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Autor: Peter, Theodora
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Europaallee in Zurich – shadeless urban canyons and concrete surfaces heat the city air like a furnace. Photo: Keystone

to sustainable principles, the new neighbourhood also has a spacious park and other notable areas of greenery.

Vegetation and water

Meanwhile, the focus in Geneva is on increasing local vegetation. Last summer, officials approved a strategy that underpins the planting of greenery as part of an urban master plan, while the Urbanature project has already seen Geneva's municipal gardeners plant around 1,200 trees and 1.7 million plants around the city. The Geneva government also believes that there has to be a fundamental shift away from the use of personal motorised transport. Residential courtyards that serve as car parks could then be transformed into green oases. Trees not only provide the city with fresh air, but their leaves also filter out particulate matter from the atmosphere.

The city of Berne is also applying a range of measures. For example, the authorities will only permit paved surfaces if these are necessary for traffic or disabled access. Rainwater begins to dry immediately when it lands

on asphalt, whereas it will seep into gravel and evaporate later. "We need to rethink our approach to water," says Christoph Schärer, director of parks and green space in Berne. Rain should no longer be drained directly into the sewers but remain where it falls, because evaporation has a cooling effect. It will also water the vegetation. "There is no benefit to covering everything in asphalt," he says. Berne's numerous fountains and watercourses also help to freshen the air. For example, the Stadtbach stream has been partially 'daylighted' along its route through the old town.

More 'exotic' trees are being planted in the Swiss capital. These can withstand climate change, whereas many native trees such as the large-leaved lime and the sycamore are particularly sensitive to heat and drought. The Turkey oak is one of the new tree species being used in Berne. Native to south-east Europe, this deciduous tree is resistant to cold winters and hot summers. It can also cope with the late spring frosts that have become a frequent occurrence in recent years. As far as Schärer is concerned, planting palm trees is certainly not the answer.

A summer like no other

"Down with the Alps – we want to see the sea!" The 1980s youth movement used this slogan to protest against Switzerland's so-called culture of narrow-mindedness. The country has certainly taken a peep over the mountains and



broadened its outlook since then. Now the Mediterranean is inching nearer to Switzerland, at least in climatological terms. Scorching hot days and balmy nights are no longer confined to southern

Europe. And, like our Mediterranean neighbours, we have lived our lives increasingly outdoors in recent summers. Cities have enhanced the al-fresco vibe by filling their public spaces with all manner of furniture. Entire streets have turned into open-air bars, parks into open-air cinemas, river- and lakesides into barbecue and hang-out areas. Thousands embrace the summery feel; others bemoan the noise and stink.

Things are very different this year. The coronavirus epidemic has confined people to their homes in recent months – a lockdown that puts everything into perspective. How will our experience of social distancing change the everyday life of towns and cities? Sociologists and cultural experts will surely study this question one day. At best, the emergency will soon be over with community togetherness stronger than ever. Urban areas will not only be more Mediterranean, they will also be more people-friendly. The climate crisis and the challenges facing overheating cities are, on the other hand, far from over.

THEODORA PETER, EDITOR SWISS REVIEW