

# Demolition – to protect the climate?

by Martin Killias,\* *President Swiss Heritage Society*



Martin Killias.  
(Photo ma)

*(Edit.) In September 2022, the Swiss Federal Council adopted its message on the revised CO<sub>2</sub> Act, with which it aims to halve greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and achieve the 2030 climate target.<sup>1</sup> The author, a lawyer and president of “Schweizer Heimatschutz”, has scrutinised this draft law. He combines his commentary on it with the awarding of the Wakker Prize 2022 by “Schweizer Heimatschutz”. Since 1972, this prize has been awarded annually to a municipality that has rendered outstanding services to building culture in its settlement area.*

The Wakker Prize recently awarded to the Geneva municipality of Meyrin offered a lot of illustrative lessons for the link between successful urban development and good energy policy. Meyrin has shown great care in maintaining its old village centre and upgrading the areas of newly constructed buildings of the 1960s, which are no less worthy of preservation. By resisting large-scale demolition plans, Meyrin has not only preserved architectural ensembles of great value, but at the same time made an important contribution to combating global warming. In other cities, such buildings are nowadays approved for demolition, ironically often in the name of climate protection.

Certainly, new buildings consume less energy, but no one thinks about the energy used for the production of concrete and building materials, but especially for demolition and new constructions. This grey energy far exceeds the energy-saving potential of a new building throughout its lifetime. In addition, there is the problem of construction and demolition waste, which accounts for over 80 percent of the amount of waste “dumped” in Switzerland each year. With this amount, a Chinese wall could be built from Meyrin to the Austrian border at Lake Constance, year after year!

One is therefore dismayed to find in the draft of a future CO<sub>2</sub> law (in Art. 9 para. 1bis)<sup>2</sup> a provision with which the demolition of old buildings is to be specifically promoted, namely with the incentive of assuring an increased utilisation of the real estate. In view of the many buildings constructed between 1950 and 1980, this would trigger an unprecedented wave of demolition. One can only hope that parliament will recognise the massive damage that threatens the climate and the environment here. Rarely has a law intended to protect the climate promoted such massive environmental damage in such a targeted manner.

In addition to this damage, there are immeasurable losses for the architectural culture of post-war modernism and the quality of life of entire city districts. Architectural qualities are not only important for tourism or lovers of building culture. They are also important because they convey a sense of identity to the residents. All people have a need for memory. This is attached to private objects as well as to buildings that we have lived in or that stand in familiar places. Shared memory is the basis of social cohesion. In Meyrin, this has been successfully maintained despite a heterogeneous population, thanks in part to the preservation of collective, identity-forming places of remembrance. The fact that Meyrin has made an exemplary contribution to climate protection in the process should not go unmentioned in view of the upcoming debate on the CO<sub>2</sub> law.

Source: *Heimatschutz/Patrimoine 3/2022*  
(Reprinted with the kind permission of the publisher)  
(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

\* Martin Killias completed his studies with a doctorate in law and a licentiate in sociology and social psychology. A professor of criminal law, social scientist and publicist for many years, he has been a member of the Swiss Heritage Society since 1965 and was elected as its president in June 2017.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uvek.admin.ch/uvek/de/home/uvek/medien/medienmitteilungen.msg-id-90389.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.news.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/73153.pdf>