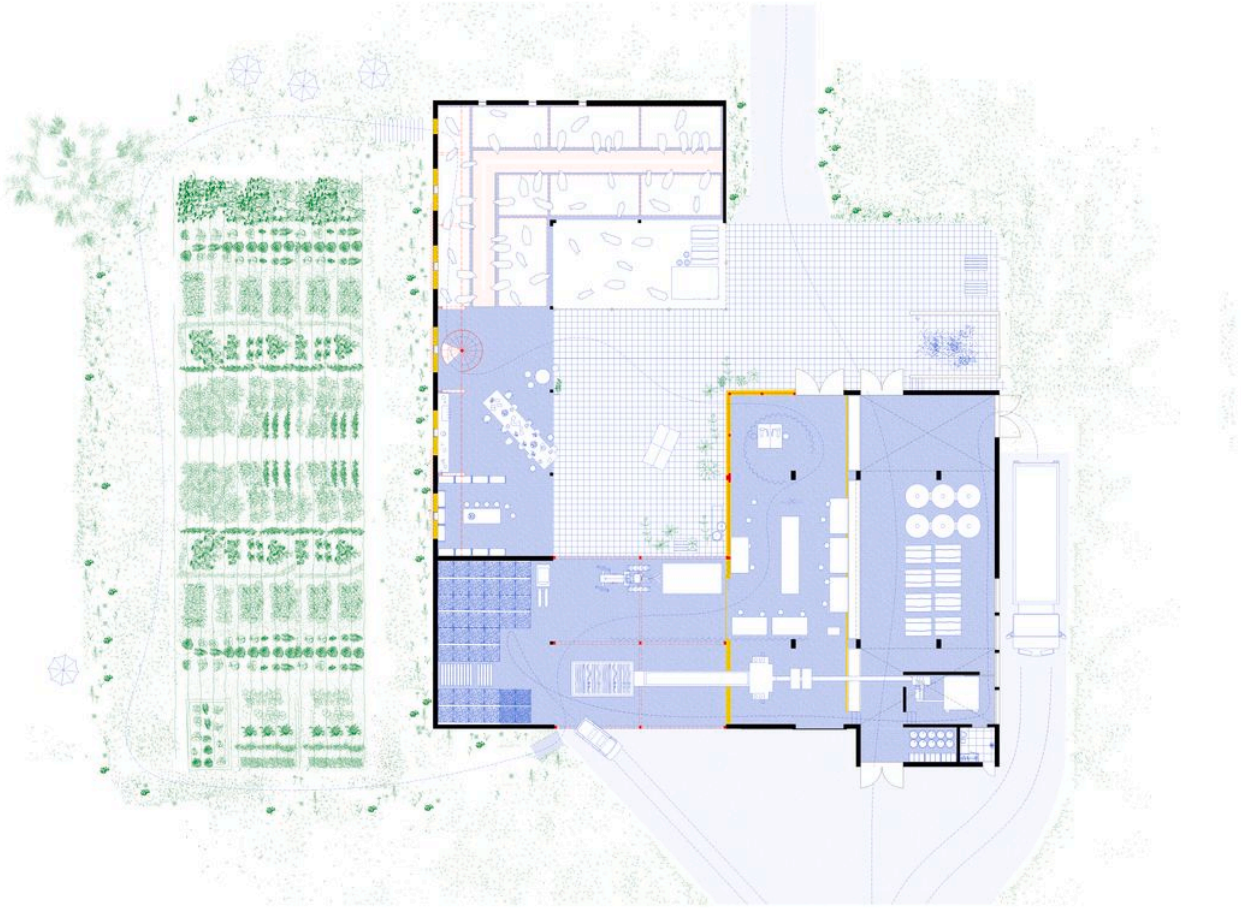
In a frist step we create little situations for people to hang out to make the park both: experienceable and inviting for visitors and at the sametime farmable. The plantings open up to the surrounding area at selected points, such as towards the old people's home or a square towards the school, which is created via a new connection through the forest. The river is opened towards the centre and becomes a point of attraction.
The meadow orchard opens up towards the old farm and offers visual connections.

The Farm–How Can the Farm Be Reused?

The conversion of the farm is to create a community space where sheep, a cidery and visitors of Walter and Erik come together.



The current farm consists of a barn with cow shed and straw storage. The machines are housed in an L-shaped storage hall.



Ground floor plan of the farm.

There are three main intentions. For the cidery, a hall is being built at the back of the yard. Here the apples are delivered, sorted, washed, crushed, pressed and finally condensed. The condensate can be stored and transported away by lorry.



Section of the farm.

The new hall forms the new space. It is intended for the community. In the former machine structure, the sheep are housed in the shorter part. Next to it is a communal kitchen with a farm shop. A new platform offers a view of the animals which has an educational component from above and connects the courtyard with a community garden behind the hall by means of a staircase. We see Walter in the role of a teacher. He has already had school classes to come over to his farm and ejnjoyes to talk about his practice.



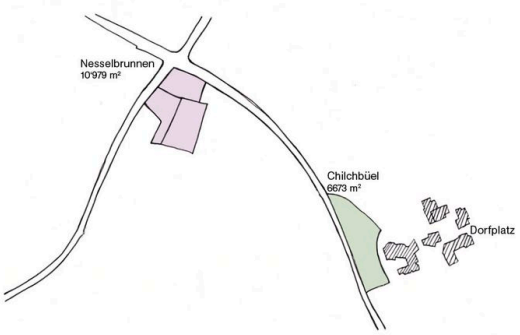
In the former stable, the closed façade opens up to the courtyard. There is an office with a workshop and a lecture room on the former hay store.

Housing–Who Will Work the Land?

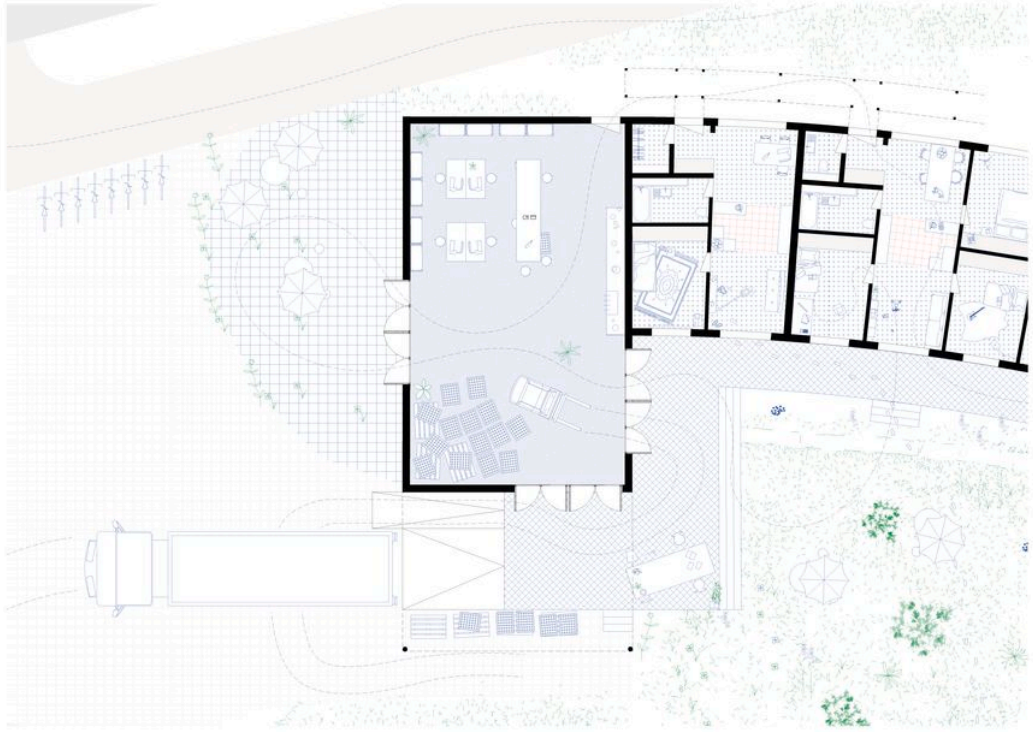
With the failure of the Chirchbüehl initiative, an apartment housing project on the municipality's last building land reserve was rejected. However, the municipality owns a plot of land on Walter's site along the junction of the entrance to Zumikon, which is in the free zone.

We propose to exchange the building zones with each other and to realise a housing project for the people that work the land. Walter should have the option to get an apartment with a view on the park. Erik could live there – close to his work but more people will be needed to maintain the park. Everyone who works on the park, no matter how small the task, should have the opportunity to move into a flat in the settlement. Following the model of the pastors who live next to the churches.

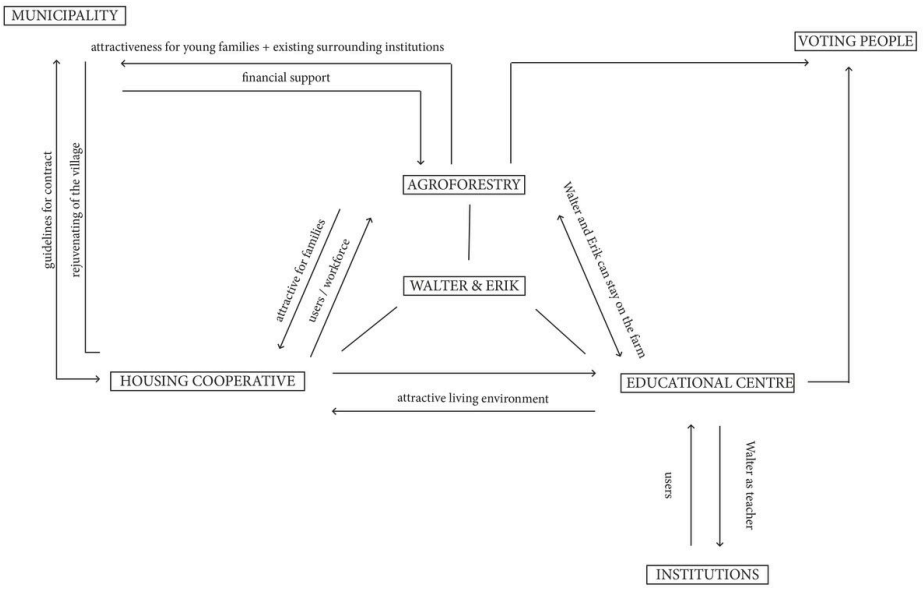
Like their predecessors 70 years ago, the residents of the cooperative are looking for proximity to nature. They support Erik in the harvest days, when many workers are needed. They are also responsible for the distribution of the must, the filling of the bottles and share the low-percentage work among themselves.



We propose a three-storey block that opens onto the park. The common access is via arcades facing the street. The basic residential mix consists of 4.5-room flats. At the top of the building, the finished must product is labeled and can be collected by lorries and brought to the outside. The building is easily accessible from the main street. On the side towards south and the park, the truck ramp is transformed to a public terrace with direct access to the park landscape.



Organigram of Dependencies



The aim of the project is to include different actors and to find dependencies. On the farm you can help to mash, pick, mow and plant. Walter and Erik will be sitting in front of the farm observing the farm with pleasure.



Zumiker Park
Agriculture, Education and Living

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