ARCHITECTURE OF TERRITORY
Metropolitan Projects

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GENEVA UNBUILT

GARDENING

CITY

AND

LAND

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Is it possible to take without impoverishing, to consume without degrading, to produce without exhausting, to live without destroying? The practice of gardening responds to these questions, precisely by observing a precautionary strategy. At harvest time the gardener will not lift and consume the whole crop; he will be careful to put aside a portion destined to produce viable seed for future crops. He will never allow the soil to become exhausted, erosion to destroy his land, or water to be poisoned. Do actions exist at the global scale comparable to those that the gardener adopts in his garden? Can one transfer the vocabulary of the garden, usually associated with spaces that are restricted and enclosed, to a space seemingly immense and open? Gilles Clement, The Planetary Garden, 1997.

Can a city embrace the metaphor of a garden and the practice of gardening as ways to rethink its questionable imperative of “growth”? Can “urban growth” be reimagined, its priorities reconsidered? Should a citizen be seen as consumer, or merely a dweller, or can he or she become a different kind of citizen, a gardener?

Geneva, one of the most desirable cities of the world, would like to reimagine its approach to growth. The established formula, which coupled „economic growth“ with horizontal urban expansion since decades, has now brought the city and its region on the verge of a crisis. Geneva has always been a cross-border entity: The polar opposites—Swiss–French, protestant–catholic, international–local, and urban–rural—have always described Geneva’s territory. But in recent years, the continuing “growth” has threatened to destabilise the cross-border balance. While the central Geneva has revelled in its status as location of global finance and international institutions, the pressure of housing supporting these activities has been absorbed in the French countryside. Here, in the so-called “Other Geneva” decades of haphazard construction have produced a sprawling urban agglomeration, in which heavy traffic, lack of public services and eroding landscape features have become a reality. It now appears that Geneva’s seemingly limitless “growth” has finally reached an impasse: the detriment of the periphery now threatens to weaken the centre.

Looking across the region beyond the city centre of Geneva, we find agricultural land, resource landscapes and nature areas, all interspersed with patterns of former villages, infrastructures, and various urban destinations including housing. Could these seemingly chaotic landscapes of unrestricted “growth”—scenery we call sprawl, Zwischenstadt, Citta Diffusa, and even Junk City—become a departure point for a new metropolitan vision?

To rethink the far-fetched imperative of “growth”, and to begin to imagine metropolitan territory beyond sprawl, we propose a reversed perspective. Instead of the Built, lets frame the Unbuilt. Instead of the City, lets focus on the Land. Instead of Building, lets concentrate on Gardening. The cuvette genevoises, framed by the lake and the mountains, is a historic landscape of boundless imaginaries of nature, of pastoral and sublime beauty, and of scenic pastimes. This is the Elyseum dreamt by Rousseau, and notre jardin championed by Voltaire. In this landscape, we see glimpses of many gardens—gardens of agricultural estates, like the Vineyards of Satigny and the vegetable patchwork of Bardonnex, gardens of social and intellectual utopias, as the collaborative Jardin de la Cocagne, and the pleasure gardens of idyllic retreats in the Vallon du Versoix. These and other gardens of metropolitan Geneva will be our project sites—all of them need new visions and careful approaches of designers-gardeners.

A garden is also always a social landscape. Its form inherently holds the values of ecology, of identity, and of common good. An urban territory imagined as a garden is an ecological, social and political project. Cultivating land doubles as cultivating society. We will approach gardening as our ethos, and both the city and the land as gardens whose gifts sustain our life, both physical and philosophical. The urban dweller of the 21st century is a gardener.