

## **Ruins of Pre-Gentrification: *Schrotthäuser* and Urban Standstill in a Post-Industrial City**

Postindustrial ruins speak of many things: slow decay, sudden abandonment, dramatic loss of function, the danger of immediate collapse. They can emanate excitement and risk to the adventurous, or spark nostalgia for those who previously lived or worked in them (Muehlebach, 2017; Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012). The postindustrial era has produced an abundance of such ruins. Former factory buildings with huge production halls and colossal chimneys, closed-down railway stations, abandoned power plants, and other large-scale infrastructures. Postindustrial decline has also materialised in cities and urban districts, in the abandoned apartment houses of former workers, their children's schools and kindergartens; in all the buildings an industrial, modern citizenry once needed. Sometimes markets, societies and demolition dredgers fail to keep up with materially removing these ruins from a present they so blatantly do not belong to anymore (Ringel 2018a). Still, the accelerated speed of material destruction underlines what postindustrial ruins signify most forcefully: that times have changed.<sup>1</sup>

Postindustrial ruins shape once-industrial cities and settlements, particularly in the global North and former socialist parts of the world (Dawdy, 2012; also Ringel, 2018a; Pelkmans, 2013); but also in the global South, usually in the context of failed development (Yarrow, 2017; Mains, 2012; Ferguson, 1999). These formerly industrial buildings were initially erected during 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century periods of industrialisation. Today, most of them are swiftly expelled from the current political and economic order, in which they have lost all value. Often, we fail to notice their decay, deconstruction, or disappearance. Meanwhile, some of these buildings retain some 'promise' for the future (comp. Anand et al., 2018), attracting financial and emotional investment, awaiting retrofit and reuse (Howe et al., 2016). This promised future is usually imagined as a gentrified one. Signs of decay, elsewhere prefiguring demise, suddenly add value to the promise of gentrification: a certain

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<sup>1</sup> In the discipline of anthropology, particularly urban anthropologists have tried to address these changes of the postindustrial era. For some examples, see Dawdy, 2012; Schwenkel, 2013; Harms, 2013; Fennell, 2012; Pelkmans, 2003.

rugged charm of the old or a cool edginess reminiscent of industrial modern designs. A future other than demolition seems possible. I call these buildings ‘ruins of pre-gentrification’: their potential for future-use reinvests them with value in the present and, in the era of finance capitalism, makes them attractive to speculative investments. But what if this future fails to transpire? What if gentrification never actually happens?

Ruined apartment houses from the late 19th and early 20th century feature prominently in my fieldsite, Bremerhaven, a prototype postindustrial city in Northern Germany. Between 2013 and 2016, I conducted over a year of ethnographic fieldwork there, studying urban sustainability in all parts of the city with the help of a variety of research methods, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The aim of creating a sustainable future for Bremerhaven has led the city’s postindustrial transformation over the last 15 years. The city has revamped its economy with a focus on tourism and renewable energy, and aspired to become a climate city. This postindustrial future materialised swiftly on the brownfields of the previous economic era: huge new factories for offshore wind turbines and rotor blades emerged in the Southern harbour, and postmodern tourist attractions adorn the new city centre. In addition to discussing these new - material - achievements in their city, people also constantly referenced another set of buildings: Bremerhaven’s infamous *Schrotthäuser* (literally, ‘scrap houses’). These dilapidated buildings speak of changes that have already happened as much as ones that never occurred (comp. Yarrow, 2017; Nielsen, 2014). This is a characteristic they share with most postindustrial ruins.<sup>2</sup>

Postindustrial ruins have their own complex temporal characteristics. Not simply predetermined by their industrial past, they also display the many postindustrial futures invested in them over the last several decades. These futures have been continuously renegotiated in their specific social, cultural, political and economic context. This is not to say that their own existence in time is solely shaped by the value they are given by the people who talk about, plan with, or decide to demolish them. Rather, as this paper shows, the time

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Bremerhaven currently has a population of approximately 11,5000. Before its postindustrial crises - in the 1970s, 1980s and (after German reunification), the 1990s, which closed its central fishery and ship-building industries - the city sported almost 150,000 inhabitants. In the early 1970s, it was still expected to grow even further to around 2500,00. This anticipated population growth never happened. Yet infrastructural decisions and investments were made on its basis. As a result, the city’s harbours featured a variety of empty buildings, abandoned for decades. Other postindustrial ruins are less visible, such as the six-lane motorway cutting through the city centre (comp. Ringel, 2018b). The *Columbusstrasse* is not obviously a postindustrial ruin but its size and design create many problems in the contemporary era. Indeed, this street has more recently been seen as a threat to current revitalisation efforts in the newly developed Old and New Harbour, which it cuts off from the rest of the city centre.

of these buildings as much as the time of the cities they are build in and the people that live in and around them, is *co-created*. Particularly in the context of a predicted as much as contested process of gentrification, this means that these buildings through their material qualities influence unfolding events and further expectations of the future. In this process, these houses depict their own kind of agency. Following Jane Bennett's influential work on *Vibrant Matter* (2010), these houses have 'Thing-Power' (ibid.: 6): an ability to have effects. Inspired by Bruno Latour's idea of the actant, Bennett sees the agency of a thing in the fact that it "has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events' (ibid.: viii). In this paper, I want to capture some of the effects produced by Bremerhaven's *Schrotthäuser*. By elaborating on their complex temporal character, I will scrutinise their (perhaps surprising) role in the production of time and the negotiation of a gentrified future in this particular postindustrial city.

Crucially, their agency helps to maintain a form of 'urban standstill'. A product of many different forces, this temporal feature of the whole city is not just a social, economic and political matter, a product of social negotiation. Rather, these postindustrial ruins have their own material, chemical, physical, biological, ecological and static qualities with which they influence the city's present and future . They, too, shape rhythms, affect tempi and disrupt expectations. For instance, the static qualities of *Schrotthäuser*, determined by their respective physical and material state of decay, has the power to influence the prospects and planning of both Bremerhaven's city administrations and citizens, who all align their specific hopes, dreams, fears and expectations. In that sense, I claim that these ruins can even, as Roxana Moroşanu and I put it, 'trick time' and the future. They have the ability to 'modify, ... bend, distort, speed up, slow down, or structure the times they are ... in' (Ringel and Moroşanu, 2016: 17) as well as the rhythms, tempi and temporal entanglement they are part of. This kind of 'temporal agency' (Ringel, 2016) does not require a conscious will to have effects (comp. Bennett 2010).

This paper aims to conceptualise and explore this agency. It falls into three parts. Following anthropological genre conventions, I first introduce my fieldsite. I specifically focus on the history of the postindustrial ruins whose agency I scrutinise. In the second section, I explain why considering a non-human form of temporal agency is important for the anthropology of time and the ways we conceptualise time in the postindustrial city. Whilst reviewing the recently fashionable anthropology of infrastructure, I touch upon topics of maintenance and repair, to re-evaluate the temporal relationships between humans and their

infrastructures. In the third section, I explore in more detail the kind of temporal agency these houses exhibit – in relation to their own existence and the future of their district, as well as the city overall. I return to the idea of ‘urban standstill’ in the conclusion. If it was not for these ruins’ material qualities, the district would look differently now, but it would not necessarily be more promising for its inhabitants. As such, these ruins’ temporal qualities have not taken the district out of time by preventing a gentrified future. Rather, their indeterminate, somewhat dystopian materiality has helped the district’s inhabitants maintain a status-quo, which continues to hold various future possibilities open. Ironically, these houses’ lack of maintenance and repair assists a variety of actors to maintain their life in the district against all odds – and to create prospects for the district otherwise unimaginable.

### **Time in a Postindustrial City**

The North German harbour city of Bremerhaven is a place of extremes. On the one hand, Bremerhaven was fortunate enough to receive a one-off lump-payment from the national level, to overcome its postindustrial crisis. Almost 15 years ago, these funds allowed Bremerhaven to start a process of urban transformation that other cities only dream of. Two main objectives were defined for the city’s revitalisation: Bremerhaven wanted to become the centre of the German offshore wind energy industry, and a prime tourist destination. At first, this strategy seemed successful: a new city centre emerged on the post-industrial wastelands of the older parts of the harbour. Next to the 1970s National Maritime Museum, we currently find two further museums, the German Emigration Centre and the Climate Centre; a Dubai-esque four-star hotel and convention centre; and a postmodern shopping mall incongruously named “Mediterraneo”. The whole marina was refurbished, with high-end apartment houses built alongside it. This development caters neatly to processes of gentrification as we know them: built on the postindustrial wastelands of the past, new housing estates embody the proof that the city as a whole is moving towards a new, more prosperous future. Since hardly any locals can afford to buy or rent these sumptuary apartments, they often feel excluded from these prime locations, overlooking the dike and on the North Sea. Yet critics of Bremerhaven’s gentrification are quickly silenced with a reference to the city’s overall greater good. So far, so normal.

On the other hand, Bremerhaven remains Germany’s poorest city. This paper is concerned with Bremerhaven’s poorest, but also arguably most beautiful neighbourhood: the

*Goetheviertel* [Goethe district], named after its central street dedicated to Germany's most famous poet. This district is the only nineteenth-century Wilhelminian district to have survived the World War II bombings of Bremerhaven. Many of its houses are elaborately adorned with a variety of historicist symbols, statues and designs. They feature impressive gables, dormers and turrets. In addition, its location near the revamped and fully gentrified city centre should make its future development a matter of no time at all.

Indeed, this future gentrification seems unquestioned, if not differently contested by the people living and working in the district, and its visitors. Media reports about the Goethe district usually feature the notion of surprise about the absence of gentrification. For example, the conservative national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* starts their 11 October 2016 article on the district as follows (my translation): 'If this wasn't Bremerhaven, but a district of Berlin or Frankfurt, it would have long been gentrified'. The article goes on to describe this absent gentrified future: 'Students and former students would have moved in these apartments, and small cafes would have opened on the ground level, selling more than twenty kinds of coffee. The rents would go up, too.' It summarises the district's plight by saying: 'But this is neither Berlin nor Frankfurt. This is Bremerhaven... And that is why nothing of this happens.' To underline how absurd this situation is the journalist observes that in this context, even a local leftist politician, one of my main informants, hopes for a 'soft gentrification' for the district.

Despite these widely shared expectations, the Goethe district remains the poorest district in Germany's poorest city, having some of Germany's highest unemployment, poverty, and crime rates. In addition to the many welfare recipients (as often reported: the highest percentage in any German district), it accommodated a number of refugees during what is referred to as the 'European refugee crisis' of 2015. They were housed in buildings that were often filled with trash, stairways barely usable. My Afghan friends, whose guardian I became during fieldwork in 2014, also moved out of the district as soon as they could.

Other houses in the district were in an even worse state. Their level of decay led to their official closure under German building law. Initially products of failed investments of finance-capitalism, these *Schrotthäuser* were at the centre of the city's elaborate, but essentially failing gentrification strategies for many years. The district had been targeted with several investment and urban development strategies, including the introduction of a district manager, to secure its development. However, the district is still characterised by the same urban standstill that dominates the whole city. In the eyes of many, particularly the city's urban planning agency, these scrap houses were to blame for this standstill. Uninhabitable

and so run-down that renovation seemed neither possible nor financially feasible, many thought, they actively prevented not just investments in their own futures, but in the whole neighbourhood.

The standstill can be seen as a result of the expected, as often wished-for and feared, gentrified futures not materialising. As ruins of pre-gentrification – i.e. material remnants from a process of urban development that has never taken off – the scrap houses are not just expressions of this standstill; they also help to produce and maintain it. By doing so, they are not simply to be seen as (passive) material obstacles, preventing a change for the better. Rather, I see their stubborn persistence in the present as a productive force in the current peculiar temporal pause, in which the gentrified future is continuously deferred (comp. Ssorin-Chaikov, 2003). The future of this district which - like the city overall - struggles with its postindustrial transformation, remains to be determined whilst local life goes on. Almost ironically, over the course of time, these houses have come to embody the effects of the continuous non-fulfilment of previous anticipations of gentrification *and* simultaneously yielded their own unpredicted effects on the district's future. As I showcase further below: they help to maintain the district's present by preventing a future widely expected for it.

The district's standstill, then, constitutes a contested, if still 'sustained pause' (Weszkalnys, 2015) that can to some as something oppressive, fostering an inability to move ahead. However, for others it can also be seen as productive – albeit not in the ways usually intended: despite continued decay and demise, many of the districts' inhabitants still see a future for themselves in the district. But how long can those fearing gentrification sustain such a pause? And how do these houses support them in these efforts? Before explaining the nature of these houses' temporal agency in more detail, let me lay out why it is important to think through the kinds of temporal effects material objects and infrastructures have, particularly in the postindustrial era. Before presenting some more ethnographic material, this should highlight what, more generally, the example of the *Schrotthäuser* in Bremerhaven contributes to the currently topical academic literature on infrastructures.

### **The Time of Infrastructure**

Research on infrastructures has recently gained some popularity in the discipline of anthropology (for example, Anand et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2017; Larkin, 2013). The reasons for this are manifold. Here are two possible ones: First, the increasingly visible effects of the decline of former welfare states. Second, threats to the functionality and

maintenance of crucial infrastructures during most recent crises – including the financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures, and the European refugee crisis and subsequent expectations of a potential breakdown of state services. Infrastructure, as we see, has become problematic mostly through its failure and breakdown - with its own temporal repercussions.

From the start, time has played an important role in the anthropological analysis of infrastructures. Some define infrastructures as being characterised by temporal properties of ‘perdurance’ and ‘durability’, because of their often immense ‘scale and ubiquity’ (Boyer, 2017: 174; comp. also Star and Ruhleder, 1996), but many analysts stress that this perdurance depends on the continuous work of human maintenance (for example, Mains, 2012; von Schnitzler, 2013). In the face of infrastructural failure (Hyme et al., 2016), anthropology - and other social science disciplines, such as human geography (see Graham and Thrift, 2007) - have therefore mainly focused on the importance of maintenance (Ringel, 2014; Jansen, 2013; Graeber, 2012).

This acknowledgment of the intimate dependencies between infrastructures and humans necessarily entails a variety of temporal effects, logics and dynamics worth unpacking (comp. Jalas et al., 2016). Akhil Gupta (2018) has recently argued that decline and decay are inherent in any infrastructure. They are not an afterthought to its construction, but built into it, hence infrastructure’s dependence on maintenance. The postindustrial era, with its many visible reminders of this decay, has extrapolated infrastructures’ paradoxical pairing of robustness and magnitude with precarious and fragile material existence in time. At the point of failure, anthropologists as well as their informants were forced to render these infrastructures’ presents and futures problematic. Stressing their dependence on use and maintenance, also entails a temporal operation. It forces the observer to contemplate these infrastructure’s future survival, with all the implications this has for those using and depending on them. Most accounts conceive infrastructures as passive objects to both human care and time’s relentless power of moving on. Even those infrastructures that were built to structure, speed up or curtail time (for example, mobility infrastructures such as Bremerhaven’s *Columbusstrasse*), might fail to live up to their intended function and find themselves out of time, with no future prospects ahead. Some functional failure is explained as the natural outcome of decay and caducity; some as the effects of profound changes in the broader political economy, such as the shift from Keynesian welfare statism to austerity under neoliberal forms of capitalism (Boyer, 2018). But both the ecology and politics of material infrastructures fail to acknowledge the possibility of infrastructures’ own agency. What about the unintended

effects their material properties might have? What kind of unexpected futures can they produce?

Many anthropologists suggest that these unintended effects stem from the temporal multiplicity that they uncover in both infrastructures and human-infrastructure relations. For example, as Joniak-Lüthi (2019: 5) has it, infrastructure ‘is inherently lively and fragile as it is always a complex web of multiple temporalities’. Inspired by scholars such as Tim Ingold and Doreen Massey, she also defines infrastructures as places ‘in which specific social relations intersect and accumulate over time’ (Joniak-Lüthi, 2019: 5-6). Following Barbara Adam, she approaches infrastructures as timescapes, which, she claims, ‘is a helpful heuristic tool for incorporating multiple temporalities, both human and nonhuman, in one analytic frame to highlight their mutual entanglements’ (Joniak-Lüthi, 2019: 6). This approach includes the many different ‘time horizons, lifespans, rhythms and cycles of the environment, materials, capital, humans, discourses, technology, the state and other agentive forces that make and unmake’ infrastructure, and ‘indexes the inherent fragility of a connectivity that can only emerge when these multiple temporal relationships are, more or less successfully, synchronized in the work of construction, maintenance and mundane utilization’ (Joniak-Lüthi, 2019: 6-7). This complex entanglement of different aspects of the social life of infrastructures co-create the specific time of each infrastructure with a unique combination of these different aspect’s temporal properties. But temporal multiplicity is also enforced by their similarly unique histories. These material configurations are remainders of a specific past (Bach, 2017) and entail a very particular temporal quality (Bryant, 2014). But, as Geoffrey Bowker (2015) suggested, we might have to think about infrastructure’s temporal existence differently: ‘Infrastructures do not inhabit human lifetimes. ...rather than being born and dying, infrastructures expand and retreat, support more or fewer people’.

One field where scholars consider similar temporal complexities is the anthropology of postsocialism (for example, Ssorin-Chaikov, 2006; Ringel, 2013; Haukanes and Trnka, 2013; Kesküla, 2016). However, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2017) recently suggested that the task for the analyst is not just to highlight this multiplicity of different temporal factors and aspects of any given situation or object of inquiry, but to critically unpack how these presumably different temporal properties, characteristics, and logics relate to on another. To uncover multiplicity, time and again, is only the first step in an analysis. To go beyond uncovering these temporal multiplicities could also allow us to see ruinous infrastructures not as failed outcomes of the past and the many different temporalities inscribed into them, but as complex human-material configurations with a take on the future, imbued with a promise, as



Anand et al. (2018) put it. Maintenance and repair are not just attempts at stopping natural decline and failure, but efforts to maintain these potentials of the future.

In the case of the scrap houses in Bremerhaven's Goethe district, I am not interested in understanding their temporal agency as a perspective on the multiple narratives about, and expectations of, the district's potential future. The effects these houses produce are not just subsumed by the human politics at play between those differently invested in a gentrified future (from potential investors, landlords and property owners to those barely affording to live in the district). Rather, I want these houses - as infrastructures - to be taken seriously as co-creators of the districts present and future, with their own effects, disturbances and promises.

So, more generally, where lie, and what are, the promises of infrastructure – modernity? progress? security? connectivity? – and how 'elusive' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013) might said promises turn out to be in the postindustrial era? A perspective on infrastructures through their (expected or presumed) relations to the future might help us consider their actual and often unintended effects, rather than their temporal multiplicity. These relations can be rather unusual. For example, Morten Nielsen (2014: 170) describes unfinished houses in Maputo, Mosambique, writing that the presently ruinous character of these houses is 'the effect of the future', rather than the future being an effect of a (past) present. Similarly, Thomas Yarrow (2017) focuses on the enduring effects of an infrastructure plan in Ghana that has never materialized, but still influences people's lives. Mathijs Pelkmans (2003: 129) also understood the unintended effects of the emptiness of newly erected buildings in his fieldsite in Batumi, Georgia, from the perspective of the dream of a better future. He concludes, 'That the buildings were empty was perhaps even a precondition of the maintenance of that dream, because as long as they were empty they belonged to the future and therefore remained potentially accessible to everyone.' As I will show in the last section, the promises of infrastructures such as the scrap houses in Bremerhaven can be found in their productivity, social, temporal and otherwise, which paradoxically, as in my case, might stem from their functional failure and material decay. As Shannon Dawdy (2012: 776) has it: 'Writing ruins and abandoned land off as negative space... allows property to be imagined as terra nullius, ripe for imperial planning as the capitalist cycle spins back toward boom. But when examined ethnographically, ruins and vacant lots come into focus as important spaces of urban activity, even of social, economic, and ecological productivity.' Bremerhaven provides one such example, in which postindustrial ruins play a role in the local production of the future.

### ***Schrott*-houses and the Future**

As noted earlier, Bremerhaven is famous for its *Schrott*-houses. In the German language, *Schrott* is too solid to be waste of a disposable kind (such as packaging or normal everyday refuse). It is foremost defined by its loss of function. Hence, in German, something is referred to as *Schrott* when it is broken or does not function anymore. Although the *Schrott*-houses of the Goethe district have lost their function, they are still somebody's property, in fact usually not just somebody's but a whole variety of investors' – and that is usually the problem. Complicated ownership structures prevent ending the decay of these houses. To solve these problems, a few years ago, the city initiated a federal law on scrap houses, which should help to more easily 're-municipalise' them, i.e. to allow the city to lawfully re-appropriate them. Once the property problems are solved, the city could sell, demolish or renovate (if possible) these *Schrotthäuser* to start a process of gentrification. The local urban development agency even created its own department for sorting through the complicated property structures, and for kick-starting re-municipalisation.

All this entails that the futures of the *Schrott*-houses in the *Goetheviertel*, and their inhabitants, are the subject of many official and voluntary attempts at reviving the Goethe district. Over several decades, the city administration has invested huge amounts of EU and national funding to fight the district's slow material decay and social decline; Bremerhaven's housing society has realised a few successful pilot renovation and new building projects; and the city's main employment promotion agency opened a branch in an old school, in the middle of the district. Further, there are several active social organisations who target the district, including the local Landlords' Advertising Association (*Eigentümergeinschaft*) and the Goetheviertel's own Citizen's Group (*Bürgerverein*). Even the city's renowned contemporary art museum runs a youth project on the ground floor of the *Schrott*-house in 45 Goethestreet. Nonetheless, most activists are at some level surprised that these attempts seem to fail and that gentrification has not yet worked its wonders here. At first sight, the houses look impressive, and many people expect this district to be 'up-and-coming'. However, with a second look, one realises these houses are empty, mouldy, rapidly decaying. Nonetheless, some of the flats are rented out illegally or temporarily occupied. Even the better looking houses, not yet deemed to be *Schrott*, are in dire need of renovation, for which funding seems to be generally sparse in the district.

Walking through the Goetheviertel reveals a different, if only slightly more hopeful perception of life in the district. Beyond rumours of corpses rotting in the abandoned houses, we find families proudly walking through their neighbourhood on a Sunday afternoon; a very active local mosque community, who have just started an urban gardening project; Renate's always loud and buzzing playground project, which attracts many of the local children; and even the district's charming pub, the 'Little Witch' (*Zur kleinen Hexe*), had its regular customers throughout the dire years. These everyday impressions of the city's poorest district should not distract from the many problems the inhabitants of the *Goetheviertel* continue to face. Still, the decay of the infrastructure in which these lives find porous shelter are not the result of unfortunate happenstance.

The broken-down character of these buildings resulted from a deliberate lack of maintenance. Several of my informants date the beginning of their district's decline back to the 1980s, when the city transformed the whole district into an investment area, facilitating the sale of the houses to investors from all over the world. These 'foreign investors', some of them from as far away as Australia, saw the potential for good revenues. Even then the *Goetheviertel* was ripe for gentrification. But when these revenues failed to materialise due to a collapsed housing market, the investors stopped maintaining their properties for many decades. A vicious circle was set in motion: more decay meant increasingly less maintenance, with increasingly fewer prospects of a better future.

These houses slowly came to constitute a kind of excess: a material excess too stubborn to be properly expelled from the present. They came to exhibit the 'urban standstill' that affects the city away from the accelerated developments in its centre. Their material properties make them linger in the present, and for many reasons (legal, economic, static) it is hard to get rid of them. Years of decay and lack of maintenance have turned them into ruins of past futures that – and this is crucial – have themselves never transpired. However, rather than further prefiguring gentrification, as these houses and their 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture tentatively still do, they have unexpectedly taken up an active role in shaping the district's present.

By preventing gentrifications due to their material – if somewhat fragile – robustness these scrap houses depict a kind of agency that allows the district's current inhabitants to stay. This time, these houses' material and legal limbo creates hope for those living in and around these ruins of pre-gentrification. The scrap houses help at least some local residents resist gentrification and prevent them from being unwanted inhabitants in their own district. This has been the case for some time now. Again, most people see the reason for the failure

of gentrification in the dilapidated qualities of the ruinous houses: their crumbling facades, broken or blunt windows, rooms full of pigeon crap; the ways their smell and feel; the fear they insight and the unease the produce.

But the improvement of the Goethe district is looming and many continue to see gentrification as inevitable. These expectations of a gentrified future have initially led to the demise of these building. Now, these expectations themselves are maintained by these very buildings and their remaining potential for gentrification. Amidst such contradictory effects, the scrap houses' temporal agency allows the maintenance of the standstill of the Goethe district. With its material perseverance and decay, it continuously helps to co-create new expectations. Resident groups have raised their voices; social clubs have opened their doors to the local poor; several cultural festivities take place in the district every year. In hindsight, these constant renegotiations of the district's present and future are attempts at sustaining the district's still productive standstill to prevent the looming inevitability of a gentrified future, and hold the present open for other futures yet to come.

One of the many actors, Brigitte Hawelka is a cultural anthropologist by training. She is the district's *Quartiersmeisterin* [district manager]. As many others, she sees speedy gentrification and people's expulsion as the biggest dangers for the district's future. However, her work falls into a context of competing, often controversial expectations. Although the city administration wants her to initiate gentrification, many such attempts failed before Brigitte took over. The district's inhabitants, in turn, have heard many promises for making their district a better and safer place, but also continued living there despite the non-fulfilment of these promises. In this sense, I presume, it would be a bigger surprise for everybody involved if the wished-for prosperous future suddenly happened. Meanwhile, most actors maintain the moment of standstill with their differing hopes, fears, and expectations: the houses could still be rescued or demolished and times could still become better or worse. The inhabitants of the Goethe district thereby maintain their district's indeterminate present as a potential against all odds and promises. The city, too, keeps the idea of the district's potential alive in order to convince potential investors to stay tuned for a better future.

In this vague, but contested context, Brigitte's work focuses on two strategies: first, making life in the district better in the present for those living there, while at the same time being able to sell these efforts to her employers as promoting the district's further development. Not incidentally, her first campaign included the production of a flyer on waste separation and garbage collection in several different languages, catering to the district's heterogeneous population and most inhabitants' curiously most urgent problem: waste.

Second, to help revive the district by supporting local businesses and investors to revive and use the scrap houses. For Brigitte, the goal is not simply to make the district look cleaner and thereby more attractive to new investors; her goal is to create a district in which its inhabitants can feel more at home. This measured, decelerated approach to the district's development is at least facilitated by the robust, if fragile, materiality of the scrap houses. This materiality holds the present open for other futures than the expected gentrified ones.

Brigitte and others active in the district are very aware of - and vocal about - the risks of gentrification. As many German cities currently suffer from rising rents and even consider introducing rental price caps, the actors of the Goethe district are realistic enough to see that the Goethe district will not be affected by these developments soon. They still work towards a better future, which does entail a further stabilisation of the district, a continuous social and cultural diversification and no expulsion of those currently living here. Moritz, the initiator of another project in 45 Goethestreet and yet another trained anthropologist, conceptualised it thus: any improvement in the district now is nothing more than a 'normalisation' of the district. This reflects how bad the situation only recently was, and in many parts of the district still is. Following the same logic in material terms: if any of the *Schrott*-houses would ever be renovated, it would result in a 'normalisation' of these ruins. Their material qualities would be 'normal' again (i.e. not pending static collapse or not being mouldy) and they could resume their intended function: to house people again. That, as a matter of fact, would not be gentrification. And such a development is still in the remit of what their material-temporal agency allows for.

With the contradictory effects and agency of the scrap houses in mind, this cultivated reconsideration of the present and the future of the *Goetheviertel* points to a fresh, somewhat contradictory set of expectations of gentrifications. Again, the houses' material and legal limbo assists the continuous (re)production and maintenance of the district's standstill. It thereby keeps the future of the district's current inhabitants and houses as tentatively open as possible. Most importantly, this maintenance work continuously proves to be adaptable to new concerns, demands, and expectations of ever-novel presents and their respective futures. It has not scared off the spectre of gentrification, but it has allowed for other lives to take place in the confines of the *Goetheviertel*. Nonetheless, as I show in conclusion, times keep on changing and even the Goethe district is ripe for some surprises.

## Conclusion

As the last section has shown, Bremerhaven's *Schrotthäuser* constitute ruins of failed anticipation, but they still have their own effects on the future. Like many of the district's inhabitants, these houses await a better future; but, statically speaking, time has probably run out for them. They epitomize the standstill in urban renovation that dominates both their district and many parts of the city overall. However, this absence also produces spaces and futures for those that are doomed to be excluded from the gentrified version of the district's future. As I have shown, the scrap houses' material qualities maintain the current district inhabitants' local futures by delaying the gentrification everybody continues to foresee. I have understood this effect as an expression of these material objects' temporal agency. Whilst discussing recent contributions to the anthropological literature on postindustrial cities and infrastructures, I have presented these houses with their specific material properties as active partners in the co-production of time in this particular district. They are part of the district's present and potential futures. However, the effects they have as well as their own existence in time are not predetermined. Infrastructures, as Bowker had it above, do not die like humans. They can be more easily connected to new futures and different times. Let me end this paper with yet another unexpected temporal twist in this district's postindustrial present.

On my last visit, the unexpected has happened: one investor, himself well-versed in retrofit, has taken on the challenge. To the surprise of many, he has renovated a handful of those houses that had previously been deemed scrap. The federal scrap houses law has helped the city to facilitate this investment, and the investor is explicit that his plans are longterm. The rents should not go up too much, despite the fact he aims at high-quality renovations. He even bought another house for renovation, opposite his first three renovation projects, to allow for a better view for his tenants. Brigitte and other activists in the district are pleased with these developments. However, they are well-aware of the many remaining challenges. The Citizen's Group is falling apart, Renate from the playground project faces serious health issues, and the new owner of the formerly popular French restaurant in Goethestreet is struggling to run her business successfully.

These few newly renovated houses might seem promising in a time of urban standstill. Yet for better or worse, the list of social, material, legal and infrastructural problems remains long. Perhaps the recent success story will help maintain the efforts of those interested in developing the district. Or, this unexpected renovation might stress the potential lying in these ruins of past pre-gentrification. But the promise of this potential for future gentrification, as I have tried to show, has for a long time not produced a quick fix to

the district's stagnation - for better or worse. The temporal agency of the Schrott-houses had its role to play in this complex and contested process of producing a future - as much as maintaining the present - of the Goethe district in Bremerhaven. In order to make the accounts of time and gentrification that the social sciences produce more complex and accurate, we should attune to the temporal agency of material objects and infrastructures, and the ongoing tentative as well as material temporal effects that these objects produce, or fortunately fail to produce.

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