

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 37 (2010)  
**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** Spatial planning : my beloved Switzerland, where have you gone?  
**Autor:** Ribi, Rolf  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906718>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 31.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## My beloved Switzerland, where have you gone?

Spatial planning is becoming a political issue in Switzerland. The Swiss are getting increasingly concerned about overdevelopment and urban sprawl in their homeland. New popular initiatives now aim to curb development. Little will change while responsibility for spatial planning primarily lies with the cantons and communes. A federalist approach to spatial planning comes at a high cost. By Rolf Ribi

The figures are irrefutable yet hard to believe – the Swiss countryside is declining at a rate of almost 1 square metre every second. That equates to 7.4 hectares a day, which is more than the entire Rütli meadow, or 2,700 hectares a year, an area the size of Lake Brienz. Over a 12-year period, the total reaches 32,700 hectares, larger than the Canton of Schaffhausen. This figure appears in the Federal Council's 2005 Spatial Development Report and remains valid today.

Wherever you look in Switzerland towering cranes in urban areas and villages and extensive works on the nation's roads are testament to ongoing hectic construction work in spite of the economic downturn. Currently the most impressive examples are Berne's new ultramodern Westside district, created by well-known architect Daniel Libeskind, and Zurich West, the recently built, attractive neighbourhood with its high-rise buildings of up to 126 metres in height in the former industrial quarter. There are also the state-of-the-art headquarters of dozens of global companies along the sweep of Lake Geneva between the cities of Geneva and Montreux with its high levels of immigration from abroad.

Constant construction work over years, and indeed decades, in urban and rural areas comes at a cost – the loss of countryside and progressive urban sprawl within Switzerland. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reports of "anger at the large-scale Americanisation of little Switzerland". A headline in the critical magazine "Beobachter" even reads "Farewell to our beloved homeland!"

Could Switzerland soon become overcrowded? The country's population today stands at an unprecedented 7.7 million, which is upwards of 100,000 more people than a year ago. The Federal Statistical Office estimates that the population will reach 8.4 million by 2030. The agreement on the free movement of persons with the Euro-

pean Union means immigration will remain high for the time being. But the fact remains that Switzerland's total surface area is small at 4.1 million hectares. If we exclude the nation's lakes, mountains and glaciers, this leaves settlement space of 280,000 hectares (just 7% of the country's surface area) for 8 million people. Switzerland's Central Plateau is today already one of the most densely populated areas in Europe.

National Councillor Peter Spuhler of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) says: "The level of immigration is clearly too high. Switzerland is not currently able to sustain more than 8 million people. It is a question of the burden on the social state, our infrastructure, our roads, public transport and house building. We have reached our limits."

### Urban sprawl in rural areas

The worst consequence of the decades of development and overexploitation of the countryside is urban sprawl on a once much revered landscape. Of course, there are still picturesque villages and towns in the countryside with traditional houses, cultivated fields, vineyards and church steeples. But such typically Swiss scenery is increasingly being replaced by modern developments. Every village now has new housing estates and its own industrial park, every town has shopping malls, car showrooms and leisure facilities, and no tourist destination is complete without infrastructure buildings and empty second homes. New motorways, expressways and high-performance regional railway networks are increasingly transforming the countryside into a giant agglomeration stretching from Lake Constance to Lake Geneva.

Lukas Bühlmann, Director of the Swiss Spatial Planning Association warns of a "gradual disfigurement of the landscape", a development like that found in the suburbs of large cities in the USA and France. Raimund Rodewald of the Swiss Landscape

Conservation Foundation says: "When landscapes are transformed like this, they lose their aesthetic quality, their familiarity and their recreational value."

### Specific causes

How could this be allowed to happen? What are the reasons for the loss of countryside and the urban sprawl? There are specific causes, including the failure of spatial planning policy. The almost 8 million people living in tiny Switzerland require more and more settlement space. The figure today already stands at an average of 400 square metres of space per person. Developed areas have been growing at a significantly faster rate than the population for years. Raimund Rodewald explains: "At some point you reach the limit of sustainability."

It is not just the population that is on the increase, our expectations in terms of prosperity are also growing. Today, one person demands almost 50 square metres of living space, whereas 50 years ago people managed with half that amount. A typically Swiss aspiration, the dream of owning your own home in the country, is also a factor. A third of settlement growth nationwide is accounted for by single-family homes, which total more than 10,000 new units a year. The political communes make the land available because they want to attract good taxpayers and create new jobs. Architecture critic Benedikt Loderer says: "The single-family home is the surest way of creating urban sprawl in Switzerland."

Another factor

**Berne (Brünnen):**  
What was once an area of grassland and farmland with a small wood, between the motorway and the railway line, is now home to the Westside shopping centre, opened in 2008. In the background are the residential neighbourhoods of Gäbelbach, Holenacker and Tscharnnergut.



which has significantly influenced spatial development in recent decades is the increase in traffic on the roads and railways as a result of commuting between home and the workplace and greater mobility during leisure time. Federal government's Spatial Development Report writes: "The rise in traffic has gone hand in hand with increasing noise and air pollution and continued impairment of the countryside." According to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the numerous motorways built in Switzerland over the past five decades (three of which alone link Berne with French-speaking Switzerland) "have transformed the country to an extent that nobody anticipated". Rapid transport links made of asphalt and concrete stimulate the economies of adjacent communes and regions, trigger new planning proposals and create even more commuters. Public transport has also facilitated urban sprawl through attractive inter-

city railway and tram networks. The Spatial Development Report states: "Spatial planning has failed to coordinate settlement development and transport planning."

A significant factor in the urban development of the countryside is the large reserves of building land in the communes. Almost three quarters of all building zones, amounting to 220,000 hectares, have already been extensively built on, while the remaining quarter is generally developed but not extensively. The unused building land represents a huge construction reserve and could meet the spatial requirements of a further 2.5 million people (if it were not located in peripheral areas). The Spatial Planning Act in fact stipulates that the communes should keep such reserves at low levels and should plan for a maximum of 15 years. But many communes continue to do the exact opposite. They stockpile huge reserves of building land, in

particular in rural cantons. However, additional building zones are also often approved still, even near to urban areas, to ensure further growth.

### **The constitution and the situation on the ground**

When 1 square metre of countryside is being lost every second, when urban sprawl is clearly continuing and "when so much land is being used it is as though there were a second Switzerland" (*Tages-Anzeiger*), the question must be raised as to the position of spatial planning in the constitution and in law. Following the rejection of the "socialist" land initiative in 1967, the Swiss people and the cantons approved the new constitutional article on spatial planning in 1969. Article 75, which continues to apply today, states: "The Confederation shall lay down principles on spatial planning. These principles shall be





binding on the Cantons and serve to ensure the appropriate and economic use of the land and its properly ordered settlement. The Confederation shall encourage and coordinate the efforts of the Cantons." The 1979 Spatial Planning Act was only approved in a referendum at the second attempt, as the first draft was rejected as too "centralistic". Federal government's strategies and sectoral plans, cantonal structural plans and communal land use plans have since made up the federalist concept of spatial planning policy in Switzerland.

What conclusions have been reached on Swiss spatial planning policy? "Spatial development in recent decades cannot be considered sustainable as defined by the Federal Constitution" is the basic verdict reached by the Federal Council in its Spatial Development Report. The constitutional objectives of spatial planning, namely economical use and ordered settlement of the land, "have still not been achieved 30 years after the Spatial Planning Act entered into force", says Stephan Scheidegger, chief legal officer at the federal office concerned.

Conservationist Hans Weiss does not believe that spatial planning has failed. He says: "Switzerland would look very different were it not for spatial planning. The landscape has not been ruined by urban sprawl where spatial planning has been taken seriously at communal, cantonal and federal levels." Raimund

Rodewald of the Swiss Landscape Conservation Foundation commends the constitutional objective of economical land management. However, he is critical of the fact that federal government hands over responsibility for implementation of the objective to the cantons, which in turn pass it on to the 2,700 communes. He says: "The passive approach of the cantons and communes has caused an obvious spatial planning disaster." The widely condemned malaise with regard to the implementation of spatial planning can be easily explained: the communes insist on their communal autonomy and create new building zones to ensure their growth; the cantons point to their sovereignty and usually allow the communes to grant consent; and federal government affords the cantons a lot of freedom in the approval of structural plans.

#### New popular initiatives

Growing discontent amongst the Swiss people about urban sprawl in Switzerland is highlighted by three popular initiatives. Spatial planning is set to become a political issue in the near future. An event in the small farming village of Galmitz in Fribourg is partially responsible for a shift in opinion. Raimund Rodewald believes what happened there three years ago was a milestone in the history of conservationism in Switzerland. Amgen, a Californian biotech company, wanted to construct a major production fa-

cility there on a 55-hectare site in the countryside area of "Grosses Moos". The Canton of Fribourg's rapid decision to grant planning permission for the area clearly contravened federal law and the cantonal structural plan approved by the Federal Council. But the Federal Office for Spatial Development (as it is now known) did nothing to prevent the planned rezoning. Galmitz has since symbolised the latest failing in the history of spatial planning.

The Helvetia Nostra Foundation, led by environmentalist Franz Weber, now hopes to counter intensive development in Switzerland, having proposed two popular initiatives. Weber has withdrawn the "Against excessive construction of developments which are detrimental to the environment and the countryside" initiative, signed by 106,000 people, as it aims to achieve the same goals as the environmental associations' countryside initiative. The second popular initiative put forward by the highly-regarded environmental campaigner, Franz Weber, concerns an old unresolved issue - that of infrequently used second homes in many tourist destinations. The "End to the unrestricted construction of second homes" initiative, which has received 108,000 signatures, aims to restrict the proportion of such properties to a maximum of 20% of all housing. The Federal Council fears an effective halt on construction in significant tourist regions, and



**Pontresina (left):** The top view, which is of the wooded area with footpath and signpost in Laret, in the eastern part of the village, was captured in 1999. The construction of the protection barrier has now destroyed the character of the landscape (below).

**Castasegna (right):** The top pictures were taken in 1996 and show the village of Castasegna in Grisons, with the river Mera and the old stone bridge. The pictures below show the village three years later with the new bypass and avalanche screen.



says the initiative is unilaterally aimed at individual communes, therefore preventing all-embracing regulation. Parliament has backed the government despite the fact that second homes have long since blighted traditional local scenery.

### Well-received popular initiative

The "Space for people and nature" initiative, known as the countryside initiative, was launched by 16 environmental associations, led by Pro Natura and the Swiss Landscape Conservation Foundation, and submitted in 2008 with 110,000 signatures. This initiative calls for an amendment to Article 75 of the Federal Constitution. It wants federal government and the cantons to implement spatial planning objectives together rather than the cantons and communes unilaterally. It plans to strengthen federal government, enabling it to lay down principles and adopt resolutions to ensure high-quality inward settlement development (high-density development) and to restrict development in non-settlement areas. And, most significantly, the total area of the building zones should not be increased for 20 years. The moratorium on building zones is the bone of contention.

The Federal Council must take a position on the popular initiative by February 2010. It roundly rejects the countryside initiative and points to the ongoing revision of the Spatial Planning Act. Maria Lezzi from the Federal

Office for Spatial Development does not support a moratorium. She says: "We are focusing on clearer planning principles and minimum content in cantonal structural plans, more specific definition of building zones, new planning permission guidelines and firmer sanctions."

Spatial planners in Berne were alarmed at the environmentalists' countryside initiative. The Federal Council put forward an indirect counterproposal to the well-received popular initiative in the form of a new Spatial Development Act, the key elements of which are that the cantons must specifically set out in their structural plans how they will manage inward settlement development and improve settlement quality. The excessively large building zones must be adjusted within five years. Owners of undeveloped building land must allow development of their plots, otherwise the communes will obtain a right of purchase on them. Areas outside the building zones (for agriculture, conservation and recreation) will be redefined as countryside zones (and no longer agricultural zones).

### The price of federalism

This proposal for a new Spatial Development Act was given a rough ride in the consultation process. The cantonal heads of planning see it as a threat to the "cantons' fundamental responsibility for spatial planning". The farmers fear for their farmland and fertile arable

land in the new countryside zones. And the draft proposal, with its 87 articles, which do not provide for a limitation on building zones at national level, has been generally criticised as far too extensive. Lukas Bühlmann of the Spatial Planning Association said: "Politically, we must forget this complete revision of the law". A partial revision of the law is now being drafted in the Federal Palace as a response to the countryside initiative.

"Federal government must be able to oblige the cantons to bring their plans into line with the objectives of national planning and it must be given the authority to coordinate the plans of individual cantons with one another" – this was part of the Federal Council's dispatch to the Federal Assembly in August 1967. More than 40 years later, federal government and the cantons are still at loggerheads over control over spatial planning policy, while in the meantime overdevelopment and urban sprawl continue. A federalist approach to spatial planning comes at a high cost.

### DOCUMENTATION

2005 Spatial Development Report, published by the Federal Office for Spatial Development, Berne 2005.  
[www.bbl.admin.ch/bundespublikationen](http://www.bbl.admin.ch/bundespublikationen)  
 Martina Koll-Schretzenmayr: Gelungen – Misslungen? Die Geschichte der Raumplanung Schweiz, Zurich 2008. The Neue Zürcher Zeitung publishing house.  
[www.nzz-libro.ch](http://www.nzz-libro.ch)  
 Documentation centre [www.doku-zug.ch](http://www.doku-zug.ch)

