'No Hysteria': findings from the IFIL Seminar on Switzerland's urban and rural spaces April 2012

Rural idyll and sophisticated cities: A study of Switzerland's urban and rural settings, the relationship between them and the space where they merge.

Presenters from left to right: Lukas Golder, gfsbern, Stefan Kurath, UrbanPlus, Mark Reinhard, SECO

So, what did we find out...?

Electoral Trends: Understanding the 'Güllengraben'
Lukas Golder, Political scientist, GfS.bern <www.gfsbern.ch>

'Güllengraben' or 'manure pit'/'sewage dig' refers to the political cleavage between city and country. The name makes reference to the usefulness of manure in these respective locations. The urban/rural cleavage emerged in the 19th century when two ways of handling economic situations arose, one in the country and one in the cities. The urban/rural conflict is no longer so clearly defined and merges with other new conflicts including attitudes towards globalisation and opinions about how society does and should work. The 'Güllengraben' is of increasing significance and will become a central cleavage in Swiss politics.

Raising the level of the rural/urban conflict will be the city's and country's differing perspectives on how life in rural areas functions. Two examples are perspectives on the countryside and the rural economy. The urbanists view of the countryside, i.e. conservation of nature, opposes the ruralists' pragmatic approach of utilising nature, exploiting it to gain something from it. The pragmatic view of the urban people toward the rural economy, that it is weakly structured and dependent on payments is at odds with the rural point of view that their economy is competitive and autonomous. Exchange about these perspectives of life in the countryside is predicted to intensify.

Switzerland, however, is perfectly prepared to handle the increasing urban/rural conflict. The will for regional balance and the consensus democracy are elements that help to find peaceful, pragmatic and sustainable solutions. The nation is extremely multicultural, extremely complex. The joint, coherent, harmonised cooperation that Switzerland's political system allows, leads the way for cultures within the culture to get along.

Growing Switzerland: Making Space
Stefan Kurath, architect & urban designer, urbaNplus <www.urbanplus.ch>

Switzerland is an urban landscape. It is not countryside and it is not city. It can in fact, be classified into 39 different types of landscapes as identified in a study by ARE. These landscapes and their variations are related to how we live, how we work, how we travel. Our lifestyles are translated, one to one, to what we perceive outside. Everything, every idea, every change in society is being translated into the landscape.

'The reality of urban development demonstrates that is not only the architects and urban designers alone but innumerable other actors who have an influence on the built environment through their decisions and actions.'

Raising questions about how things could be - questioning issues such as space/society/mobility - is a critical element in shaping the future. It is about discovering possibilities and transforming and translating these possibilities into the urban landscape.

In the 50 years between 1950 and the year 2000 the average population density of Switzerland increased from 153 people per km^2 to 231 people per km^2 with more areas of 1600 people per km^2. Decisions on how we incorporate further growth into the built environment could follow many rationale - place new settlement along the main highways, put new settlements at the borders, concentrate all development in one place, e.g. grow a Super Zurich, turn the whole country into one big city or find ways to ensure differentiation between different types of spaces so as not to end up with one homogeneous landscape. How we prioritise the needs of society will have a direct effect on Switzerland's future spatial landscape.

We can contribute to spatial culture with urban design. Urban design is a work of cultural extension transforming what is there into something new through a process of analysing permanency and dynamics in space. Permanency refers to the cultural landscape and its overlay of history and usage. Dynamics refers to the many players involved (architects, engineers, planners, local community etc.) and to non-intended effects.

'Spatial culture can be portrayed as something that is not created by architects and planners but by the respective local communities whose various interests are translated into the built urban environment and thus are superimposing on existing patterns.'

Intercultural understanding is neccessary not only across international borders but within national borders as well. For the urban Swiss, cowbells, 'schwingfests' and the 'alpabzeug' are pretty much as culturally foreign as Chinese society. Finding ways of merging the needs of the two very different 'realities' of urban and rural Swiss as they become more closely interlinked is the challenge for urban designers.

The current method of providing housing to a growing population is based on expansion into a finite space. This is clearly not a sustainable solution. To change the way we use land, we have to change the way we live, change our realities. What could we/ should we change about the our current model of living in order to change current patterns of unsustainable land use?

For example, what impact could information technology have on settlement patterns? What differences could it make to the way we live and work?

Sampling agrotourism in Switzerland with an overnight stay 'Sleeping in the Straw' at Bauernhof Bättwil

Balance of Wealth: Innovation in rural and alpine Switzerland
Mark Reinhard, The State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO

Regional policy in Switzerland started in the 1970's after the watch making crisis and difficulties in the textile industries in the north east saw disparities in regional development grow. Initially aimed toward equity through the provision of infrastructure, it was recognised that regional policy should promote structural change as well. Swiss regional policy is now aimed at equity and efficiency with a focus on innovation and knowledge.

The objectives and strategies of the Swiss regional policy are to promote the competitiveness of regions by promoting entrepreneurship and the capacity of innovation. Improving the competitiveness of regions creates employment and by doing that regional disparities can be reduced. Peripheral regions may never catch up with regions such as Geneva and Zurich which have such strong advantages but you can improve the level of economy in these areas.

There has been a change in the spatial focus of regional policy. Previously only the problem areas were dealt with but now the geographical application of regional policy includes all regions in Switzerland excluding the five metropolitan zones, the biggest cities. There is also an agglomeration policy in Switzerland which was implemented in 2001. There are thoughts to bring the regional and agglomeration policies together.

The first 4 year period of implementation closed at the end of 2011. It has been the first attempt to foster innovation at the regional level. In this period SECO supported slightly more than 1000 projects with 350 million francs. Keeping in mind that in a specific region you don't just have regional policy to foster the economy, several policies e.g. spatial planning, agriculture, come together in the same space, what will the return on this investment be?

Tour of Burgdorf: Implementing the theory
Yvonne Urwyler and Susanne Szentkuti, Projektleiterin Mobilität/Energie/Umwelt, Baudirektion Burgdorf <www.burgdorf.ch>

The various sites that were presented to us on the walking tour around Burgdorf demonstrated the city's approaches to absorbing it's projected population goals and its efforts to create a desirable, liveable urban experience: a proposed development of medium/high density apartment living around the train station includes a new building to be the permanent home for the 'Velostation', currently housed in a tent; redevelopment of the old Typon factory site into further medium/high density living options involved the decontamination of the site plus heritage issues; 'Begegnungszone', shared spaces for cars, bikes and pedestrians with a top speed of 20 km per hour have been successfully

implemented in a number of locations throughout the town; in Burgdorf's historic centre, planners face the challenge of keeping commerce and life in the area as people prefer to do their daily shopping in the new part of the city.

A proposal to demolish a cluster 1950's apartments blocks situated in a lost pocket of the city on the banks of the river Emme, included creating a new riverside precinct with park and river front promenade. Dealing with the Emme's tendency to flood her banks has been an extra challenge associated with realising the revitalisation of this zone. The neighbouring blocks of flats were built in the1960's and are in need of renovation. An integration programme is run by the city council to integrate the mainly migrant, low income families who live there into the cultural fabric of the wider community.

And so the list goes on... the tour helped seminar participants appreciate the complexity of issues town planners face in making decisions that balance the city's priorities.

An example of Spatial Planning being put into practice, a tour of Burgdorf with Yvonne Urwyler and Susanne Szentkuti, Baudirektion Burgdorf

Agriculture: An example of reform?
Thomas Maier, The Federal Office for Agriculture FOAG
<www.blw.admin.ch> & Regula Siegrist , Schweizerischer Bäuerinnen- und Landfrauenverband (SBLV) <www.landfrauen.ch>

Switzerland is a strong believer of *multifunctionality* in agriculture. The multifunctional tasks the agriculture sector is expected to carry out are set out in part 1 of Article 104 of the Federal Constitution. These functions are: ensuring food supplies for the population; maintaining the natural resources and preserving the countryside; maintaining a decentralised settlement pattern in rural areas.

There is a large consensus regarding the importance of the role agriculture is fulfilling for society and on the services that society wants agriculture to provide. Article 104 was voted on in June 1996 with 80% of Swiss people voting yes and all cantons agreeing to the article. Ten years later a representative study undertaken by the University of St. Gallen in 2007 asked the Swiss population what they expect from Swiss agriculture. The findings of this study showed that people's expectations of agriculture compare well with the legal framework.

Farming has changed quite a lot in the last decade. As their sector has been reformed some farmers have been innovative in finding ways to earn an income. They have become more entrepreneurial and have started to run businesses linked to the farm. In 44.5% of farms, diversification activities parallel to farm work are taking place. These activities include: the direct selling of agricultural foodstuffs, labour for other farms, renewable energy, tourism and gastronomy.

Agriculture is a strategically important sector of society that we are going to be increasingly dependant on in the future. Between 1990 and 2008 the number of farms fell by one third. Rapid expansion of settlement and urban areas into former agricultural areas decreases the amount of land suitable for farming. If the number of farms falls further and farmland continues to be built over what are we planning to be eating 30 years from now? What instruments are there for keeping farmers on the land and keeping new housing estates off it?

Presenters from left to right: Thomas Maier, FOAG, Regula Siegrist, SBLV, Martin Tschopp, ARE

Mobility& transport: Feeding the agglomerations
Dr. Martin Tschopp, Federal Office for Spatial Planning, ARE
<www.are.admin.ch>

The 'Blue Banana' refers to an area of urbanisation in Europe that covers one of the world's highest concentrations of people, money and industry. The area extends (in a kind of banana shape) from London, down the Rhine through to Milan. Switzerland sits entirely inside the 'Blue Banana' and is among the richest areas in Europe. Even though Switzerland has dispersed areas which are not so well connected and where the accessibility is lower, within the European context the nation is still in the very, very central area of the continent.

Approximately 6 million of the 8 million Swiss are densely settled in the Mittleland. This relatively small, densely populated area, makes it easy to run a public transport system. The rail road network is dense compared to similar countries. The road network is also rather dense even though construction of the motorway was started relatively late in the 1960's.

The impact of these two networks on accessibility can be demonstrated with the example of Scuol. In the year 2000, Scuol experienced a huge gain in accessibility by rail road because of improved infrastructure in the form of a new tunnel. At the same time, accessibility by road began shrinking because of lower average speeds. Average speeds on roads are declining due to the high usage of the system.

In turn, the transport system and the resulting levels of accessibility have an impact on population development and patterns of land use. One example of this is the way Switzerland's transport system is feeding the growth of the agglomerations. Agglomeration are steadily growing as people tend to move away from the core areas. They are able to do this because an efficient and reliable transport system allows them to travel the extra distances.

In the case of Zurich, statistics show that the highest amount of growth has always taken place at about 25 minutes from the city centre yet in distance measurements this growth has taken place at greater and greater distances from this central point. We can see that this growth and sprawl took place only because we have seen massive improvement of the road and rail road networks.

Declining accessibility by road (falling average speeds due to congestion) may prompt further calls for a change in the modal split urging people to move from individual forms of transport to public transport. However, the public transport system is currently running at maximum capacity at peak times. Assuming population growth will place further demands on both rail road and road networks causing greater decline in accessibility, how will Switzerland continue getting its workers to their places of work on time? (Just noticed 'Home Office Day' promoting non-location-specific working promoted on the SBB newsletter!)

Accessibility and centrality are important to maintaining a good economy. If regional policy, as presented by Mark Reinhard, SECO, is to be effective, is not the continued support of maintaining and improving transalpine routes is necessary?

As already came up in response to Stefan Kurath's presentation, what impact has access to information technology had on settlement patterns? What differences could it make to the way we live and work?

In conclusion...

In choosing this topic I think there was some danger of getting stuck on negatives but quite the opposite; all speakers carefully put forward positive messages about dealing with the challenges the country faces. '*No Hysteria*' but instead standing calmly in front of the grand challenges of our time.

What does the future hold? Perhaps a boom in roof-top framing? A workforce that mostly works from home? Successful businesses operating from hightech-hideaways in the Alps? New generations of Swiss growing up in built environments not yet conceived?

Of course these challenges and the questions surrounding them are not only relevant to Switzerland. During my next cross cultural encounter I will be interested to compare situations surrounding these topics. Questions on how and where people live and work, what they eat, will certainly have a deeper meaning.

And 'thanks'...

The Initiative for Intercultural Learning (IFIL), is a non-profit organisation. Its work is aimed at fostering dialogue between different cultures and providing an important contribution towards global understanding. IFIL achieves its goals by organising intercultural study trips. It's 2012 programme includes study trips to China, Gambia, Israel/Palestine, Japan, Bosnia plus other destinations.

However, the journey towards becoming a global citizen must begin with introspection and a greater understanding of one's own cultural contexts so this year IFIL has offered it first Swiss seminar as an opportunity for young Swiss people to add depth to their knowledge of the country and society they live in.

On behalf of IFIL, I would like to thank all who presented for their generous contribution to this process. ***I hope that this seminar is the starting point of a lasting learning process.***

Lucinda Tanner
IFIL Seminar Organiser
April 2012