



Panel report:

Die Stadt als Biotop? Umweltgestaltung, ökologisches Wissen und urbane Natur im ausgehenden 20. Jahrhundert

Geneva, June 29, 2022, 6th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences

Convener: Tobias Scheidegger / Nadine Zberg

Participants: Tobias Scheidegger / Nadine Zberg / Niki Rhyner

Comments by Nils Güttler

Report by Eliane Schmid, FernUni Schweiz

The panel "City as a habitat?" centers on environmental design, ecological knowledge, and urban nature in the late 20th century. Organized by **NADINE ZBERG** (Zurich) and **TOBIAS SCHEIDEGGER** (Zurich), the speakers scrutinize concepts of an ideal habitat for urban and urban peripheral citizens. These concepts are analyzed via case studies of Swiss efforts to introduce more green spaces in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nadine Zberg's talk focuses on 1970s Zürich as a "Lebensraum" (habitat, biosphere), and centers on three members of the Zurich Workgroup for Urbanism (*Zürcher Arbeitsgruppe für Städtebau*), Rudolf Schilling, Martin Küper and Rolf Keller, as well as Frederik Vester, a behavior scientist and researcher in biocybernetics. All four feared that the existence of the "urban citizen species" was at peril through the rapid growth of the city. To explain specifically what kind of peril the four men were fearing, Zberg uses the case study of the planned express ways.

The planned express ways, so the critics, would disturb the urban habitat and obscure the two rivers Limmat and Sihl. Concretely, Schilling and Küper mobilized against the construction with a poster reading: "Kein Platz für Liebespaare! Mütter mit Kindern, alte und junge Leute sind in Sorge um ihr Refugium" (No space for lovers! Mothers, children, young and old people fear the loss of their refuge areas). Schilling and Küper believed that urban citizens had an innate need to protect their home, their "Refugium" (sanctuary), and mobilized them to do just that. In fact, all four men were deeply worried about the psychological strain, and even damage that urban citizens experienced because of this denaturalization of the city. Furthermore, the four men saw increasing drug addiction, loneliness, and health issues as the result of the concrete jungle.

Next, Zberg zooms in on neighborhoods, as the four men saw neighborhoods as spaces where change was easier to implement. They were of the opinion, that the intensification of neighborhood



co-habitation fosters a social network and citizens can and should engage actively in shaping their habitats.

A further case study within this neighborhood case study introduces Ursula Rellstab, who fought to create more open spaces in the bourgeois neighborhood of Oberstrass. Rellstab follows Schilling and Keller exactly, as she becomes an active urban citizen. Her book *Strasse frei! Ein Experiment für Stadtverbesserer* (Clear the road! An Experiment for Urban Improvers) relates her efforts to shield urban children from noise and exhaust fumes. The five critics posit that a "return" to a better habitat (*Lebenswelt*) for urban citizens is possible and that they should actively engage in regaining this.

Questions followed directly after the talk, and inquired about a comparison to the 1980s, about subalterns, and about collaboration with the municipal government. Zberg remarks that the 1980s saw a continuation and strengthening of the 1970s programs. Concerning subalterns, Zberg notes that the urban critics mentioned moved very much in their own bourgeois bubble, hardly addressing homelessness or people of lower income. As for Government collaboration, this is something that was quite avid. A lively exchange between government and activists saw many traffic calming projects come about as a result of this in the 1980s.

Next, Tobias Scheidegger also takes us to the 1980s. He studies Basel and Zürich to show how landscape architects criticized the "modern", functional city. In the canon of green criticism, the following points are reiterated regarding the new "functional modern": Planning green spaces is aesthetically questionable; nature is commodified and controlled; green spaces are care-intensive; a psychopathological attitude is being fostered. A symbol for all this is the sign "Keep off the grass!", used to criticize the municipal government's "denaturizing". In contrast, landscape architects vow for usability and adaptability of green spaces.

Scheidegger moves on to concrete examples of green thinkers influenced by Karl-Heinrich Hülbusch's teachings at the *Kasseler Schule der Landschafts- und Freiraumplanung*. Unique to this school's approach is that it teaches plant community analysis to discover which plants grow in specific urban settings and why. According to Dieter Kienast, an internationally acclaimed landscape architect from Zurich who studied at the *Kasseler Schule*, vegetation is an indicator for societal development. In fact, plants can teach us about the lifestyle of people in various neighborhoods (i.e., bourgeois neighborhoods suppress nature) and help think about how nature is planned in the city and what plants should be sowed in the future to cater to natural and societal needs.

Scheidegger ends his talk with an outlook to what happened in the late 1980s. The ideas of the critics against the "functional modern city" have pointed towards an implementation of more green in the city, and a specific analysis of the existing green, to learn what urban citizens actually need. Over the century this somewhat utopian thinking of nature telling us how we should support it and a stance that is pro free proliferation of green become more pragmatic, as social, and ethnic pluralization should become visible through ecology.



Questions posed to Scheidegger concern protective measures, success story and biodiversity / neophytes. In contrast to our perception today, the 1980s focused on vegetation in general, rather than on vegetation as spatial planning. Were the landscape architects mentioned in the talk successful? Scheidegger explains that the landscaping projects were met critically, faced several obstacles, before their greening attempts were approved of. Lastly, Scheidegger agrees that biodiversity and neophytes were critically eyed in the 1980s which is why a preference for "native" plants prevailed. However, some critics argued that this is a rather conservative approach that can be linked to the notion of nationalism. So even when more greening was agreed on, the intricacies were still subject to debate.

Following the two talks, **NILS GÜTTLER** (Zurich) briefly summarizes **NIKI RHYNER**'s contribution, who was unfortunately not able to be present herself. Rhyner's text adds an important perspective to the two urban greening perspectives, namely that of considering the periphery. In the planning of the periphery, urban planning concepts were considered, and the same topics as voiced before are addressed: participation, homeland, modernity, nature, and habitat.

Rhyner uses the case study of the Ecomuseum Simplan (Valais) to show this urban influence, and cites ethnologist Klaus Anderegg (also from the canton of Valais) who analyzed the topics of homeland and traditions in the Ecomuseum. Ethnology (*Volkskunde*, as it used to be called in German) plays a significant role in the re-greening process, which attempts a return to how nature was "before".

Thus, the Ecomuseum is an example for how these concepts of habitat and nature can be found in both urban and rural settings of 1970s and 1980s Switzerland. Güttler takes up on this thought in his concluding remarks when he ponders if this phenomenon is international or purely Swiss. Indeed, Güttler believes that the ideas of non-community and proliferating cities can be found in the US, and points towards Las Vegas. On another note, Güttler, a historian of knowledge himself, takes a history of knowledge perspective on the three panelists' topics. He believes that the coming together of so many fields of research – behavioral biology, sociology, biology, and European ethnology – lends itself to this historiography. What is more, there is an interplay of the city, networks within it, municipal officials, and users. Thus, we can see how broad a spectrum environmental studies actually cover.

One strong idea resulting from this panel is that 1970s and 1980s Switzerland shows many urban and rural initiatives to green or re-green open spaces to create natural habitats for the inhabitants. As an afterthought, it is fascinating to see the attempts to make the city as natural as possible, whilst the move to abandon the city, and completely making way for countryside living, did not appear to be desirable.

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Panel overview:

Niki Rhyner: «Heimat stellt ein ökologisches Mikrosystem dar»: Volkskunde und Regionalplanung in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren (cancelled)

Nadine Zberg: «Lebensraum» Stadt. Ökokybernetik, Modernitätskritik und die Entdeckung der Spezies Stadtbewohner:in in den 1970er-Jahren

Tobias Scheidegger: Grünräume für die plurale Stadtgesellschaft. Vegetationskunde, urbane Diversität und alternative Planungsparadigmen der 1970/80er-Jahre

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