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EDITED BY ROBERTO ROCCO AND DANIELE VILLA

NEW URBAN LANGUAGES

Tales and images of spatial justice

NUL

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Restructuring the Swiss city

Urban regeneration is not for everyone

Abstract

A return to density has been the focus of programs and policies of most of the European cities. Switzerland is no exception. A number of projects of urban restructuring in the centre of large metropolitan areas, small cities and even villages have thus emerged in recent years. Supported by an efficient railway network, the ongoing transformation of decommissioned railway-yards, former industrial sites and vacant lots appears a consistent policy addressed towards a more sustainable urbanization pattern. But who are the new dwellers of the city centres? As the first realizations have shown, only a small part of the population will benefit from this transformation increasing its "spatial capital". While only few administrations have more distinct public housing policies, the market is the major force driving the transformation producing new smooth layers of inequalities within the city. The paper, based on recent design experiences, suggests a different interpretation of the process of urban restructuring, focusing on the challenge of integrating resource redistribution in regeneration policies and into design tools.

Keywords : – Urban regeneration; redistribution policy; density; Switzerland

1. Introduction

Reconsidering the issue of density has been the focus of programs and policies of most of the European cities. Switzerland is no exception. In recent years a number of urban projects restructuring the centre of large metropolitan areas, small cities and even villages have emerged. Supported by an efficient railway and road network, the ongoing transformation of decommissioned railway-yards, former industrial sites and vacant lots, within the city cores, appears as a consistent policy addressing a more sustainable urban pattern.

This paper presents a reflection resulting from the author's involvement in a number of design experiences in the French-speaking part of Switzerland[1]. The search for higher density within the urban realm, and, on the other hand, the care for agricultural land preservation, have been crucial issues to understand how the Swiss city and territory reorganise themselves and the critical aspects of this restructuring.

2. Regeneration and redistribution.

Return to density lies upon two distinct and yet linked matters of concern about the urban environment.

In part emphasis is put on the excessive land consumption and on the request for a better balance between urbanized territory and agricultural land. This concern has pushed research towards higher-density settlement criteria in line with a "containment" policy of urbanized land contrasting the perceived negative impact of "sprawl"[2] . However, what does balance mean in respect to the urban form? What form of city is emerging by the will to protect the agricultural landscape and how is this articulating the relationships between different parts of the city?

Alternatively, higher density is foreseen as a cure to dull urban environments. Low-density, peripheral housing settlements are considered as the main responsible for the lack of a "vibrant" public space within the fabric of contemporary cities. Increasing intensity and "congestion", thus becomes a strategy to foster sociality and urbanity. Nevertheless, what is the specific contemporary public space, intensifying social life, and how is it articulating the city structure? Furthermore, who are the new dwellers benefiting from the increased density of city centres?

Whilst few are the administrations with specifically distinctive social housing policies, the market stands as the major force driving the transformation [Rérat and Lees, 2011], producing new smooth layers of inequalities within the city.

However, confronted with recent design experiences, I shall suggest it is possible to achieve a greater understanding of the aims of "building the city within the city". The hypothesis is that urban regeneration could be implemented alongside a general attention towards a new "redistribution policy". It is worth considering that opportunities for "redistribution" of resources are not just related to the social housing stock, nor do they target the housing market alone.

Urban regeneration changes the structure of the city: its infrastructures, public spaces, accessibility, quality of environment, and range of uses. All of these changes concur in modifying the quality of our daily existence in the city and can be recognised as tools to balance, or, conversely, to exacerbate, the distribution of resources pertaining access and citizenship.

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[1] Since 2010, together with Nicolò Privileggio, I have participated in a number of projects as co-author at first and as an urban planning consultant lately. Most of these projects have been developed in the context of invited planning studies.

[2] In Switzerland the policy of containment of new urbanized surfaces is addressed at a federal level through a sectorial Plan (Plan Sectoriel des Sufaces d'Assolement) which, since 1992, attributes to each State a certain minimal amount of valuable agricultural

Considering the city space as a common good we can suggest that the association between regeneration and redistribution is the main objective of planning intervention in the existing city. The target of redistribution policies expands from the original and still crucial domain of social housing to the structure of the city and its social qualities. In this context a wider territory is involved, including the peripheral neighbourhoods and the vast urban networks, stretching between the core cities.

Img. 1: *'Diffused centralities'- image from Privileggio-Secchi, 'Fribourg: une structure ouverte', invited planning study for the Agglomeration plan of Fribourg, 2010 – The foreseen process of densification, in the city of Fribourg, is valued as an opportunity to address the redistribution of resources between the city center and the peripheral neighbourhoods*

Hence, the discussion of regeneration inequalities can be a starting point to redefine the aims and tools of urban restructuring.

I shall suggest the hypothesis that regeneration strategies aiming to develop a more densely built environment are concurrently producing three different layers of inequality in the uses of territory on different scales.

The role of the market in these pervasive strategies is the first feature of concern. Eager to gain more affluent taxpayers, local administrations are approving or encouraging an urban regeneration process, driven by the market, which targets the upper-middle class. As the first realizations have shown, only a small part of the population will directly profit from this transformation, increasing its "spatial capital". [Rérat and Lees, 2011]

Secondly, urban regeneration in the city cores frequently involves open spaces (agricultural leftovers, or obsolete sports fields), which are plunged into the urban fab-

ric. Filling up these spaces, to provide more built mass, frequently means depriving the city of an asset, which cannot be recreated. However the relevance of those under-used, but usually well cared spaces, is even more important for they are part of the open space fabric and ecological network of the city. Their role, in the overall form of the city cannot be disregarded and should be considered carefully.

Finally, on a regional scale, a concentration policy is driving attention, and investments in the city cores and, contrastingly, in the agricultural landscape. This thus takes place at the expense of the network of urbanized territory, which cover a large part of urban Swiss and whose regeneration and improvement potential, in terms of regional sustainability, can remain hidden.

3. A market driven development.

The promise of a lively environment and the possibility of an enlarged mobility pattern, strongly supported by a well-connected railway system, attract new dwellers in the city cores of middle-size Swiss cities. The market produces major interventions of regeneration, frequently located on former railway-yards, or in the proximity of train stations[3] .

Adhering to the sustainability issue of moving an increasing part of individual mobility to the public transport, regeneration efforts re-propose a strong polarization between centre and periphery within the single city, whilst re-proposing a physical model of urbanity rooted in XIX century city. Although the stated goal is the intensification of urban life, the actual public space included in most of these interventions, reproduces models of social interaction taken from the past, never really questioning the current demand for public space.

Moreover, the increase in built volume within the city core does not necessarily lead to an increase in the number of inhabitants bringing new life to the city centre. The reduction in the dimension of households, concurrently determines an increase in the occupation of rooms per capita. Larger dwellings now accommodate a number of households, which is still decreasing, though less quickly than decades ago. It is maybe early to talk about a return to the city, however, it is clear that the structure of the population is changing, producing a "new-built gentrification" [Reart, et al. 2009]

Prioritizing the strategy of "building the city within the city", should imply a general concern for gentrification processes taking place in the regenerated neighbourhoods. However, only a few municipal or state administrations in Switzerland, as for instance Geneve and the Vaud State, have coupled regeneration policies with particular attention to renovating the social housing stock [Tranda-Pitton, 2009, p.277] so to guarantee a persistent social mix of population in restructured neighborhoods, while producing access for new dwellers.

In the City State of Geneve, diverse, current demolition interventions and reconstruction of obsolete social housing aim at increasing the number of households in restructured neighbourhoods[4] . Concurrently, some of the "grands projects" of the recently approved State Plan[5] (as the PAV sector) prescribe a consistent percentage of dwelling of public utility and/or at the controlled price on the rental market[6]. The housing market has always been tense, with less than 0, 5% of dwellings vacant. However, clear analysis of the demand structure has never been truly taken into consideration, making it difficult for the less advantaged to find a convenient accommodation

[3] Recent examples can be found in larger cities like Lausanne or Geneve, in small and middle-size cities like Neuchatel, Fribourg, Bulle or Sion, but also in villages like Chatel Saint Denis.

[4] They are usually promoted by social housing cooperatives taking the opportunity for a necessary renovation of dysfunctional buildings to increase the number of households.

[5] Plan directeur cantonal Genève 2030 | Adopté par le Grand Conseil le 20 septembre 2013

Nonetheless, in this case the strategy of regenerating the city, considered as one major opportunity to host an ever increasing population, highlights the issue of access to the housing market. It is clear that, while policies addressing social housing improvement are not the only way to consider the issue of "redistribution", they are a necessary starting point.

4. Filling the gaps: eroding common grounds.

A second layer of inequality relates to the form which urban restructuring assumes within the city cores and in peripheral neighborhoods.

While regeneration opportunities are usually given by built spaces, as decommissioned railway-yards, or dismissed industrial sites, they frequently include also a range of under-used open spaces, like agricultural plots or obsolete sport facilities.

In the city of Bielle, for instance, the recent competition for the Gurzelen site[7] aims for the transformation of an obsolete open-air sport facility into a housing settlement with different services, such as schools and playgrounds. The regeneration program affects the overall spatial structure of the existing neighborhood, enhancing its public space. However, undeniably, the sport facility will be relocated to a more peripheral position. The neighborhood, thus, loses an asset, which is a common good never to be recovered. The opportunity to dispose of a single plot must be examined in its specific context, nonetheless the possible cumulative effect of such urban design experiments is of great interest.

In the planning study for the Agglomeration of Fribourg[8] , we were confronted with this same issue, at the overall scale of the city.

The agglomeration of Fribourg is rich in open spaces, which are at an intermediate scale, between the small private garden of the single-family houses, and the open landscape of stunning quality. They are mainly, well-cared, agricultural plots waiting for the city to grow. Most of them have already been legalized as future building sites, and diverse transformation projects, foresee to fill these gaps following a model of compact form, which never really existed before.

Nonetheless, it is not difficult to perceive how the quality of the city is strongly related to the presence of this vast range of open spaces, acting concurrently as buffers and connections. They are buffers as they keep the former villages or planned neighborhoods at a distance, reinforcing a local sense of identity, yet they provide connections linking the diverse parts to the larger landscape.

Our proposal considers those leftover as more structured "greens", meant as catalysts for change. "Greens" produce a pattern of "diffused centralities", polarizing and enhancing the existing relations between "spots" of sociability (the nursery, post office, church, or snack bar), while new urban mass is organized around them.

The "green" thus becomes a recognizable reference point in the neighborhood, well connected with the overall structure of the city: through public transport (railway

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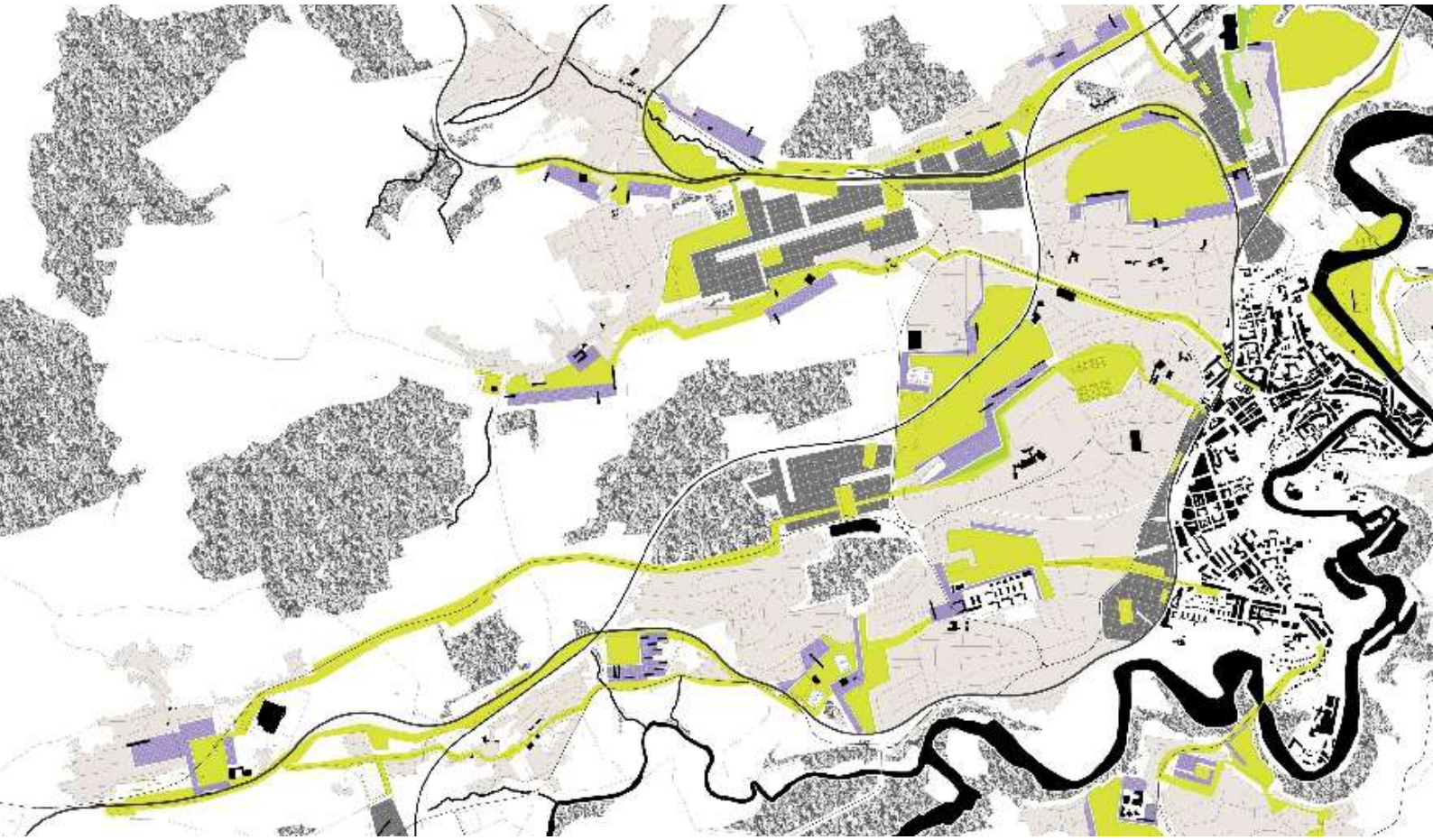
[6] The new State development plan (Plan directeur cantonal) of Geneve foresees an increase of 100.000 inhabitants, or 50.000 households, and surfaces for 60.000 workplaces (Republique et Canton de Geneve, 2013).

[7] Concours d'urbanisme en mandats d'études parallèles Gurzelen, 2014

[8] Mandats d'études parallèles pour le Projet d'agglomération de Fribourg, 2010

and buses), soft mobility and the landscape structure. The strategy of regeneration is aimed at the improvement of urban space on a local scale while enhancing the possibility of access and connection to the extent of the city. Peripheral neighborhoods can profit of an increased "critical mass" to enhance their public space and service activities.

However, they can see their peripheral character strongly reduced, through a more decisive belonging to the overall structure of the city. Regeneration and redistribution, thus target the accessibility of urban spaces, and the quality of urban form, as it strongly affects the possibility to weave a new set of social relationships within the fabric of the city.



Img. 2: *"Fribourg: an open structure focused on the intermediate scale", image from: Privileggio-Secchi – 'Fribourg: une structure ouverte', invited planning study for the Agglomeration plan of Fribourg, 2010 – The densification project clarifies and enhances the open space structure.*

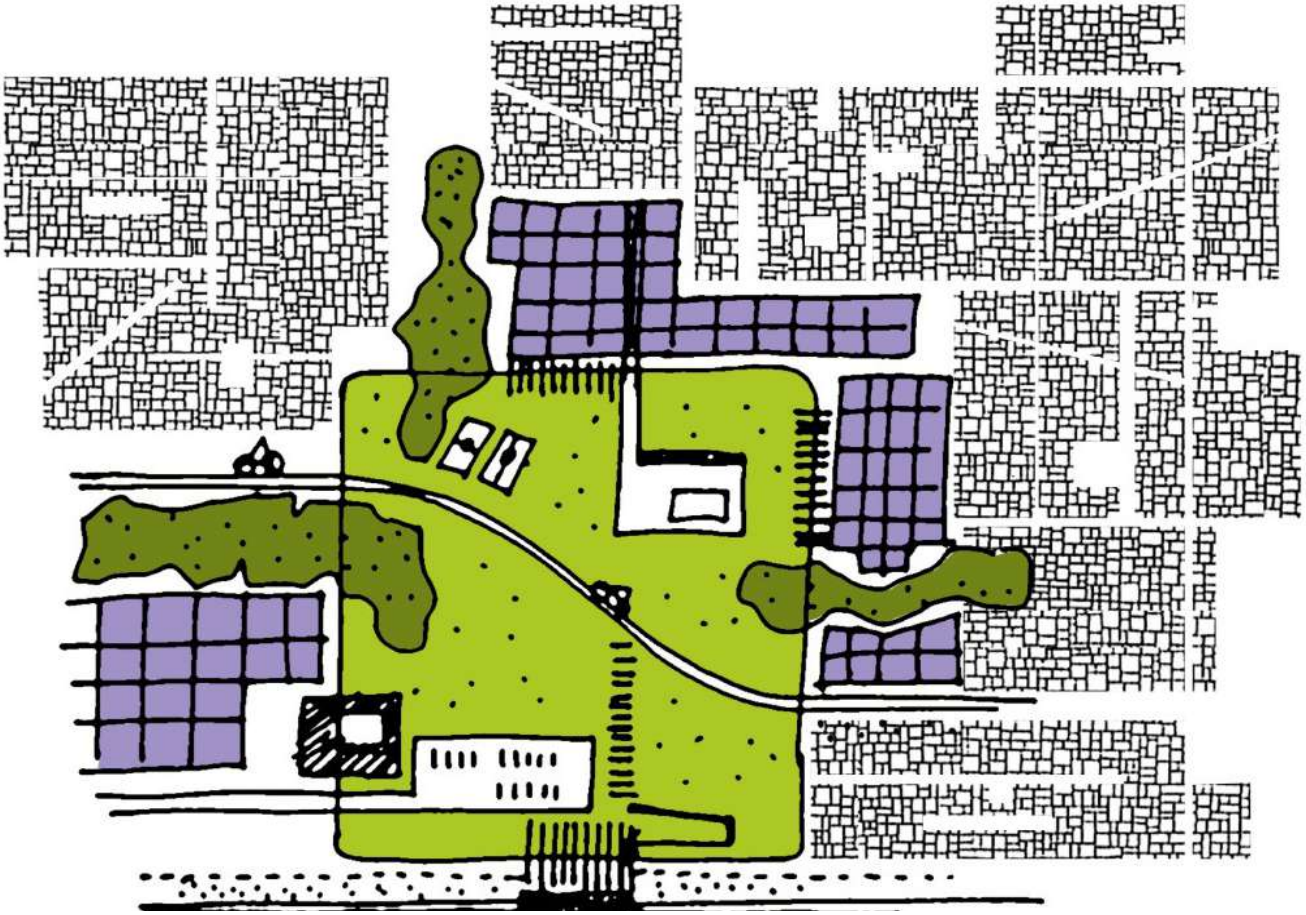
Public open space is, in this context, a relevant tool to trigger new uses of urban space. However the demand for public space is still a potential field of investigation, confronting the range of activities which enhance everyday experience: walking, cycling, but also taking care of the land, while taking care for oneself. In this respect we can notice that some activities, which once were coincident with suburb individualism, as gardening, for instance, are shifting towards a more collective participation in the care of urban land.

The aim of increasing density whilst enhancing "sociability", thus, puts the quality of urban space at the center of the planning agenda. We can consider how this target has been recently the object of investigations which pertain to the implementation of regulatory tools, as well as design interventions.

In the Geneve State Plan (Republique et Canton de Geneve, 2013), the target of 100.000

new inhabitants is reached through an articulated set of strategies to increase density. These include the transformation of the first "crown" villages, such as Carouge, and the spot-like density increase in low-density suburbs.

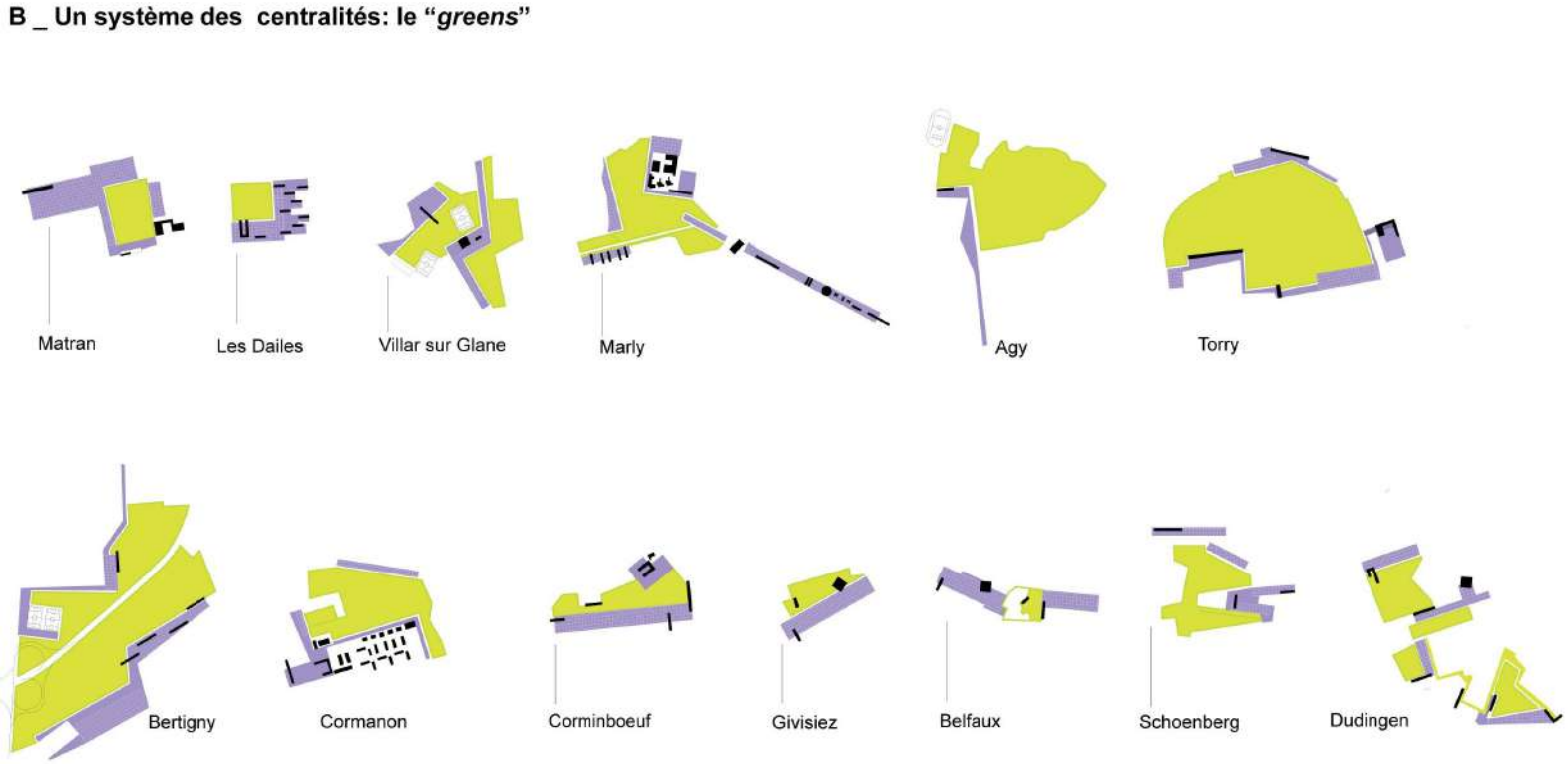
Coherently the plan stresses the relevance of urban form. As a new regulatory tool the "index of density of land use" was recently introduced, to enable the comparison between urban design alternatives. The main effect of this index seems to be the emphasis it places upon the balance between built volume and open space. It further establishes a distinction between different kinds of open spaces (private gardens,



Img. 3: *'The "green" as a tool for densification interacting with the existing neighbourhood'- image from: Privileggio-Secchi – 'Fribourg: une structure ouverte', invited planning study for the Agglomeration plan of Fribourg, 2010.*

collective spaces, or sanitary green bands). They have different effects on the index calculation, while they also differ in the way they affect the social quality of urban environment[9] . Obviously enough the index is not a guarantee for the production of a just and good city form, but it is representative of an effort to control the "quality" of the urban form, where quality is meant as the performance of the urban space in respect to its uses, permeability and ecological connection. However, it is important to notice that the production of urban space and city form is still, at large, responsibility of the project, which cannot avoid considering the performance of urban space as a priority.

[9] For instance a small park, which can be used by all citizens will be extrapolated by the calculation of the overall index of density helping urban designer to reach the requested density goal. The same land, used as private garden, will sum up differently and, despite the same built mass, could prevent the project to reach the requested density.



Img. 4: *'The "greens" as a system: an implementation strategy'- image from: Privileggio-Secchi – 'Fribourg: une structure ouverte', invited planning study for the Agglomeration plan of Fribourg, 2010 – The single "green" is able to configure a densification operation, concluded in itself, reducing the interdependencies and allowing for a fine-grain "balancing" (of programs and resources) within the overall implementation strategy.*

5. Density and the regional scale

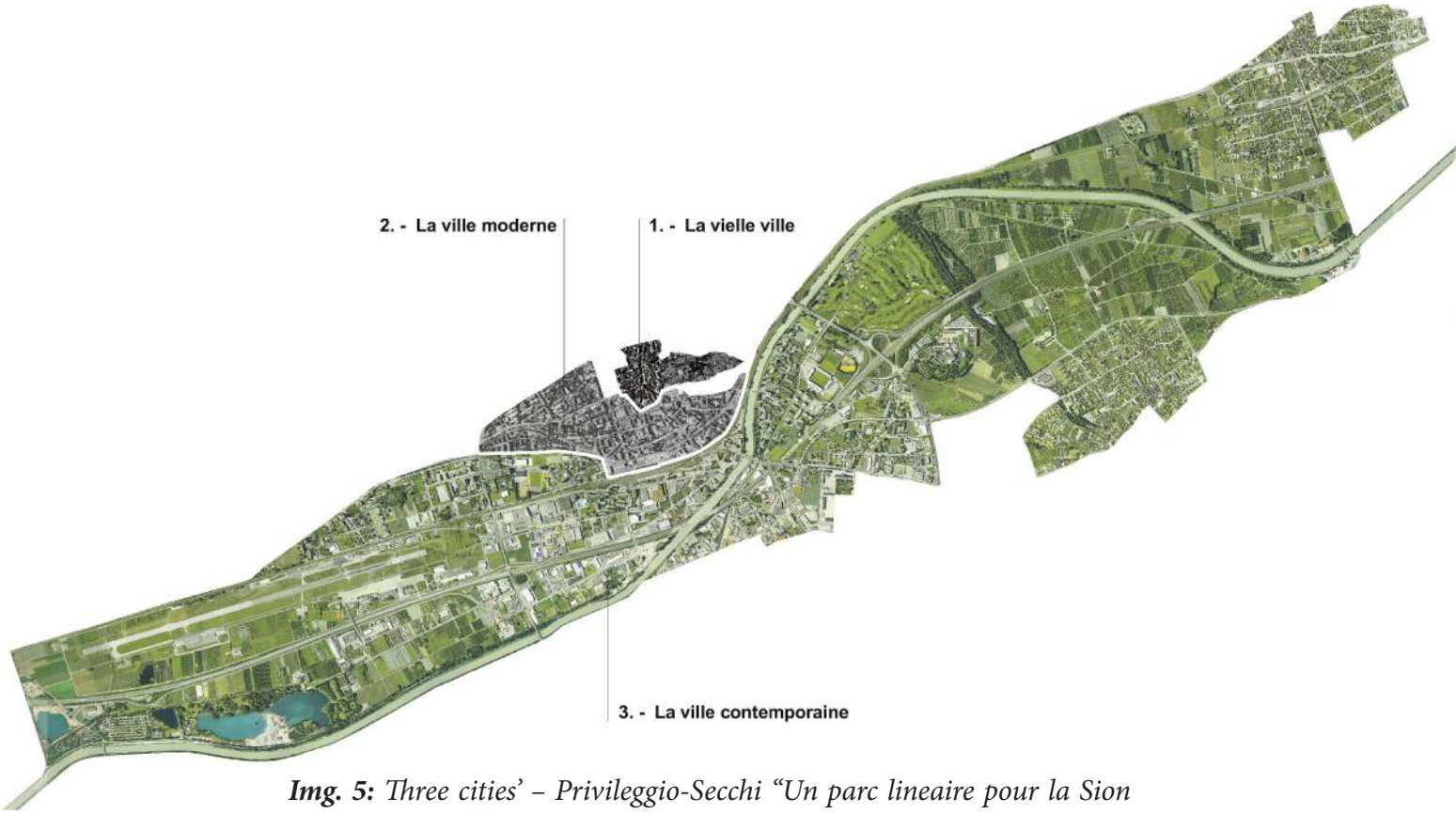
"Land in Switzerland is, by now, a limited asset", this simple and peremptory assertion can be found at the beginning of the Swiss Territorial Project [Consiglio Federale Svizzero et al. 2012, p 4.].

The concern for the scarcity of agricultural land and the need to protect it against the extension of urbanized territory is well rooted in Switzerland, and is part of the anti-urban ideology which characterizes the Swiss planning theory since its very beginning in the '30.[Salomon Cavin, 2005; Marchand, Salomon Cavin 2007]

Swiss agricultural land has been strongly subsidized during the last century and the countryside appears now as a well-cared "garden" at the very center of Europe. However, it is not always apparent how the investments on agriculture production and landscape preservation are related to a certain ideological disregard towards the urban environment and its social and spatial character. [Salomon Cavin, 2005, p.64-65]

The third layer of inequality pertains to the regional effects of regeneration strategies.

The main objective of the Swiss territorial Project is to develop a poly-centric region concentrating the urbanization process within the major city centers, meanwhile preserving large portions of agricultural land. [Consiglio Federale Svizzero et al. 2012, Map 1, p 38-39]. The suburban settlements are to be delimited and improved increasing their density, while the complex network of the urbanized territory becomes the object of a strategy of landscape preservation which should protect these regions from the



Img. 5: *Three cities' – Privileggio-Secchi "Un parc lineaire pour la Sion Contemporaine", invited planning study "MEP Traversée du Rhone en Ville e Sion"- The contemporary city which is already part of the valley is the focus of a planning study addressing the role of the river transformation in the city restructuring.*

pressure of urbanization.[Consiglio Federale Svizzero et al. 2012, Map 2, p 46-47).

On a regional scale, the emphasis and priority given to the regeneration process in the city cores, seems to leave in the background an already existing urban territory, which connects the main metropolitan areas without being integrated.

Nonetheless, the urban character of these regions, as the Valais region, the edge of the Lac Leman or even the network of small cities in the Plateau Swiss seems to be strategic for the whole nation. Similarly to other regions in Europe, they are not metropolitan areas but neither are they rural. They represent a possible ground where to observe the new form, which the city is achieving, and they thus offer the possibility to discuss the value of urban space, its fairness and accessibility. In the larger picture, landscape preservation can also be seen as part of the urbanization process, producing a completely new set of design tools and space for social interaction.

6. Urban regeneration and redistribution policies

As a sort of conclusion I would like to recall the main hypotheses I discussed and the issues they expose confronting with urban regeneration. As the current interventions show, the restructuring of urban space, aimed at increasing city density and intensifying urban life, in the Swiss cities, is possibly hiding different layers of inequalities,

Img. 6: *'The river at the center' – Privileggio-Secchi "Un parc lineaire pour la Sion Contemporaine", invited planning study "MEP Traversée du Rhone en Ville e Sion"- A new public space, a linear park along the river, is the main element able to structure the future regeneration of the already existing urbanization in the valley.*

which deploy their effects on different levels. Though these inequalities are maybe not so extreme as to raise visible conflicts or unrest, within the urban realm. Nonetheless, it is important to analyse the way regeneration can change the quality of urban space. Indeed it leads to the development of design tools able to foster policies of resources redistribution and oppose the social sorting component of urban restructuring.

I have suggested that urban regeneration can be coupled with a redistribution policy and moreover that the project of the public space should be at the centre of this policy with greater attention to the destiny of social housing within the city fabric. A reflection on the form of the city, its overall structure, permeability, connection and accessibility of the diverse parts are consistent tools to address the quality of our daily existence in the city. Hence these factors can account for the suitability of a regeneration project.

A last remark pertains to the territories of regeneration. While most of the current attention is on the regeneration of the core cities, the vast network of urbanized land, which is linking the major metropolitan areas, is at the margin of the debate. Nonetheless in these networks of small cities and villages along the main valleys of the Swiss territory urban space is changing and the urban character of the next city is being produced.

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