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“We Have Enough Food – That Wasn’t the Problem”

Lukas Stadelmann

One of the curious features of COVID-19 is its invisibility. It is not merely that contagion itself is invisible. The virus also produces no visible marks upon the body but rather is characterized by a sequence of withdrawals, from the sense of taste to the capacity to breathe. Attempts to represent the pandemic visually have therefore been obliged to focus on other aspects of our everyday life, on services and supplies normally taken for granted. And there, too, the visual impact has been characterized by absences. The first iconic representations to appear were everyday voids: photos of empty shelves where, before, pasta and toilet paper stood. They quickly moved on to ridicule. Memes online and newspaper editorials made sport out of the irrational and egoistic behavior of hoarders. Perhaps more than frail humanity, these voids revealed vulnerabilities of the logistics infrastructure that supplies goods, the “big boxes” and “architecture without content” that we so often overlook.

Take a single ordinary product – pasta, in this case, but it could easily be one of many others considered indispensable – under extraordinary circumstances. In Europe, the pasta market is both saturated and steady, met by a constant supply with almost no seasonal fluctuations. It is supplied by a highly optimized infrastructure with relatively few actors and a customer

base across the whole of Europe. With supply and demand almost levelled, prices are low. The cost of transportation per unit makes up a large part of the overall cost—a truck voyage filled with pasta costs the same as one filled with consumer electronics—so there is an incentive for producers to keep these costs as low as possible. At the same time, storage close to consumers is expensive, as a high population density means high land prices. Conventional retailers usually hold the smallest possible volume of goods in their stores to accommodate as many customers as possible. If, due to higher demand, extra deliveries are completely filled with pasta and toilet paper, the entire shipment produces a financial loss. This explains why the shelves in the supermarkets emptied. It was not that production could not keep up but that the patterns of transportation were so optimized that they were particularly prone to disruption. “We have enough food—that wasn’t the problem,” as Thomas Gasser, head of logistics at Migros Suhr, told Benita Vogel and Michael West (“Migros-Logistik leistet Sondereffort,” *Migros Magazine*, March 13, 2020).

But we did not start at the beginning: pasta is an end product, and while its manufacture could happen almost anywhere, the sourcing of its raw material does not. Wheat is grown in most European countries, but most of the durum wheat used in pasta is imported from Canada, while the main manufacturers of pasta within the European Union are located in Italy. The



biggest consumer, with the highest import quantities, is Germany, followed by France and the United Kingdom. Since the value of the grain is extremely low, it is not transported by airfreight, which explains the steady supply throughout the months of 2020. Arriving in the ports of Italy, the processed pasta leaves via the country's north, passing through Switzerland to reach the main consumer markets. And despite a Swiss public vote in 1994 (the Alpen Initiative) to transfer transit-traffic to rail, it took until 2020, when legal restrictions for road transportation came into force, for pasta manufacturers to use this form of transportation to reach the German market. The manufacturers themselves admit that train transportation is cheaper, more secure, and more reliable (aside from the obvious reduction in environmental impact). The reason for delay thus has another source. It is (again) a spatial problem: many producers and retailers no longer have access to the rail network. The low cost of road transportation has led to a logistics sprawl away from the rail infrastructure and human settlements, a consequence of the rocketing land prices close to consumers. In response to the pasta shortage, retailers told us that "the warehouses are full." Pasta storage is just not where the customers are. To make matters worse, the pandemic has also brought a surge in home delivery: more trucks are bringing pasta directly to the customer.

Ideally, rail transportation is used to transport the goods as close to the end-consumer as possible,

but most inner-city rail infrastructure devoted to the relocation of goods has been rezoned for large-scale development. The cost of this is found in increased transportation volume and more emissions. An example is the SwissMill tower in Zurich. Extended in 2016 after a public vote, the silo provides grain for the Swiss market, in particular for the subcontractors of the retailer Coop. But while the tower represents the logistics heritage of the area, most manufacturers are no longer found in inner-city areas. This means that raw materials arrive in the city by train, are transported by truck to manufacturing facilities outside the city, and then brought back again to Zurich's consumers. This is a recent development. The Zurich Güterbahnhof (freight depot) was demolished in 2013 to make way for the police and justice department, and the Coop bakery moved from Zurich Nord in 2017 to Pratteln (Basel-Landschaft) one year after the SwissMill tower was finished. Coop's only pasta factory was closed in 2014. Since then, imports have mainly come from Italy and France.

The most visible consequence of these developments is the large, seemingly entranceless structures built in a region defined by an intersection where the east-west A1 highway and the north-south A2 axis merge the traffic for a couple of kilometers before the A2 departs south. The region does not have a single name. It includes Niederbipp in the Canton of Berne, Härkingen, and Oensingen, or the two towns called Wangen, one in Berne and one in Solothurn,





barely 20 kilometers apart. Today, it is easier to count the logistics providers that do not use this area for transshipment than the ones that do. The long-standing tradition among architects of describing the country as a continuous town has been fulfilled, but not as intended.

The simplicity of these structures appeals to architects. They trigger a fetish for clear shapes in a vast territory. "This is an architecture that nobody is prepared for," as Rem Koolhaas remarked. Koolhaas describes automated greenhouses and Tesla factories as "an intense piece of architecture without almost any need for inhabitation," leading to a "transformation of architecture" that he himself—at the Harvard Graduate School of Design Conference on the Countryside on October 28, 2015—claimed he does not know how to relate to: "nobody could have thought of a building this extremely abstract, this codified, this uninflected by human need, this distant from us, and, nevertheless, kind of produced by us, and needed for us."

As The Invisible Committee declared in *To Our Friends* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press: 2015), "Power is logistic. Block everything!" The romantic images of urban production, greenhouses and shady trees do not suffice for the challenges caused by a long-standing tradition of planning our cities by looking only at those aspects comfortable to us. The cracks in the cultivated stages that are our cities only show in times of disruption, but they show the

complexities hidden behind. Cities originated around marketplaces and sites of transshipment: there is something inherently urban about the interaction with physical goods and the processes connected to them. The same potential can be found in today's infrastructure, but we require new images, and even a new imaginary, of the urban as we now encounter the clash between a lifestyle that consumers have grown accustomed to and the commitment to a sustainable future — an imaginary free of false romanticism that deals honestly with our dependence on infrastructure that extends far into what is sometimes called the hinterland. We need, in short, a vision of the city that includes its externalities.

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fig.1 Malheur&Fortuna, Feasibility Study Zurich Hardfeld, 2020

fig.2 Bas Princen, *End of the Highway*, 2001