



**SWITZERLAND -- URBAN?  
URBAN LANDSCAPE AND THE NOSTALGIC ALPINE IMAGE**

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## **SWITZERLAND -- URBAN? URBAN LANDSCAPE AND THE NOSTALGIC ALPINE IMAGE**

### **Changing Regional Structures in Europe and Their Mark on Landscape**

The political-economic structure of the old continent is changing rapidly. Borders are losing their importance while joint programs and projects at the level of Europe's regions are taking over. Lately Switzerland, although being known for its political resistance, to the pressure to abandon neutrality and isolation started to become more and more integrated economically into the European market. This shift caused changes in Swiss policy on the country's relationship to international organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union, and led to Switzerland relaxing its attitude towards neutrality in order to take advantage of the offered joint programs. In 2002, the Alpine country joined the UN, and in the Fall of 2005 the Swiss Federal Council stated that membership in the EU is viewed as a long-term option and, that, the suspended membership application will not be withdrawn. In the meantime, several nation-wide referenda testified for the changing mood of the Swiss people; in June 2005, official results from all 26 cantons showed that 54.6% of the voters supported joining the Schengen group of European nations, while in September of the same year some 56% agreed that workers from the new, mainly Eastern European, EU states could take up residence in Switzerland provided they have a job and can support themselves. Parallel to this shift in governmental and popular attitudes, the country began to participate in many cross-border joint ventures that are based on the new regional structures.

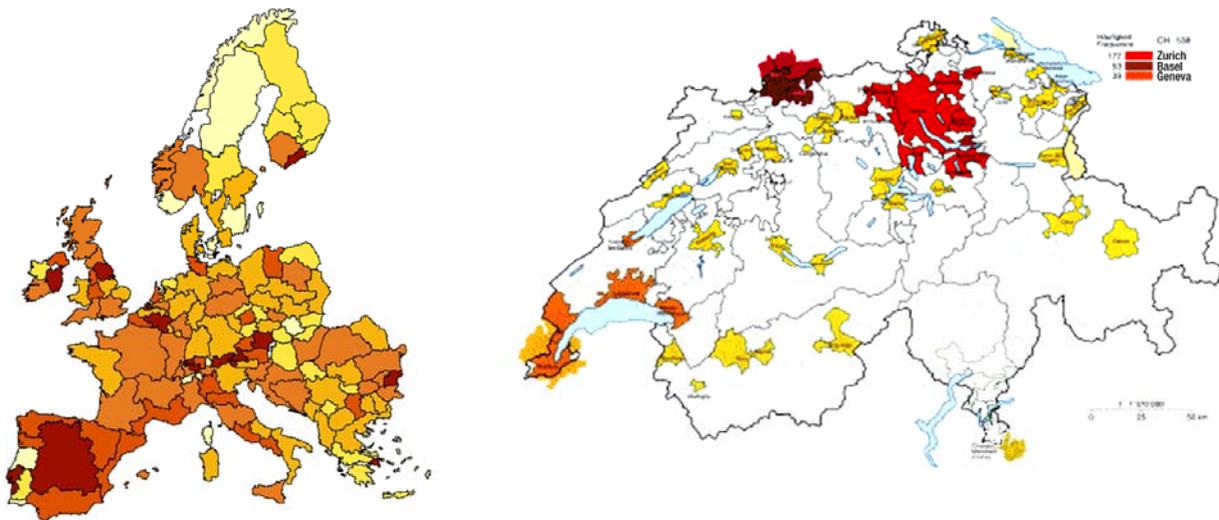
*"Through the cross-border co-operation (...) peripheral regions will triumph over the disadvantages and obstacles put in their path by virtue of their geographical location and, naturally, Switzerland joins in" <sup>1</sup>,*

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<sup>1</sup> quote from [www.interreg.ch], the website of the Trans-European cooperation between Switzerland and the European Union

claims the spokesman of Interreg, the Trans-European cooperation between Switzerland and the European Union.

In his book *Macht und Gegenmacht im globalen Zeitalter*<sup>2</sup>, German sociologist Ulrich Beck notes that we live in a world where the borders and the social conditions are in a state of flux and that therefore our social and economic activities have never been so free from territorial boundaries. At the same time,—argues Beck—our cross-border activities and relations are undergoing major changes and are leaving their mark on the landscape in which we live and work. How can we describe this altered landscape? Although consisting of 26 cantons, Switzerland has most of its industrial and financial capacity concentrated in three metropolitan areas, greater Basel, Zurich, and Geneva. Situated along the national borders they have developed into strategic locations in which the Swiss economy is coordinated nationally and globally.



In the preface to his recently published book, *Landscape Architecture in Mutation*, Christophe Giroto, Chair of the Landscape Department at the ETH in Zurich, says that although landscapes around us have always been changing, “...only recently have they become mutant, so to speak. They have not only moved into realms quite different from their previous states but have also acquired an irreversible condition.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Beck: *Force and Counterforce in a Global Age*, Frankfurt am Main, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Christophe Giroto: Preface, in: Hubertus Adam, Jörg Dettmar, Christophe Giroto, Susanne Hauser, Michael Koch, Maya Kohte, Marcel Meili, Antoine Picon, Stefan Rotzler, Maresa Schumacher, Charles Waldheim: *Landscape Architecture in Mutation – Essays on Urban Landscape*, GTA Verlag, Zürich, 2005

He identifies the event of mutation in this case with a transformation into a state that is better adapted to new environmental conditions.

One thing seems to be clear: the social, political, and environmental conditions in Switzerland are undergoing major changes and this process leaves its mark on the landscape. But there are more understandings of the phenomena and different suggestions on how to react have been thrown on the table. One extreme approach would definitely be Studio Basel's diagnosis of an entirely urban Switzerland, a concept that can be opposed to landscape, architecture, and other cultural products emerging from a rural identity. Examples to the latter could be the work of Gion A. Caminada and some of the designs of Peter Zumthor that are based on traditional building techniques and living conditions.

### **The Concept of Total Urbanization**

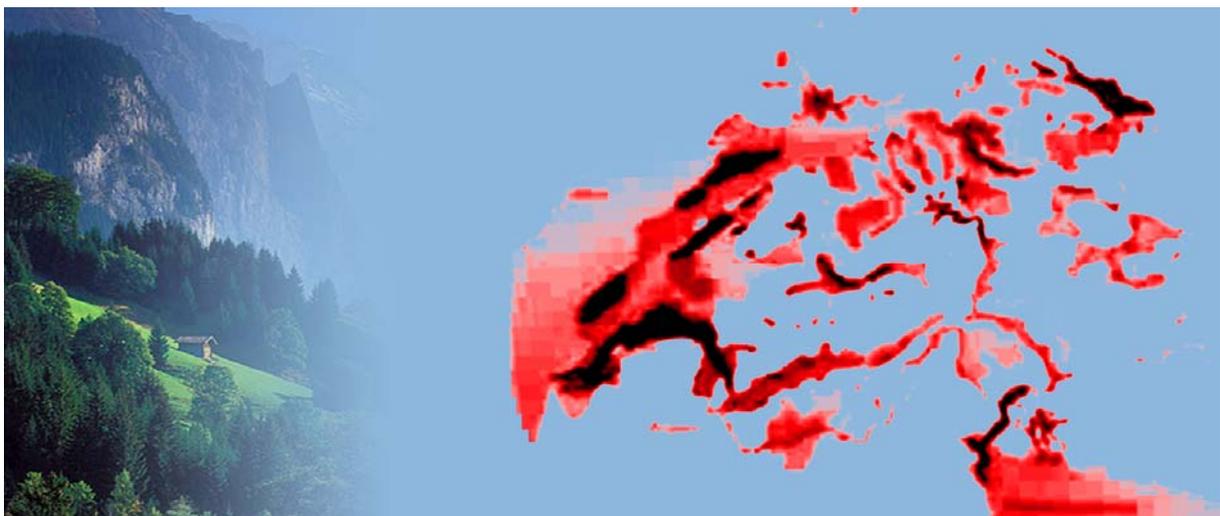
Marcel Meili's analysis of Switzerland as entirely urban is, according to the author, a perception of Switzerland that comes from within the country, whereas other countries see Switzerland as a void on the border of three different cultures. Meili's diagnosis starts out from the claim that these two different viewpoints create a tension with repercussions on many levels, including urban planning and landscape design. Meili, who -besides being an architect- is a professor at the Basel Studio of ETH, says that the Alpine nostalgia is fading away and Swiss landscape should now be understood as part of a new urbanscape, where "*...everything is urban – the mountains, the Matterhorn, and all.*"<sup>4</sup> Studio Basel's research focuses on the topographic map of Switzerland less in terms of geography but more of the new urban structures that have materialised over the last couple of decades. Meili goes on stating that

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<sup>4</sup> Marcel Meili: "Lovely Swiss Countryside" - Myth and Reality in the Urban Topography in: Hubertus Adam, Jörg Dettmar, Christophe Girod, Susanne Hauser, Michael Koch, Maya Kohte, Marcel Meili, Antoine Picon, Stefan Rotzler, Maresa Schumacher, Charles Waldheim: Landscape Architecture in Mutation – Essays on Urban Landscape, GTA Verlag, Zürich, 2005

*“while the urban topography is continuous, it exhibits many different urban conditions. What we read as countryside, for instance, is really part of the urban structure. The countryside as such no longer exists.”*<sup>4</sup>

According to him, the myth of national coherence is over. He argues that the small villages of the Swiss Alps were artificially kept alive via pumping funds into the farming industry, which was made possible up until recently by the flourishing Alpine tourism. The long survival of unprofitable agriculture has also been aided by the country’s policy of military neutrality, which led to the view that self-sufficiency in food production is an issue of domestic security. The Alpine farmer was so heavily subsidized that he was almost an employee of the state and had to be sustained economically by the taxpayer. This fact and its problematic character became evident once tourism began to suffer a setback. According to research done by the Swiss Federal Audit Office in 2003 tourism in the country is middling and, interestingly enough, those on holiday choose more and more the cities as they seem to offer a more diverse range of entertainment, and make only one- or two-day trips to destinations in the countryside. Alpine tourism is a loser in the global trends of travel and tourism and, therefore, it cannot provide enough income for the cantons to support their agriculture. This fact caused the migration of youth towards the metropolitan regions; as Meili points it out: *„a young person’s typical route is to go to the city for an education - and to stay there”*.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron, Christian Schmid: Switzerland An Urban Portrait, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2005

In Studio Basel's view agrarian life is already a phenomenon of the past, and any remainders of it are nothing but products of our nostalgia. Here, I also find it important to point out that, although Switzerland is a country of Alpine farming in many people's mind, in reality only about 4% of the working population is employed in agriculture and forestry. This ratio is pretty close to the EU average, and so is the mean size of farms. Moreover, every day the equivalent of 18 football fields of agricultural land disappears, mainly because of the growing economic need and the demand for settlement areas, and because farmers have to give up their farms due to the structural changes in the agriculture sector.

But Meili's comprehensive analysis leaves open a number of questions. For example: how can urban landscape drive out and replace the weakened picturesque nostalgia in a land where "*...the existing pattern of settlement is now shaped by the country's new spatial and multifunctional structure*"<sup>6</sup> and where people live in sprawling conglomerations, collages of urban, suburban, and rural elements? The author claims that silent zones or green holes „*...represent a battleground of different interests. This is why they are urban structures...*”<sup>7</sup> Meili continues the argument by saying that one can only understand urban structures in terms of networks, differences and boundaries arising from interaction with metropolitan areas. How can the huge parts of cultivated land, or with other words the third nature, be sustained economically once they become silent zones? If cultivation was funded by the cantons or the federal government, will the cities the metropolitan regions of which incorporate those zones become financially responsible for them?

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<sup>6</sup> Foreword by Michel Schneider in: Angelus Eisinger and Michel Schneider (ed.), *Urbanscape Switzerland*, Birkhäuser, 2003

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Meili: "Lovely Swiss Countryside" - Myth and Reality in the Urban Topography in: Hubertus Adam, Jörg Dettmar, Christophe Girod, Susanne Hauser, Michael Koch, Maya Kohte, Marcel Meili, Antoine Picon, Stefan Rotzler, Maresa Schumacher, Charles Waldheim: *Landscape Architecture in Mutation – Essays on Urban Landscape*, GTA Verlag, Zürich, 2005

## Landscape in Mutation - Suburbia

In a research project the Swiss landscape architect Maya Kohte claims that changes in landscapes today are taking place mainly in urban agglomerations. According to her conclusions the new landscapes generated in these areas appear to be distinguished by the simultaneousness of both rural and urban characteristics. These areas represent a major field of activity for landscape architecture. As far as their spatial development is concerned, however, there is a lamentable discrepancy between objectives and actual results.

*“The research project proceeds from the following assumptions: A separate landscape category can justifiably be established for the actual landscapes in agglomerations on the basis of their distinctive features. It would therefore be meaningful to formulate a special design approach in landscape architecture on these grounds.”*<sup>8</sup>

In a chapter of the already mentioned book, *Landscape Architecture in Mutation*, Kohte points out the importance of looking at ‘blind spots’ that escape our attention, because they are inaccessible, hidden from the view, or fragmented. Taking them into account means “*expanding the possible fields of activity for design*”<sup>9</sup>, claims the author, also pointing out that most of these ‘urban voids’ are located in the suburban areas.

In 2003, ETH professor Christophe Girot conducted a similar research project at the Network City and Landscape institute, titled *Towards a New Design Theory on the Basis of Exemplary Empirical Analyses*, and came to the conclusion that at present, great changes are taking place in the Swiss landscape, more precisely: in the urban agglomerations and, above all, in their peripheries. Girot and his co-author Annemarie Bucher claim that

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<sup>8</sup> Maya Kohte: *Landscape Architecture in Swiss Urbanized Landscapes*, research project, NSL, ETH Zürich, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Maya Kohte: Introduction – Focus on Mutations, in: Hubertus Adam, Jörg Dettmar, Christophe Girot, Susanne Hauser, Michael Koch, Maya Kohte, Marcel Meili, Antoine Picon, Stefan Rotzler, Maresa Schumacher, Charles Waldheim: *Landscape Architecture in Mutation – Essays on Urban Landscape*, GTA Verlag, Zürich, 2005

*„as this landscape serves as the habitat for two-thirds of the Swiss population, considerable importance must be paid to its design. In the face of the current changes in this landscape, the evident discrepancy between the expectations of the planners and designers and the visible results in the landscape are seen as reflecting a problematic inability to control the situation. In the landscapes of urban agglomerations, there clearly exist sites that have not been taken into consideration by landscape architects and planners, and have consequently not been considered in their designs.“*<sup>10</sup>

This approach is not only interesting, because it calls attention to landscape architecture lacking a differentiated standpoint on design for urbanized landscapes as well as a term for urban agglomerations but, since suburban tissues in the European city-structures are places where natural and urban characteristics are usually combined and they themselves often offer a transition from ‘urban’ to ‘rural’, the project also offers a new understanding of how the shift towards urbanscapes can retain rural qualities. Or, to put it differently, how nature can emerge in an urban context. Girot and his team members also call attention to the fact that places that are in a state of flux will become the best locations for landscape projects.

## **Maintaining National Identity**

Although many fresh diagnoses demystify the Swiss cultural landscapes, the myth of national coherence and the nostalgia for nature still seem to be very emphatic characteristics of Switzerland’s self-perception. Many architects and theorists in Switzerland base their concepts on cataloging traditional Swiss qualities and resources and transforming them in a way that they then can be used within the contemporary context. Here we should also mention the well-known Swiss tradition of generations celebrating their national identity with organizing EXPOs every now and then. These fairs are always to represent the „Y’en

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<sup>10</sup> Christophe Girot, Annemarie Bucher: Towards a New Design Theory on the Basis of Exemplary Empirical Analyses, NSL - Network City and Landscape, ETH Zürich, 2003

a point comme nous” (there are none like us) feeling of the Swiss, which is largely based on their myth of national coherence, or as Marcel Meili argues: the fact that „...every citizen was 'cultivated', able to live anywhere in the country and yet take full advantage of all infrastructures from buses and railways through school services to state subsidies.”<sup>11</sup>



We will better understand the continuing presence of ruralism in Swiss identity if we take a look into the natural resources of the country. Switzerland has 48 mountains that are 4000 meters or higher and with 4634 meters Monte Rosa is the second highest peak in Europe excluding the former Soviet Union. But, unexpectedly enough, Switzerland is also a country of extremes; Ascona on Lake Maggiore in the canton of Ticino is only 196 meters above sea level and has a Mediterranean climate with palm trees growing on the shores. Switzerland ranks second as the most densely forested country in Europe with 30% of its territory covered by woodland, only Portugal at 40% having more of it. Thus, it is no surprise that more than 90,000 jobs in the country depend on timber in one way or another. Switzerland is less known for its water supplies, though it has 6% of Europe's stock of fresh water, The Rhine, Rhone and Inn all take their source here, although their waters flow into three seas: the North Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Switzerland also comes second in Europe with its 1,500 lakes and 1,800 glaciers, only Finland having a higher 'number of lakes / area' ratio. Hydroelectric power supplies 60% of the country's

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<sup>11</sup> Marcel Meili: "Lovely Swiss Countryside" - Myth and Reality in the Urban Topography in: Hubertus Adam, Jörg Dettmar, Christophe Girod, Susanne Hauser, Michael Koch, Maya Kohte, Marcel Meili, Antoine Picon, Stefan Rotzler, Maresa Schumacher, Charles Waldheim: Landscape Architecture in Mutation, GTA, Zürich, 2005

electricity needs, and that figure is the highest of its kind on the old continent. Not unexpectedly at all, the relationship with the mountains, water, and the use of traditional timber structures are central to contemporary Swiss design.

In the meantime, the paradox of being urbanized and rural at the same time is almost an export product of Switzerland, a country that presents itself to the world as having two faces that seem mutually exclusive. One image of it is that of an ordered, wealthy and urbanized country making money from finance, high-end tourism, quality chocolates and precision watches. The other image is of an equally tidy but bucolic landscape of farmers, cows and cheese.

### **Caminada, Zumthor and Swiss Traditions**

Motivated by the ruralist nostalgia, a trend of returning to the cultural roots of the Alpine regions and to the mountains themselves made its appearance in contemporary Swiss design. With briefly introducing Gion A. Caminada's and Peter Zumthor's relevant work, I would like to point out how architecture with a very contemporary taste can follow traditional values at the same time.

Gion Caminada has created work in the canton of Graubunden that has arisen from a unique interactive relationship between the social and economic premises of the Vrin area in Val Lumnezia and the traditional building techniques and typical living conditions of its inhabitants. To date, he has mostly employed solid timber construction, known as 'knit-building', a term that refers to the interlocking corners of such works. The other tradition Caminada follows is the use of a stone base, which for practical reasons is often replaced by concrete. As Steven Spier states in the book entitled *Swiss Made*:

*“... Caminada’s architecture does seem more immediate than most. He is surely one of only a handful of contemporary architects to design a noteworthy set of stables and an abattoir (...), an economically vital set of buildings for the village.”*<sup>12</sup>

Caminada has taken on commissions outside his village too but always retained his fundamental principles. His goal is to build houses that would not compromise the values and way of life in the valley that he has so admired.



Not far from Vrin, Caminada's village, lays another small settlement, Chur that also has 'its own architect', Peter Zumthor, whose designs clearly mark local architecture. His architecture is often described as a concentrated substance of collected materials -great quantities of wood, stone and light- that are not simply lined up but become compressed. *“He concentrates mountain slopes, history, and the sky”*<sup>13</sup> – says Hiroshi Nakao about Zumthor’s work, and we need not be idealists to see how cultural roots and nature are both incorporated in this design. The architect, an uncompromising realist uses experiences of Swiss nostalgia as context of his work but, since he wants the projects to be well embedded within their surroundings –he calls his designs completed landscapes- traditional qualities also become present in the buildings themselves.

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Spier, Martin Tschanz: *Swiss Made – New Architecture from Switzerland*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2003

<sup>13</sup> Hiroshi Nakao: *No Ideas But in Things*, in: *a+u, Architecture and Urbanism*, February 1998 Extra Edition, Tokyo

*"In my mind, I envisage what it will feel like to live in the house I am designing, I try to imagine its physical emanations, recalling at the same time all the experiences of place and space we are capable of making..."*<sup>14</sup>

- says Zumthor about the importance of experience in the design process. His ability to recall the fundamental elements of architecture and to redefine traditional archetypes reaches its accomplishment in his soundbox project for the Swiss pavilion at the Hanover EXPO in 2000. Structurally and morphologically based on the simple way timber is stacked to dry, the soundbox is not, however, a minimalist sculpture but is meant to present characteristics of Switzerland. Zumthor claims to have "*...a passionate desire to design (...) buildings which, in time, grow naturally into being part of the form and history of their place.*"<sup>15</sup> He finds it essential for the building to embrace qualities which can enter into a meaningful dialogue with the existing situation. Zumthor builds his argument for incorporating traditional values upon the importance of remembering. According to him our feelings and understanding are rooted in the past, and therefore our sensual connections with a building or site must respect the process of remembering.

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Whether our understanding of recent trends in landscape is based on urban or natural typologies, whether we perceive the shifts in Switzerland's urban landscapes as country-wide trends or rather as fragmented, local phenomena, there are certain statements on which we can all agree. Most importantly, as a consequence of all political borders and social conditions in Europe coming in flux, our social and economic activities are much more free than ever from territorial boundaries, and the major changes the cross-border activities are undergoing leave their mark on the landscape, bringing it into a state of mutation.

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Zumthor: Peter Zumthor Works, Birkhäuser, Basel, 1998

<sup>15</sup> Peter Zumthor: A Way of Looking at Things, in: a+u, Architecture and Urbanism, February 1998 Extra Edition, Tokyo

Since the best opportunities for landscape operations are probably offered by locations in flux, they suddenly come into focus, and begin to play an important role in defining national identity where, although people rather identify themselves with the region they come from than with the country as a whole, the Swiss idea of landscape becomes a common dream.

A common dream which has to have answers for –among many others- the problem of the cultivated land or, in other words: that of the third nature. While nostalgic views' aim is the conservation of historic landscapes via bringing nature back to an uncultivated state, progressive analyses intend to incorporate the silent zones in the urban pattern of Switzerland.

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