

A Youth Centre for Zurich, Lisbeth Sachs

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«Her architectural means are clear: the curved construction creates the free atmosphere that young, creative minds and actions need. Is there such a thing as being too radical at that time?»

**A YOUTH CENTRE FOR ZURICH,
LISBETH SACHS
Petronella Mill & Felicia Liang**

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We are sitting in the cellar at the gta Archives, looking at an assembly of pastel-colored folders spread out over three tables. Newspapers, papers, magazines, images, drawings and letters. They are the primary source documents of Lisbeth Sachs, donated to the archive. Drawn, written, collected, commissioned, received and more. Our eyes roughly scan the documents, laid out in front of us, until we both seem to rest on one piece. That object, a plaster model or an organic sculpture, is claiming our attention.

The white, cloudlike shaped plaster model, glued onto a red- and blue painted platform, was made by Sachs as a proposal for a new youth centre in Zurich.

Throughout the 20th century, the adolescent, or modern youth appeared and established itself with a new cultural agenda. This new group of young 'unrested' citizens were concerned and informed, and would subsequently present themselves on the streets around Europe and demand their rights. Comprised of a worldwide escalation of social conflicts predominantly characterized as liberation against state repression, protests that raged between youth demonstrators and the police throughout the summer of 1968. Switzerland may not have seen as many spectacular demonstration scenes as Paris and Berlin, but in Zurich one of the main reasons for the disputes was the demand for an establishment of a self-governed youth centre.

Going through the archival folders, we find a letter from Sachs to city councillor Edwin Frech, showing that Sachs proposed a youth centre directly to the city board. The almost fifty-year-old-sheets are translucent and fragile, but still present Sachs' engagement and demonstrate the means of her architectural agenda. She evidently cared for the issue of giving the new youth a place to be.

In 1971, three years after the first riots, Lisbeth Sachs posts her letter written upon three light orange a4 sheets to city councillor Frech. She requests a direct commission from the city and more specifically proposes the youth centre.

«Und Zürich? Die Welt-Finanzstadt? Sollte sie nicht auch etwas ideell Beispielhaftes tun? Die Kritik, der Verbesserungswille der Jugend an der Industriegesellschaft ist ein Menschheitsproblem—im Osten und Westen.»¹

Already during the 1930s, an idea sprang forth for a youth centre in Zurich, where the young people could meet and participate in a variety of different activities in one space. In the 1950s, a closed competition for a youth centre in Zurich was held and invited ten young architectural practices to participate.² The brief was thorough, a site was chosen close to public transport and along the Limmat river and the program was large and complex. It included different

sorts of rooms for activities, workshops and gatherings. The structure itself had to make it possible for structural changes in the interior according to development and events.

As we flip through the pages in the archive, finding out more about Sachs' architecture, we ask ourselves, where Sachs was at this point of her career. This is a time when Europe saw increased rights and independence for women. Today, as the historical awareness of the imbalance between men and women in the architectural field has been brought to the foreground, it is evident that Sachs seems to have been fiercely driven to create new opportunities for herself. But to which extent? Did she have to create new opportunities for herself as an independently working female architect? Why was Sachs not invited to the competition?

In 1939, as one of five in her class, architect Lisbeth Sachs, born 1914 in Neuenhof, Baden, graduates from ETH in Zurich and begins her practice as a self-employed architect in Switzerland. In the year of her graduation, with previous experience (only) including an internship at the office of Sven Ivar Lind in Sweden and Alvar Aalto in Finland, she is awarded the first prize in the competition for a new Kurtheater in Baden. At the time of the youth centre competition in Zurich, Sachs is working on the new theatre in Baden, which was not built until 1950/51 because of the war.

The competition entries for the new youth centre ended up being divided into two main groups by the jury; one showed the versatility of the program externally and the other group summarized the entire structure in a clear and simple form. The proposals were highly rational in their appearance and fully attuned to the given program. Owing to the economic setbacks, the planned construction never became a reality.

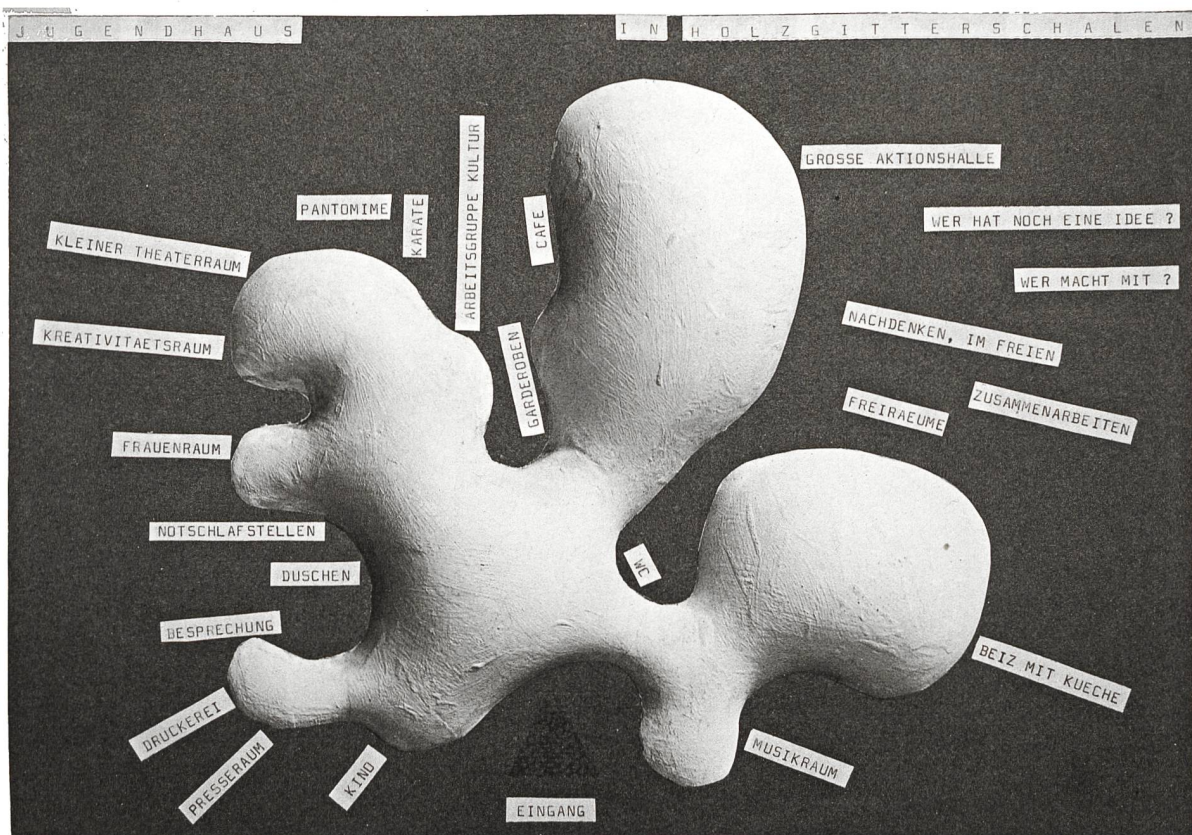
The history of youth centres is a modern story. With no or few predecessors, the assembly of the new typology must have been an organic process mostly controlled by political decisions. These political decisions have been crucial for every youth centre in Zurich. The doughy shape of Sachs' proposal amongst the hard-angled, rational modernist competition entries, could hardly be imagined. And seeing them in contrast to today's youth centre 'Dynamo' you ask yourself what it would be like, if Sachs' proposal had been the youth centre today? Could we thus assert, that politics control the functions and aesthetics of architecture?

«The rioting youth could no longer be ignored. The oppression and the problems were heard.»³

Zurich, June 29, 1968, a demonstration was directed against the decision of the city council for not mak-



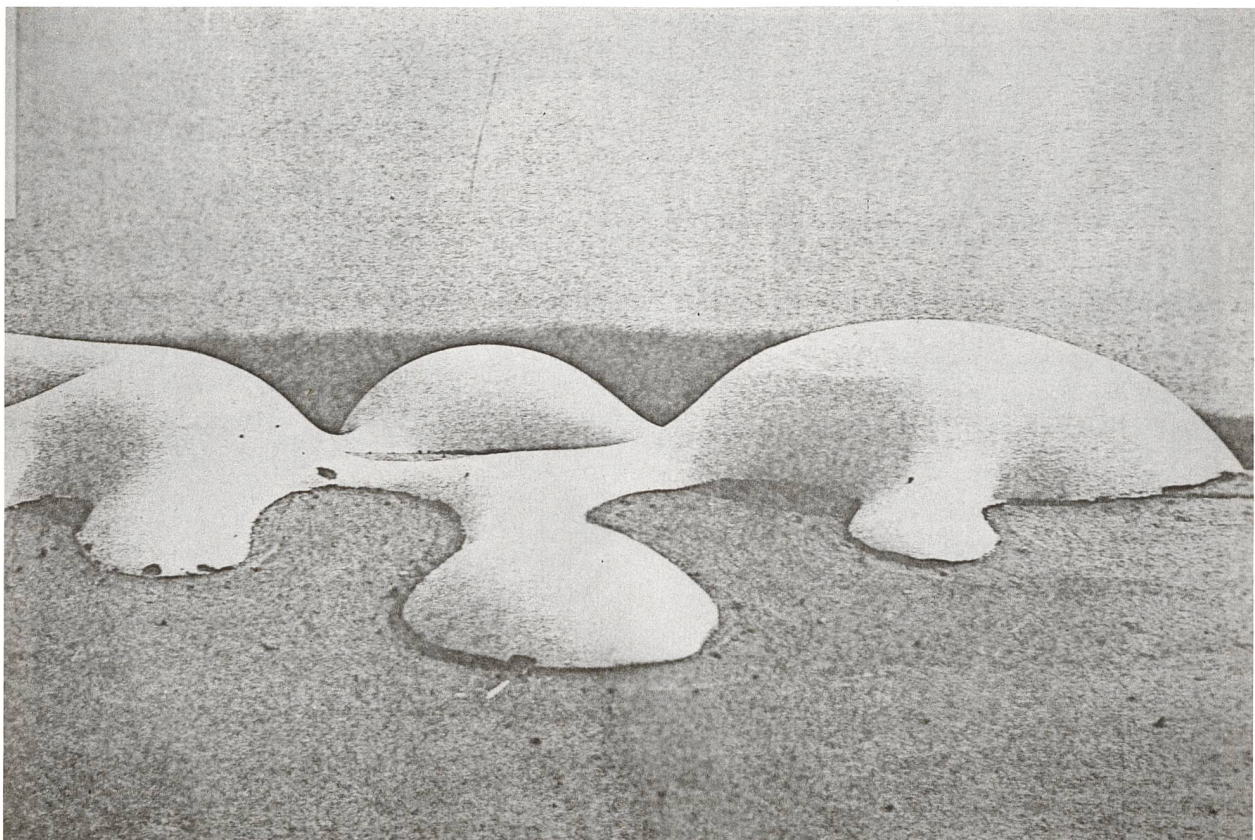
Report on Lisbeth Sachs, 1958.
 Photograph: Alexander Barbey



Youth Centre model
 gta Archiv/ETH Zurich (Nachlass Elisabeth Sachs)



Lisbeth Sachs Archive
gta Archiv/ETH Zurich (Nachlass Elisabeth Sachs)



Youth Centre model
gta Archiv/ETH Zurich (Nachlass Elisabeth Sachs)

ing the vacant department store Globus near Zurich central station, that was otherwise up for rent, available for an autonomous youth centre. In the aftermath of what would become known as the «Globuskrawall», the manifesto «The Zurich Manifesto» was launched. It was published on July 5th 1968 as «Aufruf zur Besinnung»—Call to Common Sense—and supported by a large number of members and significant public figures.⁴ The manifesto stated that the cause of the crisis was the inertia of institutions which prevented the adaptation to the changing needs of people and the development of creative minorities. It ultimately demanded the provision of a centrally located autonomous youth centre.⁵ Because of the demonstration and the manifesto, the city council were made aware of the concerns of the young people.

Leafing through the fragmented, brown with age, cut-out articles from newspapers such as «Neue Zürcher Zeitung» and «Forum» frequently depicting the events of the youth revolution, situates Sachs not just as an architect but as a reader and a writer in a larger debate. There is a humble and community-oriented approach that does not seem to be a priority for other architects at the time.

In 1969, Sachs herself reports from the «Sechs Tage Zürcher Manifest», takes the party of the youth and pleads for democracy. «Eine Demokratie, die nicht fähig ist, ihre eigene Evolution zu integrieren, gibt sich selbst auf.»⁶

An «Externe Kommission für Jugendfragen» was formed by the city of Zurich. The group traveled to various European cities to investigate and document how other youth centres were organized and run. The committee suggested the Lindenhof Bunker as a space for the young and on October 30, 1970, the bunker, the first official youth centre since the Globuskrawall, was opened.⁷ With the new youth centre new problems quickly arose, and the bunker was confronted with issues that used to belong to the streets of Zurich. After only 68 days, the newly established youth centre was forced to close.

There is a lingering question of how Sachs' proposal differs from projects that failed trying to use existing spaces. It is obvious in its form, so what are the advantages Sachs wanted to convey?

Sachs wanted to build an affordable and quickly accomplished youth centre, maybe even as a temporary solution, floating on water, south of the beach near Tiefenbrunnen. She writes in her letter to Frech, that building a community house, with common spaces for public use, would not only meet the city's need but also her own interest in doing something meaningful for more than just a family. As Sachs sends her proposal for a new youth centre, she attaches five documents and a copy of her article «Die Dächer

von Frei Otto». Except for the materials that Sachs mentions, the gta Archive includes more documents pertaining to her project. Such as a physical model, photographs of the model and other model studies, together with descriptions of a collage showing the program and even thorough calculations of the costs. The shape triggers thoughts about Alvar Aalto's lake-like vases, the elevation shows an affinity with Frank Lloyd Wright and the presented lightweight structures serve as the most important reference to Frei Otto. A first review of Sachs' model reveals an interest in her influences. On a blue painted MDF panel Sachs paints a five-sided red figure. Centered on the platform, Sachs places the building; a white molded irregular organic shape. The overall structure is a multi-carved grid of wooden battens, creating domes of various sizes. The plastic, partly translucent roof admits a soft, pleasant light. Internal space organization is based on an open floor plan where the different heights of the roof are differentiating and defining spaces. Interior walls, Sachs suggests, can be arranged by the users themselves. Offering wall elements which can be conducted and rearranged so the facilities could gradually expand or be removed.⁸

Architectural ideas and ideals are woven together with political reasoning and financial budgets. Sachs presents the youth centre as something flexible and temporary and we ask ourselves if it was the image of the temporary or the real ephemerality that Sachs was suggesting. Her proposal is not taking a stand in the landscape of Zurich but rather in idealistic concepts on urban planning. Her architectural means are clear: the curved construction creates the free atmosphere that young creative minds and actions need. Is there such a thing as being too radical at that time? Given that Zurich at that moment did not have anything similar and it contrasted in every possible manner with how a youth centre in those days was being perceived.

Sachs explains the program with the help of a collage. Using a black and white image of the model, she treats the shape of the building as an island as she cuts it out and glues it on to a dark background. With this playful collage technique the white shape pops out against the dark background, making it appear three-dimensional again. The program is not presented on the plan, but around the white figure, against the background. Sachs describes the organization of spaces by writing the function of the room next to the shape, outside the building. On small pieces of paper, just big enough for the word to fit, she writes functions or activities such as Druckerei, Kino, Frauenraum, Kreativitätsraum, Cafe, but also questions like «Wer hat noch eine idee?», «Wer macht mit?» as well as the phrases «nachdenken, im freien» and «zusammenarbeiten».

The ambiguity in Sachs' youth centre proposal makes it both challenging and easy to read; temporary or permanent, utopian or pragmatic, nature or city, intuition or reasoning. One or the other or both. Could this have been the ultimate issue for Frech who never replied to Sachs (of what we know from the archive)? Could it have been read as too progressive or whimsical?

Sachs is convinced that it is possible to build interesting and smart architecture and still keep the costs low.⁹ Her intentions for the youth centre are meant to be affordable and simple enough for the users to accomplish the construction themselves. The cost calculations are roughly estimated and described. Now, Sachs also gives us an idea of the size of the project. With a presumed size of 1000 m²–1500m² covered area, including sanitary facilities and heating, the project could cost less than one million Swiss francs.¹⁰

Could there actually have been a response from Frech but Sachs did not want it to be known? The tale seems to end too abruptly, for her to not follow up on the silence. Sachs' scheme is very much the contrary to her contemporaries. The improvement of the city is not found in the traditional way but in the alternative; this could be seen as a direct critique of the city's vision.

In 1972 and 1977 the city attempted two other youth centres. Both were abandoned due to lack of commitment from the city to maintain a proper functioning youth centre.¹¹ Sachs continues to write about the circumstances from an urban perspective where she notes the lack of urban spaces for leisure and not only for the commercial activity. Sachs also criticizes the city and the inhabitants for the current lack of participation, engagement and awareness.

«Wir brauchen in allererster Linie Stadträume, die auch der Musse, nicht nur der Geschäftigkeit Platz bieten. Der größte und schönste Stadtraum ist uns durch die Natur selbst, ihre Topographie, den Wechsel von Wasser und Land, geschenkt.»¹²

The situation of the Zürcher youth and the youth centre was at a deadlock. The *«Neue Zürcher Zeitung»* describes the project and its policies as «cumbersome and having a reserved approach, as though being dictated by the elders».¹³ Another option for a youth centre arose in 1977, as a defunct mill, when Rote Fabrik was earmarked for demolition. A public referendum was launched, initiated by the citizens with the help of the city's Social Democrat Party (SP) to keep the space intact and convert it into a cultural community centre for the new arts movements and possibly an autonomous youth centre in Zurich.

As the riots and problems continued, Sachs kept her youth centre alive. Years later after her proposal to

Frech and several failed attempts by the city, Sachs penned another piece about the youth centre. The article's purpose does not concern her previous work but rather the issue of the youth.

«Weil ich, wie in jedem Menschen, so auch in der Jugend, in ihren Äußerungen, zuerst das Positive, als das wesentliche, zu entdecken trachte, fand ich mich bereits vor zehn Jahren zu einem Jugendhaus, zur Idee seiner Gestalt getrieben.»¹⁴

«Bereitschaft, alles kaputtzuschlagen, was uns kaputtmacht.»¹⁵ On May 30, 1980, the youth riots culminated in the *«Opernhauskrawalle»* (Opera House riots). A demonstration took place outside the Opera House. The city planned to grant 61 million Swiss francs of its art budget for a refurbishment and an extension of the opera house and nothing was planned to be distributed to the Rote Fabrik on the other side of Zurich. As a result, a decision was made to make Rote Fabrik the temporary home for cultural activities.

The same year Sachs writes in *Werkbund Material «Neue Wege für die Lösung von Jugendhausproblemen in grossen Städten»*: «Die geschwungenen Bauformen schaffen eine freie Atmosphäre, die schöpferischem Denken und Handeln gerade von Jugendlichen förderlich sein dürfte.»¹⁶ Like many other cities at the time, the usage of occasionally disposable old houses to facilitate youth meetings and centres, also applies for Zurich. New constructions usually failed to convince the financial administration or electors.

With Sachs' sculpted proposal she certainly asks herself why this is so. How should and could a room for a group of people, like the unrested youth, find its place in the city? When looking through different variations of the three-dimensional form, Sachs almost seems obsessed with the shape of her youth centre, that it may only concern the form of the building itself. But that would be a very simple-minded way of thinking after going through her legacy in the archive. As Lisbeth Sachs was so determined that her project would provide a fostering and creative atmosphere for the youth, over the years, the youth centre never lost its assertiveness.

In 1982, a poll was initiated and resulted in favor of a new construction for the youth.¹⁷ The city budgeted 15 million Swiss francs for the former *Drahtschmidli*, with the aim to provide the young a free space to develop themselves and assume responsibility. In 1988, under the name *Dynamo*, the new Youth Culture Centre was opened and offered courses, hosted events and quickly expanded to include different types of workshops and spaces for the youth.¹⁸