Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad

Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad

Band: 24 (1997)

Heft: 5

Artikel: Our urban centres have lost substance : Switzerland needs strong towns

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906495

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Our urban centres have lost substance

Switzerland needs strong towns

Traffic congestion, falling tax revenues and heavier social security burdens are hitting Swiss towns badly. In the name of partnership, city centres are calling upon the federal government, cantonal authorities and the surrounding urban municipalities for help.

Switzerland is very urbanised. More than two-thirds of the population live in urban areas, but most people actually reside in municipalities outside city centres. The phenomenon which Urs Geissmann, director of the Swiss Union of Towns, describes as

Max Hess *

"urbanisation outside the towns" started in the 1960s and 70s. Traffic noise, lack of apartments and high rents in the centres resulted in a flight to the suburbs and a huge rise in commuter flows. In the boom years, people believed growth would go on for ever, and infrastructure was expanded without any fears for the future. But after the middle of the century the quality of life in the city centres went into decline. More and more people withdrew to green areas and became commuters, which resulted in a further vast increase in traffic – a vicious circle if ever there was one.

Drastic consequences

The successes of the services sector at first disguised the creeping loss of substance in the city centres. But as a result of the recent change in economic structures the accumulation of negative trends is now clear for all to see. Urs Geissmann puts the situation very aptly: "The people with the most purchasing power emigrate to the edges of the cities. The consequences of this withdrawal are drastic. Many students and pensioners live in the centres. The proportion of foreigners is big, and the number of so-called marginal groups – the poor, the dependent, the socially excluded – is high. The middle class and the high-earning generations are underrepresented. This results in a fall in tax revenue. At the same time the costs of social security are rising massively, and the main social benefits remain at the same level as before".

With the fact that in 1997 city centre deficits were budgeted at somewhere between Sfr. 50 million and Sfr. 200 million as background, Zurich city president Josef Estermann waxes eloquent: "We must not offload the risks of poverty and professional and social failure onto the city centres. They must not be overburdened with the weight of immigration and social integration. These must be absorbed at the national level".

In the consultative process for the revision of the federal constitution, the Swiss Union of Towns is arguing consistently for strengthening the 'third level' in the federal state. This means that greater attention should be paid to municipalities and there should be an increase in municipal autonomy. And in the context of the new system of financial equalisation the towns are insisting that their burdens should be lightened. Says director Geissmann: "Strong towns strengthen the country. In economic terms Switzerland must face up to worldwide competition. We must maintain the competitiveness of our cities, so that they can be successful".

The 'fourth level' gaining in importance

The process of relieving city centres of their burdens is made more difficult all the time by the fact that many of our political structures are no longer in tune with the social and – most particularly – the economic realities of the country. The municipalities surrounding town centres play an equal part in causing problems (traffic, drugs, etc.), but they are not obliged to participate in financing solutions.

In consequence, the 'fourth level' in the state, the metropolitan associations, will grow in importance. But the task of finding a way to ensure that users, payers, and decision-makers in these 'functional regions' share the burden is proving difficult. Commitment by cantonal authorities in terms of coordination and promotion – particularly in economic regions which cross cantonal boundaries – is essential. The towns must remain the driving forces of development. They provide work and culture. But what they now need so badly is more attractive green and residential areas, quiet streets and safe playgrounds.

Towns provide room for culture. That costs money. (Photo: Max Baumann)

To reconquer the town centres?

Those responsible for our towns are not without hope – in spite of all the problems. The main challenge facing the town centres at present is to win back the middle classes and above all to change back into living communities fit for children. ■

The Swiss Union of Towns 100 years old

Today 121 towns and urban municipalities with a total of three million inhabitants are members of the Swiss Union of Towns, which was founded in Berne and Zurich in 1897. This organisation, whose current president is Yvette Jaggi, lady mayoress of Lausanne, represents urban interests at the federal level and provides its members with a wide range of services (courses, publications, document kits, insurance advice, etc.).

* Max Hess was town president of Schaffhausen from 1989 to 1996 and now works as a consultant.