Aesthetics and Spatial Practices. Some Examples from Switzerland

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The main assumption underlying this article is that aesthetic categories and spatial practices are intrinsically connected. I argue that aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment assume an importance for their high potential to activate the agency of urban actors. Any study of the evolution of urban space in Switzerland should account for the high importance assigned by different urban actors to aesthetic questions. As "small" actors engage in a production of their "aesthetics of existence" (term coined by Foucault 1977), their actions play the fundamental role in the structuring of urban space. The aesthetic sensibilities in Switzerland have been developing in the particular spatial, social and historical conditions with the city image in a pivotal role.

The Success of a Single-Family House

According to the Swiss Federal Statistics Office, nearly 20 per cent of Swiss residents today live neither in a rural area, nor in a city, but rather, in an agglomeration with mostly detached houses. This low-density urban type occupies more land surface than central communes, which accommodate almost 60% of the Swiss population (Kohler and Goebel 2014). It is important to understand what attracts residents to the low-density environment, even at the expense of long daily car-travel for work, shopping or school. A 2003 study on Swiss spatial practices showed that there has been a cultural and political polarization between the residents of suburban

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or peri-urban agglomerations and the residents of larger centres—and especially of the inner cities (Hermann and Leuthold 2003). This polarisation does not coincide with socioeconomic boundaries but reflects opposed lifestyles, which differ in the way everyday life is organised and practiced. The two lifestyles, one practiced in the dense and diverse city and the other in areas with a lower degree of urbanity,[1] cannot be understood solely on their own terms. One is always defined in relation to its rejected opposite.

Although the idea of a decentralised urban space has been widely accepted in Switzerland from the beginning of the 20th century, the phenomenon of the single-family house has had unprecedented success, particularly from the early 1970s. Studies performed in Switzerland from 1970 to 1980 indicate that among the first reasons for moving to the periphery of the city were urban nuisances and a wish to live in the country (Longchamp 1989). It seems that, on the one hand, there are dominant aesthetic sensibilities towards the vegetal, towards rural pic-turesqueness or natural scenes in general, and towards dense and compact cities on the other. By 1981, the single-family house occupied 42% in the sum of total housing production and in only ten years the number of the single-family houses increased by 32% (Garnier 1985, p. 77). Occupation, income and education do not seem to show a significant importance for moving to the peri-urban zone. A 2015 study, based on the information of the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), showed that two elements distinguish the peri-urban dwellers from non peri-urban dwellers: family formation and full-time employment (Van Den Hende 2015, p. 274). In other words, a search for stability and 'rooting' is the centre of preoccupation of the peri-urban population. The single-family house represents the aesthetic ideal in which every peri-urban resident sees instantaneously two opposed worlds together: stability, simplicity and domesticity of the rural house on one side, and all the advantages of the modern urban civilisation, on another.

Any study of the evolution of the urban space should account for the high importance assigned by different urban actors to aesthetic questions. The aesthetic sensibilities in Switzerland have been developing in the particular spatial, social and historical conditions in which the image of the city played a pivotal role.

The Beginnings of Spatial Planning in Switzerland

Before 1900, the urbanism of Paris and Vienna had an important influence on the way Swiss cities were imagined. Several cities, in the modest terms, made plans for expansion inspired by the two famous examples, particularly that of Paris, for example, the plan Dufour for Geneva (1854), the extension of Basel (1850s),

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[1]If we define urbanity as a combination of functional and sociological diversity and multidimensional density (built environment, flows, people, ideas), the compact city represents the highest gradient of urbanity (Lévy 1999).

the Ringstrasse in Zurich or Pichard's circle with the Grand Pont in Lausanne (1836) (Walter 1994, p. 394). At the beginning of twentieth century there was a turning point in this practice—a rediscovery of the old picturesque town. As Romanticism was a rejection of neo-classical ideals, which directly influenced the creation of the Alpine myth,[2] the revalorisation of an old picturesque town at the end of 19th century was likewise a reaction to the effects of modernity. The theoretical recognition of this particular sensibility came from Camillo Sitte, Viennese architect, who published in 1889 a very influential book "City Planning According to Artistic Principles", which was translated in French in 1902 (1986). The glorification of gracious curved lines, closed public spaces and aesthetic historicism was turned against the regulatory spatial practices of which the Haussmann's Paris was a symbol. And this evolved in an unusual direction. The book, far from being anti-urban itself, inspired many anti-urban tendencies. The Historicism promoted by Sitte proved to be particularly relevant in the creation of the picturesque ideal. The book was a reaction to "the shock of the new"—to use an expression of the famous art critic Robert Hughes. Sitte promoted stability over change, a sentiment of a fundamental importance in understanding spatial and social processes which came with Modenity. The sentiment of 'the paradise lost', which is often associated with Modernity, is in fact a reaction to the disintegration of the stylistic uniformity of the pre-modern time. In this sense we must look at the persistence of suburban and the appeal of the picturesque ideal. The traditional picturesque town symbolizes the lost 'organicity', while the suburban ideal represents a unity-regained.

The image of a modern metropolis was first of all dismissed for threatening established collective values and national identity. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a movement in Switzerland, initiated from the private sphere, to promote the protection of historical heritage and preservation of the landscapes. In 1900, Marguerite Burnat-Provins, Swiss painter and poet, founded *Ligue pour la beauté,* which inspired other patriotic organizations such as *Ligue pour la conservation de la Suisse pittoresque (Heimatschutz)* (1905), *Ligue pour la protection de la nature* (1909), and the Alpine museum (1905).

Consequently it was a celebration of traditional aesthetics, as a symbol of unchangeable identity, which rapidly became an instrument for a critique of a changing urban society – seen as responsible for "the crisis of identity" and "degeneration" of a country (Le Dinh 1992). Many artists and authors supported this new anti-modern ideology—among others Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, Charles Melley, George de Montenach, and Guillaume Fatio. In the book "*Ouvrons les*

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[2]The cultural construction of the Alps emerged with writings of Romantics who "celebrated wild landscapes, (…) empty deserts, impenetrable forests, frozen ice wastes and, in particular, rugged mountains. (…) Orderliness and regularity were out; untamed wildness was in" (Beattie 2006, p. 125). Before the 18th century, the Alps were perceived as an inhospitable land and aesthetically dismissed (Senici 2005 p. 23). Under the influence of Romantic literature, firstly from England and then from Switzerland, there's been a shift in a perception of the Alps. The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a particularly profound influence on Western attitudes towards the countryside and mountain landscapes.

yeux! Voyage esthétique à travers la Suisse" (1904), Fatio calls for an action against "*la laideur et la banalité de toutes le bâtisses modernes*". Fatio's book summarises the rising aesthetic sensibility towards rural picturesqueness utilized in the construction of a new architectural and urban paradigm which rejected new architectural models. This ideology was formally articulated in 1896 during the National Exposition in Geneva. For this purpose, a village was built on a surface of 23,191 square meters to be inhabited by 353 villagers. For Bernard Crettaz this 1:1 model of the Swiss village was used as a catalyser of numerous symbolic elements, with the aim of presenting the nation as a coherent entity (1987). The village was a pure construction, yet it provided an architectural archetype to be diffused all over the country (Cavin 2005, p. 58). The city, or more precisely the big city, had no importance in this construction. It is because the city lacked the stylistic uniformity on which such an identity could have been constructed. This had a strong impact on the politics regarding spatial planning practices (Walter 1994, 1985).

Switzerland's urban planners did indeed embrace the modernist aspiration for the functionally devised environment, but they have put it in a backdrop of a picturesque conception of nature. The idea to create an institution on the federal level, which would regulate spatial practices in Switzerland, came from the politico-cultural movement of the group of elite citizens in the 1930s. A private initiative from The Federation of Swiss Architects (FSA) in collaboration with The Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA), led to the creation of the *Commission Suisse pour l'aménagement du territoire* in 1937—to become *L'association Suisse pour le plan d'amenagement national* (ASPAN) in 1943. Armin Meili, a Zurich architect, was a central figure in this movement. As director of the National Exposition in 1939 and later director of the ASPAN, he had a major influence on spatial planning in Switzerland. In a speech from 1942, he rejects the dynamic growth of dense industrializing Swiss cities, which he describes as the Babel towers constructed in stone, iron and concrete (Meili 1942).

Meili's discourse underlines some very important ideas regarding the way the urban environment would be imagined by professionals during the following decades. "Nearly all the regional proposals from that period (after WWII) suggested an *orderly* reduction of the concentration of urban development and encouraging decentralized, regional centres intended to reduce the pressures of development in the large cities. (…) The notion that there was something 'un-Swiss' about a large city (…) became the dominant axiom of Helvetian planning" (Diener et al. 2005, p. 186). The two parallel processes thus have characterised Swiss urban practices: preservation of the traditional compact towns constructed before the twentieth century and preference for a low-density dispersed urban tissue. The aesthetic and ethical ideals for Meili's urbanism were highly influenced by the English Garden-City. From the beginning of the twentieth century it seems that there was a consensus on this question among different urban actors in Switzerland. As Francois Walter noticed, this model found favour with utopians and progressivists, but also with the socialists and right-wing liberals. It united the hygienists, urbanists and local authorities and had a very important influence between 1910 and 1930 (Walter 1994, p. 412). The Garden-City paradigm in a strange way united two

ideals: nineteenth century utopians' dream of the auto-sustainable community and the aspirations of the English bourgeoisie for a residence in the natural environment away from the city. In the centre of this idea was again a paradoxical sentiment of both nostalgia for the pre-industrial age and desire for growth and progress.

Conclusion

Aesthetic judgments concerning the inhabited environment are directly connected to the questions of transformation of both values and built environment. Aesthetic judgments are unactualised societal choices. A positive aesthetic judgment is made when the object in consideration 'reflects' one's way of thinking, when one finds him- or herself 'reflected' in it. Any aesthetic experience requires sort of active participation of the observer, because it is one's imaginative attention that enables one to see a certain object in one or another way. Scruton argues that pleasure is not so much an effect of its object, as a mode of understanding it. One's experience of a building or a city may change as their conception of its changes. And as their experience changes, so does their taste. For Scruton, "changes in taste are thus continuous with, and indeed inseparable from, changes in one's whole outlook on the world, and that taste is as much a part of one's rational nature as are scientific judgements, social conventions and moral ideals" (1979, p. 106).

The city, as it concentrates a diversity of urban actors on a dense territory, generates change through the intensity of interactions. The cityscape and streetscape of the modern city is constantly changing, and this stands for the change of society's values too. The heterogeneity of the urban and architectural styles thus reflects the complexity of the urban space and social interactions. The point is that pleasurable aesthetic appreciation of the modern city depends on the acceptance of this plurality. The city is other than the sum of its parts, and consequently its beauty (as an emergent phenomenon of the city as a complex urban system) cannot be resumed to the sum of aesthetic appreciations of its separate parts.

The European Environmental Agency suggests that where unplanned, decentralised development dominates, sprawl will occur in a mechanistic way (Uhel 2006). This might be true but firstly it presupposes the inhabitants' desire to live in such an environment and this desire remains far from being a universally shared value. My intention was not to discuss advantages of one or another urban reality but rather to highlight the major role of 'small' actors in the process of structuration of urban space in which the aesthetic dimension plays a fundamental role. If the aesthetic experience and judgment assume such an importance, it is due to their potential to activate the agency of urban actors and orientate morally-informed actions concerning the inhabited environment. Inadequately accounting for this fact may come with a high cost.

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