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From an economical use of land to land use management strategies, tasks and challenges in Switzerland

Bernd Scholl

Since the city walls were demolished over 150 years ago, the history of European spatial development has been characterised by the increase in land given over to settlements. It is therefore no surprise that the beginnings of modern spatial planning coincided with the emergence of conflicts and negative consequences of the uncoordinated development of settlement areas and the infrastructure associated with urban expansion. In many countries, including Switzerland, legislation reflects a strong concern for the controlled development of settlement areas. In the past, such regulation was largely limited to the organisation of the increase in settlement areas in the context of conflicts of interest. The usual way of dealing with such spatial planning tasks and conflicts was typically to draw on (more) land resources. This rate of development simply cannot continue, a conclusion also shared by Swiss experts, as no community or polity has unlimited land resources at its disposal.

For Switzerland, therefore, restriction of the settlement area is also a strategic aim of the first order. In a small country with very limited land resources, just under 30% of the total land surface area of 41 000 km² is suitable for settlement - an economical approach to this non-renewable resource is of central importance. Nevertheless, one square metre per second is claimed for settlement (8.6 hectares per day). This figure corresponds more or less to the current German consumption of 106 hectares per day. Statistics show that in Switzerland in

the mid-nineties approximately 400 m² of settlement land were used per person, whereas at the end of the 1980s, the figure stood at just under 380 m². And, as in many other countries, the overall increase in settled areas was no longer directly related to population growth, but mainly driven by higher per capita consumption. The Swiss residential gross floor space of over 50 m² per inhabitant tops the European ranking. The issue of restricting settlement areas is therefore not a question of if, but of how, which means that the postulate of an economical approach to land use must be implemented in the form of comprehensive land use management. Of course, this challenging task needs to be evaluated in the light of future requirements in addition to the present strategy for spatial development.

In 2006, the Federal office for spatial development commissioned a group of international experts to report on the state of spatial planning and development in Switzerland. The report, published in 2007, states that Switzerland, "after a half-century of growth is facing a change of substantial significance: The population is barely growing, in many places, it is stagnating or declining - and aging intensively as well. The economy is changing and has long been moving from an industrial society to a knowledge and research-based society. Agriculture is also changing. The climate change is producing some significant impacts. Sprawl, along with its consequences, is neither economically nor ecologically sensible and narrows the possibilities for action of coming generations. The uneven spatial distribution resulting from the slight increases, stagnation or decline of the population and the

increasing percentage of elderly people has led to a shift in demand. The settlements are essentially already built. Growth is so insignificant that cities can hardly be changed structurally anymore. Demands on space are changing. Hence, most of the development must be realised through the transformation of existing areas. This will lead to challenging tasks if we want to further develop our cities and regions". It will be important to maintain the manageable size and individual appearance of the agglomerations. Bringing the agglomerations into line through overdevelopment threatens the diversity of a manageable area, which is an important value, and through this an important location advantage of the country would get lost in international competition.

Strategic re-development before new development and the Swiss City Network

In Switzerland, the main spatial strategy is to work towards gaining general acceptance for the precedence of re-development over new development. In combination with the Swiss City Network, considerable reserves for settlement have been made available in regions already well served by a highly efficient public transport system. The linking-up of these areas to the comparatively small and medium-sized towns of Switzerland, creates competitive function areas, which are in turn extremely well connected by frequent, high-capacity public transport services. This double strategy of local-oriented settlement development and integration aims to avoid excessive concentration in a few large centres as well as the depopulation of peripheral regions, which would have significant negative consequences and erode

the federal structure of the state.

In the 1990s, the larger cities (Zurich, Bern, Basel and Geneva, to name a few) have been in the process of successfully implementing the strategy outlined above by using their local spatial reserves. At the same time, the public transport system is also being expanded. But uneven spatial distribution with low average population densities would run counter to the efficient and economic operation of this system.

These efforts will not be enough, however, to gain nationwide acceptance of the strategy of re-development. Success will depend on bringing on board the vast majority of smaller and medium-sized municipalities and gaining their commitment, for in all probability it is on this level that large reserves for re-development are to be found. Admittedly, there is some concern about the four to five hundred thousand existing buildings that are situated outside a building zone.

Regional land use management. The Space+Initiative

In Switzerland at this time there are around 220.000 hectares designated as building zones and 6.8 million people (93% of the population) live within these zoned areas. According to information from the Federal office for spatial development, 27% or 60,000 hectares of the total have not yet been used. Of these reserves, about half are ready for building. In addition, it is assumed that conversions in the built-up areas will open up considerable reserves. In order to be able to ascertain the actual reserves available for potential re-development, as a prerequisite for regional management, the Canton of Basel Land participated in a special cooperative plan on

regional land use management from 2006 to 2008. This plan was initiated by Eth. All 86 communities in the Canton of Basel land and well over 400 in Germany took part in the survey. A total of about 4.450 areas covering about 51.000 hectares were surveyed. Of this total, 750 hectares are in the 86 communities of the Canton of Basel land.

The results will be published at the end of 2008. Certain tendencies for the Canton of Basel land are already foreseeable. Comparing the Space+ survey to the legally required spatial information, shows that about double the number of potential areas could be determined. It must be noted that the legally required spatial information does not include under-used, incorrectly used, or re-usable areas. The evaluation shows, in addition, that a major portion of the increased potential revealed by the Space+survey comes from the easily accessible public transport sites.

To generalise the results from the Canton of Basel land, the following first conclusions are presented:

- 1) There is much more surface area potential for re-development in Switzerland than has been assumed until now. Re-development should be focussed on the easily accessible sites made available from the public transport sector.
- 2) Communities need to develop re-development strategies and these must take all the potential areas for re-development and their connection to public transport into consideration.
- 3) Communities must work out the balance of land use as an essential foundation for a re-development strategy and the subsequent zoning plan revisions.
- 4) Whenever possible and meaningful, cooperative action across the community, cantonal and federal levels should be

promoted.

5) A 'balance sheet' on land use (similar to that used in public financing) should be made available to the governments on the community, cantonal and federal levels on a regular basis. This should make land use easily apparent. Naturally, in cases of uncertainty, all short-, middle- and long-term offers and demands must be compared.

The experience with the survey in Baden-Württemberg and Basel land allows the calculation of the following estimate, considering only the reserves in the area: from 10 m² up to 20 m² per person. This corresponds to 7.5 million residents to ca. 7.500 to 15.000 ha reserves in sites made available from the public transport sector. This makes it possible to consider the idea that the potential for re-development through social and economic change can grow even further. That alone makes the forward projection gained from this overview significant to promote and improve the (re)development of existing urban areas. Moreover, additional financial tools are necessary to improve the profitability of brownfield (re)development. With respect to the latter, both national subsidies and fiscal interventions can be considered.