

FORTY YEARS OF ALTERNATIVE CULTURE IN ZURICH: The case of the Red Factory



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Forty years of alternative culture in Zurich: The case of the Red Factory

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Abstract

This case study presents the Red Factory in Zurich, which was the first cultural institution that provided a space for alternative culture in Zurich. Emerging from a bottom-up initiative in the 1980s, the Red Factory represents a case where artists, volunteers, and the youth experimented with alternative forms of organisation, emphasising the autonomous and democratic character of the venue.

Keywords: Rote Fabrik (Red Factory), Zurich, alternative culture, Switzerland, Opernhauskrawalle (Opera House riots)

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Forty years of alternative culture in Zurich: The case of the Red Factory¹

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Introduction

This case study presents the Red Factory in Zurich, which was the first cultural institution that provided a space for alternative culture in Zurich. Emerging from a bottom-up initiative in the 1980s, the Red Factory represents a case where artists, volunteers, and the youth experimented with alternative forms of organisation, emphasising the autonomous and democratic character of the venue. Being a former factory in Wollishofen (first as a silk factory, then as a factory producing telecommunication products), the City Council planned to demolish the buildings in the 1970s to widen the road next to the lake and to construct a sea tunnel, which would connect the south and the northern lakeshore. However, residents and politicians demanded the preservation of the Red Factory as a cultural centre. As a reaction, activists founded the 'Interest Group Red Factory' (IGRF) in 1980. At this point, the cultural scene in Zurich was dominated by bourgeois culture, and neither alternative artists nor the youth had space for their cultural activities, the interest group claimed. The initiative to preserve the Red Factory as an alternative cultural venue was thus launched by two SP (Social Democrats) members and locals. It was widely accepted in 1977, at 70.4%.

Since its establishment, the Red Factory has therefore represented an experimental, alternative, and inclusive space. This goes equally for its cultural activities, its organisational structure, and its political activities. Once the financial issues were settled with another initiative at the end of the 1980s, the total operational responsibility was handed over from the City Council to the Interest Group Red Factory in 1987. In 2021, the Red Factory celebrated its 40th anniversary. Much has, however, changed since the turbulent and tense foundation phase. While it emerged from a bottom-up initiative, the influence of the City of Zurich grew in the last two decades. In addition, the organisational structure of the Red Factory has changed substantially since 2000, losing its initial basis-democratic character.

While representing a typical case study of participatory culture due to its origins, its organisational structure, its policies and political views against discrimination or racism, and naturally, its cultural activities, this case study asks, among other things, whether it can still be labelled as a participatory and inclusive case. What follows is the methodology, with a discussion of the questions asked in this article. The historical background of the case pays special attention to the political climate of the 1970s and 1980s and the role of the City of Zurich during the founding years of the Red Factory as a cultural venue. After that, this case study focuses on current challenges, followed by a conclusion.

Methodology

Our case study on the Red Factory aims to highlight specific learning points that illustrate participatory and inclusive cultural policies that influence the development of social values in

¹ In German: Rote Fabrik.

culture. At the same time, our case demonstrates current challenges for projects that emerged from a grassroots movement. The case of the Red Factory was chosen based on the researcher's prior historical knowledge. It represents a policy that was initially (a) participatory, inclusive, or democratic cultural policy; (b) taken at the local and urban level in the German-speaking part of Switzerland; (c) involved both bottom-up and top-down initiatives; (d) represents a diversity of public and civic involvement due to its origins (and its continuous existence); and (e) lasts for more than 40 years.

In addition, the Red Factory represents a successful case of creating an autonomous and inclusive cultural space. Regarding its usage, the Red Factory is one of the largest cultural venues in Europe; around a dozen other groups, associations, and organisations are present, too. Examples range from the cooperative restaurant *Ziegel oh Lac*, the art space *Shedhalle*, a sailing school, to a kindergarten. Remarkable is also the large number of studios rented by the city of Zurich in the rooms of the Red Factory; numerous artists work in over 60 studios and rooms in visual arts, music, and theatre.

Secondary literature research and archival research of the two most prominent daily newspapers and one weekly newspaper were conducted during October and November 2022 (NZZ – Neue Zürcher Zeitung and Tages Anzeiger, respectively, and WOZ Die Wochenzeitung). Based on the archival research, an activist from the Red Factory was interviewed on November 7th, 2022, at the Red Factory in Zurich.² The case study aims to shed light on the following questions: (1) To what extent can the Red Factory be described as a participatory and democratic case? (2) What were the significant changes in the last forty years since its onset in 1980? (3) How important were political parties in the process (and which ones were the most important)? (4) What were the Red Factory's concrete emancipatory policies or learning points? (5) What are the current challenges for the Red Factory?

Context: background of the case

After its establishment in 1892, the Red Factory functioned for almost 80 years as a factory. It was first a silk factory, led by the Henneberg Company and overtaken in 1899 by the silk weaving mill Stünzi & Söhne, and then a factory producing electronic devices for the phone company Standard Telephone and Radio AG (STR). Due to traffic planning by the City of Zurich, the STR sold the factory, including the surrounding areas, to the City of Zurich for 22 million Swiss francs (Anz & Mijnsen, 2021). In 1972, the government of Zurich planned to demolish the buildings to widen the road next to the lake and construct a sea tunnel that would connect the south and north lakeshores (Limmattaler Zeitung, 2020).

Soon after the City's traffic plans were published, members of the Social-Democratic Party (SP), notably Sonja Crespo and Franz Schumacher, started to oppose the factory's demolishing. In 1973, the SP launched an initiative demanding the preservation of the factory as well as its transformation into an alternative cultural centre. The pending initiative, therefore, blocked the demolition of the factory. The factory venues were used for the first time for cultural events, such as theatre.³ In 1977, citizens accepted the popular initiative with

² The interview partner was Hans X Hagen, who was portrayed in the newspaper as the 'archive' of the Red Factory.

³ An important role, as a first experiment, was played by 'Thearena' in the Red Factory.

70.4% (Anz & Mijnsen, 2021). However, the City of Zurich did not implement the plan of transforming the factory into a cultural venue and started to rent out its rooms as storage rooms, inter alia, to the Opera House Zurich.

According to the Red Factory's newspaper (*Fabrikzeitung*), the administration was dragging its heels regarding implementing the accepted initiative. Officially, the administration blamed the complicated legal relationship with the Canton of Zurich and alleged it might still be interested in the area due to traffic considerations. However, the Canton clearly demanded preserving the Red Factory and its surrounding areas as historical monuments. During meetings in 1976 and 1977, local council commissions referred to various actors, such as the civil engineering office and the public transportation of Zurich (VBZ), and their potentially conflicting interests. Contemporary witnesses experienced these actions as the administration's 'procrastination tactic' (Zberg, 2021: 81–82). However, civil society remained active. Surveys with residents from the local area in Wollishofen clearly showed support for preserving the Red Factory as a cultural centre. Moreover, there was a high presence in the media and a favourable atmosphere towards the opening of an alternative cultural venue among the population.

'Liven up the Dead Factory'⁴

As a reaction to the lack of governmental support, activists and artists created the Interest Group Red Factory (*Interessengemeinschaft Rote Fabrik*, IGRF) in 1980. Parallel to this, the youth movement became more politically active due to the lack of alternative spaces and youth centres for their events. In the same year, the city of Zurich published its plans to support the Opera House with 61 million Swiss francs (CHF). In addition to the financial help, the Opera House was allowed to use the Factory's space as an alternate workshop. The so-called 'Opera House riots' occurred as a reaction to these decisions. Masked as 'cultural zombies', around 200 protesters demonstrated in front of the Opera House on May 30th, 1980 (Limmattaler Zeitung, 2020). Protestors accused the City of Zurich of supporting 'bourgeois and elitist culture' but not an alternative one. They demanded the creation of an alternative youth centre within the spaces of the Factory. The Opera House riots sparked months of fighting between the protestors and the police in Zurich. While approximately 200 protestors initiated the movement, it soon grew and was joined by other people, marking the beginning of the 1980s social movement in Zurich (Limmattaler Zeitung, 2020).

As a response to the mass protests, the City Council invited the IGRF for negotiations. Only a couple of months later, the Red Factory was opened as a cultural venue, with annual financial support of 350,000 Swiss francs by the City of Zurich (Anz & Mijnsen, 2021). But the relationship between the City of Zurich and the Red Factory was far from settled, notably with the then president of the city, Sigmund Widmer (LdU, *Landesring der Unabhaengigen*, i.e., Alliance of Independents, a former social-liberal political party). Slow changes became visible once Widmer stepped down and Thomas Wagner, from the liberal party FDP (*Freisinnig-Demokratische Partei*), became the new mayor (*Stadtpräsident*). In addition, Jean-Pierry Hoby was appointed as the Cultural Director and was therefore responsible for the dialogue between the City Council and the Red Factory.

⁴ 'Liven up the Dead Factory' (*Leben in die tote Fabrik*) was a political slogan from the 1980s protests. It advocated the use of the Factory as an alternative cultural centre instead of tearing it down.

While this alternation in personnel improved the relationship, the 1980s were characterised by a tug-of-war between the cultural centre and the City of Zurich. Concerts were one of the few profitable areas of the Red Factory, which financially helped the Red Factory, given the meagre yearly budget of 350,000 CHF by the City. The first years thus led to the impression that the City Council followed a so-called 'policy of starvation.' The City often intervened within the Red Factory's concert domain, for example, by organising a punk band concert via an external organiser that showed commercial interests. This was seen as a direct provocation towards the IGRF, as concerts were one of the few profitable areas of the Factory. As a reaction, the IGRF dismantled the stage and removed the curtains before the concert (Anz & Mijnsen, 2021).

In addition, political events that were not in line with the official political position of the City of Zurich (and Switzerland) were not financially supported. An example of this is the lack of financing of the Red Factory's involvement in an anti-apartheid demonstration and organisation of events for South Africa in 1985. According to contemporary witnesses, one could describe the City Council's policy towards the Red Factory during the 1980s as 'repressive tolerance' (Anz & Mijnsen, 2021: 68). This tense relationship between the IGRF and the City Council ended after 1987, when a second initiative demanding to reorganise the joint management of the Red Factory and to hand it over to the IGRF was accepted by the citizens with a great majority. From then on, the Red Factory operated with a slightly higher budget, and its events and visitors grew yearly.

The organisation of the Red Factory

Initially, the factory was divided into various working groups. Numerous volunteers were active in these working groups, organising the cultural program in a bottom-up way. However, a decade later, volunteers started to lose interest in participating in these working groups. At the same time, the growing cultural program of the Red Factory required a degree of professionalisation of its structures. In 1981, the Red Factory hosted 350 events and 65,000 visitors. Only one year later, this number increased to 80,000 visitors (Anz & Mijnsen, 2021).

Since 1980, the Red Factory has been organised as a grassroots association. In 2022, it had more than 300 members. The highest body is the General Assembly, which meets once a year (or more, by request). The board group ensures the statutory and legal business of the association, monitors events, and supports the working group when required or necessary. In addition, the board group has a seat in the advisory and coordinating commissions and publicly represents the association. Table 1 summarises the current organisational structure of the Red Factory, including the IGRF and all other events and organisations at the venue.

The seventeen members of the operating group, permanently employed by the association, manage the cultural centre collectively. Being the heart of the Red Factory, they ensure that the cultural events run smoothly. Additionally, the operating group works with flat hierarchies and a uniform basic salary. This means that decisions are made jointly and responsibility is shared.

A quota system ensures that an equal number of men and women work, both in programming and technology. With volunteer positions for women in the male-dominated lighting and sound engineering areas, IGRF contributes to equal opportunities for both genders (Rote Fabrik, 2022). In the administration, five people are responsible for personnel, accounting, finances, and IT. Corresponding commissions support important business in financial or personnel matters. Two people each design and supervise the program sections: music, theatre, dance, children's and youth theatre, as well as concept events. Two additional members work in each of the three technical areas of stage/entertainment, lighting, and sound. In addition to the permanent members of the operating group, more than a hundred people with an interest in culture work in the background by helping to design the programme and making it possible to stage more than 400 events each year.

Table 1 The organisation of The Red Factory⁵

Who		How	Contract with
<i>Ziegel Oh Lac</i>		Cooperative	City of Zurich
<i>IG Rote Fabrik</i> (1) Working Groups (2) Administration (3) Technical Department (4) <i>FabrikVideo</i> (5) <i>Dock 18</i> (6) Rehearsal rooms for music/sound studio (7) Artists' workrooms (8) Artists in residence (9) Exercise room		Association	City of Zurich
<i>Rad-Los</i>		Repair shop	Company
<i>Shedhalle</i>		Association	City of Zurich
Printing studio		Association	City of Zurich
Artists' workrooms		Association	City of Zurich
Dance studio		<i>Tanzfoerderung</i>	Presidential Department Zurich
F + F		Art School (Foundation)	
PAZ		Association	
Theatre HORA		Foundation <i>Zueriwerk</i>	
Sailing school		SMS	<i>SMS Zuerichsee AG</i>
Local Meeting Point (<i>Quartiertreff</i>)		Association	
Toy library		Association	
Nursery school		Association	

⁵ Based on the interview with Hans X Hagen, Zurich, November 7th, 2022.

People permanently engaged in one area can represent their opinion in the General Assembly. Internal business regulations, fundamental innovations, or the general direction of the cultural centre can currently be decided in the operating group or at a General Assembly meeting. At the latter, the annual financial statements as well as the budget and investments for the coming year are presented. In 2022, the financial expenditure of IGRF amounted to around 3.7 million CHF. The city subsidises the cultural operation with 2.4 million CHF annually. Other financial resources come from membership fees, events, grants, and rental income (Rote Fabrik, 2022).

The division into 'bureaus' of the Red Factory with permanent employees occurred at the beginning of the 2000s. Namely, the growth in events and visitors required professionalisation of the Red Factory's organisational structure. Today, the three most significant bureaus are the Music Bureau, which is responsible for concerts, the Theatre Bureau, and the Concept Bureau, which is responsible for political events (WOZ, 2021).

During this restructuring process, a substantial body of the Red Factory disappeared: the Council of the Factory. Previously, in addition to the working groups, other organisations located in the area were represented in the Council, including those functioning autonomously from the Red Factory⁶. Moreover, externals could also bring in ideas or present requests and demands to the Interest Group Red Factory. The Council was thus an essential democratic body in the Red Factory. One of the reasons why it disappeared relates to the disappearance of the working groups, which led to a lower number of attendees in the council (WOZ, 2021). This occurred because the structural and financial independence of the operating groups grew over the years. Their increased independence made having a council of the Factory unnecessary and redundant. However, current challenges show that such a grassroots body is still much needed at the IGRF.⁷

Analysis and reflection on challenges or impacts

Regarding the question of whether the Red Factory can be described as a participatory and democratic case, one first needs to consult its statute: the Red Factory explicitly states that it engages against discrimination of any kind. Moreover, it aims to include people from the lower classes, as 'culture should not be expensive, the entrance to events only rarely exceeds the cost of 30 CHF' (IG Rote Fabrik, 2022). The Red Factory also limits collaboration with sponsors that want to use 'culture as a way to polish their image' or reputation. It observes gender parity within its institutions. As already mentioned above, in the section on the Red Factory's organisational structure, it operates with flat hierarchies and participatory mechanisms (via the General Assembly).

Since the Red Factory's origins were in a grassroots movement, it was from the start an inclusive cultural project, in the sense that it enabled lower classes and alternative groups to be part of cultural projects. As the first project of this kind, it significantly contributed to increasing the cultural diversity in the region. Also, the Red Factory is perceived as leftist, although it has never defined itself as a leftist venue. It simply follows its credo, which emphasises 'trying out, experimenting' (Limmattaler Zeitung, 2020).

⁶ Such as the restaurant *Ziegel oh lac*, see Table 1.

⁷ Author's interview with Hans X Hagen, Zurich, November 7th, 2022

However, one should bear in mind that some essential changes have occurred at the Red Factory since its onset in 1980. Firstly, institutionally speaking, the Council of the Factory disappeared during the 1990s. This body was a highly grassroots democratic element within the Factory. It would certainly be needed today in view of new challenges and heated debates. For example, the Red Factory initially aimed not to have double events; however, today, numerous events run simultaneously (Limmattaler Zeitung, 2020).

Secondly, the influence of the City of Zurich has increased. Today, the City is responsible for renting out rooms and spaces for artists. As a consequence, many artists who worked at the Red Factory for almost twenty years had to leave their ateliers. New artists are allowed to stay for a maximum of five years.

Lastly, the composition of the Board Group has changed recently. In 2021, six out of nine members came from a new generation, which was interpreted as quite a revolutionary act (Tages Anzeiger, 2021; WOZ, 2021). The change in the composition of the Board came about in response to a request made by Isabelle von Walterskirchen, who was made head of the newly created Club Bureau in 2019. She was thus made responsible for club culture at the Red Factory. However, the IGRF never specified how the Club Bureau would be integrated into the Factory's structure.

In response to a protracted back and forth between various committees, von Walterskirchen finally took the case to the General Assembly. She demanded that the Club Bureau be an independent body within the Red Factory and that her workload be increased from fifty to sixty per cent. According to the statutes, this would mean that she would also become part of the operations group, the above-mentioned seventeen-member body responsible for the operational management of the Factory (WOZ, 2021). In the end, von Walterskirchen successfully mobilised new members that attended the General Assembly and voted in her favour, which led to the acceptance of her request. While some members spoke of this event as a 'putsch,' the lack of a Council seriously curtailed the activists' actions within the Red Factory. A Council could have been used as an open venue and discussion place, which could have minimised Von Walterkirchen's back and forth between various committees.

Regarding the political parties, both the social democratic SP and the liberal FDP were relevant at the onset of the Factory. While it is true that two SP members were crucial for the initiative from 1977 (Sonja Crespo and Franz Schuhmacher), the then ruling FDP politicians in the City Council supported the Red Factory (notably Jean-Pierre Hoby) insofar as they were looking for and actively supported a constructive dialogue and solution between the two bodies (Limmattaler Zeitung, 2020).

Today, the two main challenges for the Red Factory are the lack of a democratic Council, as shown by the escalated 2021 discussion on the Club Office, and the increasing influence of the City of Zurich. The latter is reflected in the new room policy that the City of Zurich implemented, which states that artists can only stay in the ateliers for five years. In 2009, artists painted the outer walls of the Rote Fabrik white overnight. In this symbolically captivating action, white stood for cultural dreariness but also as a clean slate for a fundamental discussion: that of the role of the City of Zurich and its cultural policy. This action

also raised a fundamental question that needs to be addressed in one way or another by the IGRF: Shouldn't the Red Factory be a cultural and political free space instead of just another administered alternative cultural project? (WOZ, 2021).

Conclusion

This case study presented the Red Factory in Zurich, the first cultural institution that provided a space for alternative culture in Zurich. Emerging from a bottom-up initiative in the 1980s, the Red Factory represents a case where artists, volunteers, and the youth experimented (and still experiment) with alternative forms of organisation, emphasising the autonomous and democratic character of the venue. Regarding its organisational structure, policies, and cultural events, the Red Factory strives to be an inclusive and democratic place.

Significant structural changes occurred after the 2000s, when the Council of the Factory disappeared. This also impacted the influence and responsibility of activists and artists outside the established bodies. In addition, the city's demand to limit the use of atelier rooms to a maximum of five years points to the increased flexibilisation of the Red Factory. The changing context and climate under which the Red Factory operates surely impact its inclusive character. Two specific learning points thus stand out: on the one hand, democratic bodies need to be present to preserve the inclusive and democratic functioning of the Red Factory. The escalated conflict over the discussion of the Club Bureau status has shown this. On the other hand, subventions from the government are Janus-faced: they secure the existence of the cultural venue but, at the same time, lead to a specific dependence and, therefore, a rising influence by the city on the Red Factory.

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