

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 39 (2012)  
**Heft:** 3

**Artikel:** Passionate debate rages over Switzerland as a vast building site  
**Autor:** Lettau, Marc  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907463>

### **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:** 09.12.2025

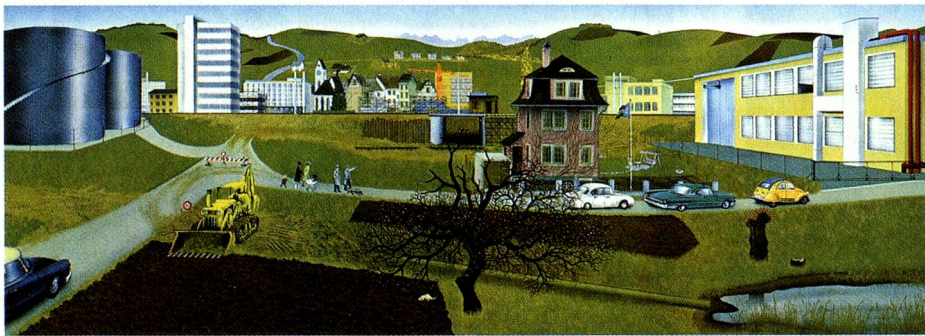
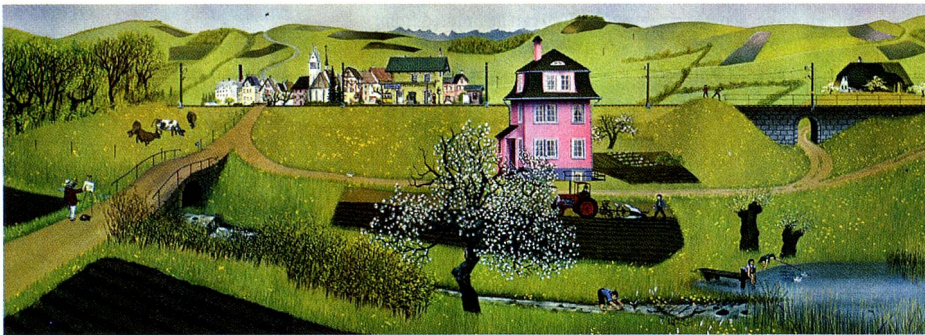
**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**



## Passionate debate rages over Switzerland as a vast building site

It came as a huge surprise to many that the Swiss people imposed clear limits on the construction of second homes on 11 March 2012. The decision was undoubtedly fuelled by a fundamental opposition to unrestricted and barely controlled building projects in Switzerland. Yet, there are also increasing signs of a complete rethink – an intensive debate is currently ongoing about a paradigm shift in spatial planning in Switzerland. At the same time, new storm clouds are gathering.

By Marc Lettau



Illustrations from the book "Alle Jahre wieder saust der Presslufthammer nieder" by Jörg Müller

How would the average Swiss classroom have looked thirty or forty years ago? It would have been a light, unostentatious space with large windows. The two-pupil desks would have been neatly arranged facing the blackboard. Two dozen children would have sat at the desks. If they happened to glance out of the window they would have seen a few cows grazing alongside the school building and behind them a row of new single-family homes. On closer inspection, they would have been able to make out the long wooden posts outlining of a couple of new houses to be built in the meadow.

This view from the classroom window was one of a rapidly changing environment. In those days almost every teacher at some point displayed a series of images on the classroom wall which for decades came to epitomise this rapid change. The images entitled "Alle Jahre wieder saust der Pressluft-

hammer nieder" (The Pounding of the Jackhammer Can Be Heard Every Year) are a sequence of seven drawings by the illustrator Jörg Müller which feature the same section of a typically Swiss landscape becoming increasingly modern and unfamiliar in seven stages.

All the teachers, who lived in the new rows of single-family homes, attempted to make the pupils, who also lived in new homes built on the green meadow, aware of the transformation. It was a cause for concern even then.

### "Urban sprawl" is the term coined

"Alle Jahre wieder saust der Presslufthammer nieder" was awarded the German Youth Literature Prize in 1974 and has been reprinted constantly ever since. It has been a success, but also an enduring failure – the jackhammer ultimately proved to be stronger than the lesson. Building work all

over Switzerland, in both the mountains and the valleys, continued for three decades without any obvious general strategy. "Urban sprawl", with its negative connotations, is the term used to describe the phenomenon.

Developed land is expanding at a rate of around one square metre every second. This means that almost 30 km<sup>2</sup> of land that can be cultivated is irretrievably lost each year.<sup>1</sup> This developed area is increasing more rapidly than the population itself in 23 of the 26 cantons. People are demanding more residential and developed space per capita every year except in the cantons of Basel-Land, Schwyz and Zurich. The reserves of land for building on are large enough to allow Switzerland's populated areas to grow unrestrictedly almost everywhere at the same time. The think tank, Avenir Suisse, which has close ties with business and is far from averse to growth, has been warning for some time that "Switzerland's Central Plateau is increasingly becoming one continuous agglomeration". The classroom pictures of yesteryear are being overtaken by the reality.

### A genuine shift

For several weeks now it has no longer been presumptuous to speak of obvious signs of change. The clearest indication of this is the Swiss people's approval of the far-reaching initiative against the excessive construction of second homes on 11 March 2012 (also see box on p. 11). The initiative put forward by the adversarial 84-year-old environmental campaigner Franz Weber, who is showing no sign of mellowing with age, calls for radical restrictions to be placed on the construction of holiday homes. Weber and his fellow campaigners see these properties, which stand empty most of the time, as symbols of the futile destruction of the

<sup>1</sup> This transformation of Switzerland was covered in figures in the 1/2010 issue of "Swiss Review".



Alpine region. Environmentalist Weber claims that the sprawling construction of second homes is general proof of the lack of a sustainable spatial planning policy in Switzerland.

It was not just in the urban regions where a majority of people voted in favour of the radical initiative. Approval was also astonishingly high in several alpine tourist areas. A good example is the clear support for the initiative in Interlaken, which is heavily reliant on the tourism industry.

It is likely that many Swiss people cast their votes not just on the construction of second homes but also on the issue of unrestricted urban sprawl in general. This is also the conclusion drawn by many newspaper commentators. Zurich's "Tages-Anzeiger" said it was easy to explain why the communes would now lose some of their planning freedom: "The track record that the communes have in spatial planning is simply not good enough." The cantons and communes were "paying the price for decades of neglectful spatial planning".

### Building land equals prosperity

The jackhammer that pounds away every day has begun to falter after the people's decision. Observed at some distance, the decision means that the voting public is today willing to make spatial planning decisions that would have been unthinkable several years ago. The psychological distress caused by the "spatial planning problem" is clearly significant. But what are the root causes of the problem? In Switzerland, the regulations governing when, where, how and how much development can take place have in the past largely been determined by the communes and cantons. To put it mildly, federal government's influence over spatial planning has been very low key over past decades. However, if spatial planning is determined from below rather than directed from above, it follows its own rules. Every commune wants to make as much building land available as possible, as this provides new taxpayers and prosperity. Little consideration is given to changes to the landscape. As a result, this supposedly rural nation can no longer claim to be rural in many places. The gap between the purported idyll and the actual landscape has become very wide. To use an untypically Swiss touch of pathos, this is paining the soul of the people.

If people's own fundamental impression



Davos and Zermatt: These pictures clearly show why the second homes initiative was approved

of their environment becomes something nostalgic that belongs to the past, this ultimately has a negative impact on their quality of life and sense of rootedness in the country where they live. Biologist Raimund Rodewald, director of the Swiss Foundation for Landscape Conservation and one of the most highly regarded experts on landscape conservation issues, tells "Swiss Review" that the approach to development in the past had been the opposite of typically Swiss: "In this country where order, stability, reliability and quality matter so much, building has never been structured well. There has been a general lack of responsibility to society."

### Parliament wants to take control

One single popular initiative cannot repair all the spatial planning shortcomings. But a

second popular initiative is already having an impact, even though it has yet to be presented to the people – the landscape initiative, which is supported by a broad coalition of environmental organisations. This seeks a general curbing of the expansion of settlement areas and essentially calls for the reduction of excessive development zones. Approval of this initiative would effectively mean that no more new development zones would be allocated for twenty years. Parliament is taking the criticism of the failings in spatial planning so seriously that it wants to take over the reins itself. Following on from the Council of States, the National Council also resolved to tighten up spatial planning law in March after months of hesitation. According to its proposals, federal government would have the power to force the cantons to reduce any development



zones deemed too large. Secondly, land-owners would be required to make payments if their land became building land and consequently increased significantly in value. Some of this kind of overnight accumulation of wealth would be skimmed off. Any new zones would therefore result in the transfer of significant sums to the state. The state would be able to use these to return building land to agricultural usage elsewhere and to pay compensation where necessary. This would undermine a mechanism that has contributed massively to urban sprawl in Switzerland in recent decades: farmers selling off acres because building land is worth ten or even as much as a hundred times more than agricultural land, and the communes concerned approving the transformation because they hope to benefit significantly themselves through the farmers who become overnight millionaires, through the vibrant building activity and by attracting affluent taxpayers. The overriding consideration of geographical space is overshadowed by local interests.

The environmental associations are already celebrating. They plan to withdraw their initiative if the spatial planning law is actually tightened up in the way described. Rodewald talks of a "clear paradigm shift". Parliament's final vote on the amendments to the law has yet to take place. This is scheduled for summer. The possibility that interest groups may then call a referendum against so much "spatial planning from above" cannot be ruled out either.

### Social change

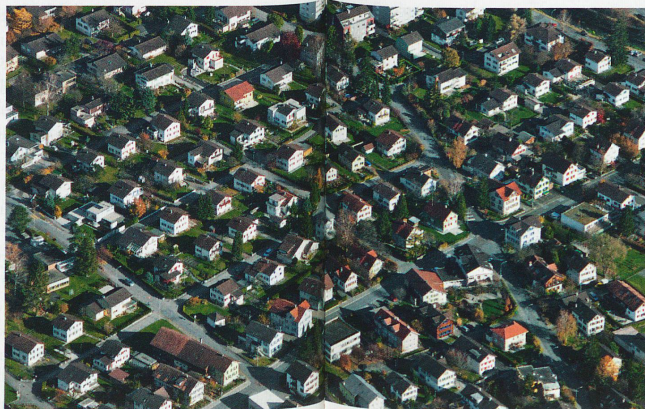
First the second homes initiative and now the landscape initiative. On the one hand, the anticipated change in spatial planning can be explained by psychological distress. On the other, it is also a reflection of social change. The reasons for protecting the land and countryside are changing. While in the past critics of spatial planning were driven by a desire to protect farmland, natural landscapes and rural aesthetics, today there is increasing emphasis on energy policy arguments in the spatial planning debate. If the change in energy policy and the rejection of the craving for non-renewable energies succeed, spatial planning guidelines will also be required. This reasoning is already evident in everyday life. A young Swiss family no longer necessarily dreams of a single-family home in the idyllic countryside be-

cause the double garage that goes with it is evidence of the cost of this "dream": far greater mobility or, in other words, environmental pollution.

The obvious migration to private homes in the country since 1970, and the resultant depopulation of the cities, has more than just been curbed. There has been an evident "return to the cities", with large and small towns and cities growing significantly since 2005. The populations of many rural communes have stagnated, though admittedly they may continue to grow in terms of area due to their sprawling development zones. In total, around 45% of the Swiss now again live in cities and agglomerations close to urban centres. The think tank Avenir Suisse concludes that "Switzerland is becoming more urban", and the more urban it becomes, the fiercer the debate about how the cities must change. The declared spatial planning ethos is "internal growth". "Dense inner cities" are being considered in most urban centres, partly for environmental reasons, as Ulrich Weidmann, a professor at the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, points out: "A high-density city is more environmentally friendly than a low-density one. Energy consumption for mobility decreases, journeys become shorter and the proportion of public transport increases. The alternative to a dense inner city is urban sprawl in the countryside. Concentrated urban settlements can be organised more energy-efficiently than individual homes in the countryside. There is the possibility of more creative ways of heating and energy recovery." However, the "internal growth" of cities is anything but rapid. Disused industrial and service buildings often remain vacant for decades before being transformed into new, vibrant districts. Slow-paced urban renewal contributes to housing shortages, which are acute in some places, driving up property and rental prices.

### Clearing forests here and there

Environmentally friendly urbanisation is establishing itself as the new benchmark. In contrast, the previously dogged protection of forests is increasingly being called into question, although it was in this particular area that federal government's spatial planning was most effective. The basic principle that forests can only be cleared if reforestation takes place elsewhere has meant that forestry land has been preserved even in the



Near Buchs in the canton of St. Gallen – one single-family home after another



Köniz in Switzerland's Central Plateau – not always a harmonious sight despite the Wakker Prize for "exemplary urban development"



Bern-Brünnen – the development of a leisure and shopping centre with 11 cinema halls, 10 restaurants, a hotel and an adventure pool

Central Plateau in recent decades. But pressure is now growing on forests close to urban centres. A highly charged debate is currently taking place in Berne over whether parts of the Bremgartenwald forest should be cleared to create an urban settlement for 8,000 people. The main argument is that clearing forests near to cities results in less urban sprawl than converting green meadows into building zones on the outskirts of the city.

The same environmentalists currently applauding the change in spatial planning being implemented by federal parliament are, of course, entering the fray. They are complaining that the relaxation of forestry protection constitutes the breaking of a taboo. If the first forestry land close to the city is cleared, this will set a precedent to start up the chainsaws in all urban centres. Lukas Bühlmann, Director of the Swiss Spatial Planning Association, shares these concerns. If there is a shortage of building land, this will inevitably result in calls for deforestation to be made easier: "If the forest town on the Bremgartenwald site is approved, it will be impossible to prevent forestry clearance on the Üetliberg in Zurich, in the Allschwilerwald in Basel and in the Bois de la Bâtie in Geneva." The list may grow as plans are being considered in Neuchâtel to create space for 8,000 new inhabitants in the forested areas on the outskirts of the city.

### Why not build a few more dams?

The impact of the Fukushima disaster, which has shaken western confidence in nuclear technology, is also putting new strain on Switzerland's countryside. As well as the call for a relaxation of deforestation regulations, the targeted change in energy policy is also seeing new battle lines emerge. Owing to Switzerland's effectively rubber-stamped withdrawal from nuclear power, energy companies are seeking to exploit renewable energies – wind and hydropower – to a much greater extent than ever before in the alpine region. They are calling for more wind turbines, higher dam walls and new small-scale hydropower plants. Environmentalists are dismayed at how the energy generation projects are again challenging the increased protection of the mountain environment. Raimund Rodewald from the Swiss Foundation for Landscape Conservation fears that a new form of urban sprawl will emerge if clear guide-

lines are not set. He says: "We are facing a wave of around one hundred power plant projects. I am concerned that the landscape will be destroyed and without making any significant contribution to the withdrawal from nuclear power." The WWF in turn is arguing that the power plant developers currently have their sights set on some of the most valuable biotopes. A dam project in the canton of Fribourg is threatening to destroy the ecological qualities of the Warne Sense river. From an ecological perspective, the "Warne Sense" is one of the "most valuable waters" among the unspoiled alpine rivers. It provides a habitat for many species of animals and plants.

Protect the countryside – and clear more forests? Protect alpine panoramas – and call for new dams? The spatial planning debate is in vogue. But the areas of conflict are massive. Despite the signs of a paradigm shift, the issue of spatial planning in Switzerland still remains something of a work in progress.

MARC LETTAU is an editor at "Swiss Review"

### CHALLENGING IMPLEMENTATION

It remains unclear how the second homes initiative approved by the Swiss people on 11 March 2012 is to be implemented in many respects. There is even disagreement on what constitutes a second home. What is not in dispute is the fact that the large number of often unoccupied holiday homes cannot be allowed to increase unchecked. The initiative calls for the proportion of second homes to be restricted to 20%. In some Swiss tourist regions, 70% of properties are currently second homes. What is clear is that the initiative does not jeopardise any existing holiday homes. But it is also evident that the purchase and construction of new second homes will become much more difficult from now on. This applies to interested parties residing in Switzerland as much as it does to the Swiss abroad. Supply will stagnate – not least owing to the as yet undefined approval criteria for future second homes – and can no longer be increased at will in future in the event of increased demand.