

Study on racist house names in Zurich

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On the 8th of April 2021, the Zurich city council (Stadtrat) announced its decision to remove or contextualize colonial and racist symbols in Zurich from houses in its possession by the end of the year. Furthermore, the council said it would approach private owners of other houses in the city that carried racist names. This was a move following the recommendations of the report “Möglichkeiten zum Umgang mit kolonialen Spuren im Stadtraum“ that was delivered to the council by the project group “Rassismus im öffentlichen Raum” (short RiÖR) in March of 2021. The Zurich city council had commissioned the report in July of 2020 after mounting pressure by civil society actors led by the collective “Vo Da.” In two public letters, the first one sent in May 2020 and addressed to the office for urban development (Amt für Städtebau) and the second sent in July 2020 and addressed to the city mayor Corine Mauch, the activists requested the city would change the racist names of the three houses “Zum kleinen M***en” (Neumarkt 22), “Zum M***entanz” (Niederdorfstrasse 29) and “Zum kleinen M***enkopf” (Predigergasse 15) as well as removing the racist mural on the house at Neumarkt 22. While the former two are owned by the city the latter is in private hands. Yet the office for historic preservation has attached a plaque prominently on the house's façade, displaying the name of the house to the public.

One contributing factor that led Vo Da and fellow civil society actors to demand the removal of the racist names at this specific moment was the fact that the city had opened the bidding for a new letting of the café “M***enkopf” (located at Niederdorfstrasse 31), which had only gotten its name in 1981, and asked the bidders to come up with a new name for the café.

While today the café has a new name (Frisk Fisk) the city has still not yet removed or covered up the racist names and the mural from the other houses. In November of 2021 they announced that they could not keep the promise they made to remove these symbols by the end of the year because they had to first submit a building permit and have to get it approved before any changes could be made to the houses. Further they announced that they were commissioning a scientific report on how the houses in question got their name and on how the meaning of the m-word has changed over time.

The report is expected to be published by the end of fall 2022. The research is conducted at the chair of the History of the Modern World at the ETH.



Sources

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