

TERRITORIO DELLA RICERCA  
SU INSEDIAMENTI E AMBIENTE  
RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE  
DI CULTURA URBANISTICA

04

ripensare  
la città  
al presente

dal virtuale  
al reale

atti del convegno



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI  
DI NAPOLI FEDERICO II  
CENTRO INTERDIPARTIMENTALE L.U.P.T.



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ripenzare la città al presente,  
dal virtuale al reale

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## Rubriche

## **Urbanization and sub-urbanization: an hypothesis on the future of the european urban regions**

*by Harald BODENSCHATZ*

The author maintains that the European cities have been transformed into urban regions which will change drastically in the future. The contemporary urban regions are a product, a minor and an evolutionary stage of industrial society. In the future other pre-conditions will govern the urban areas. The re-birth of the city centers is a possibility while a further sub-urbanization represents yet another possibility. This essay addresses three themes: the actual socio-economic dynamics, how this affects the urban areas and which decisions might be good for future urban development.

### **Urbanizzazione e sub urbanizzazione: ipotesi sul futuro delle regioni urbane europee.**

L'autore sostiene che le città europee si sono trasformate in regioni urbane che cambieranno drasticamente nel futuro. Le regioni urbane contemporanee sono un prodotto, lo specchio e uno stadio evolutivo della società industriale. In futuro altre precondizioni governeranno le regioni urbane. Il rinascimento dei centri delle città è una possibilità mentre un'ulteriore sub urbanizzazione ne rappresenta un'altra. Il saggio affronta tre tematiche: le attuali dinamiche socio-economiche, come queste influenzano le regioni urbane, quali decisioni avrebbero effetti positivi sullo sviluppo urbano.

### **Urbanisation et suburbanisation hypothèses sur le futur des régions urbaines européennes**

L'auteur soutient que les villes européennes se sont transformées en régions urbaines qui changeront drastiquement dans le futur. Les régions urbaines contemporaines sont le produit, le miroir et le stade évolutif de la société industrielle. Dans le futur, d'autres préconditions gouverneront les régions urbaines. La renaissance des centres-villes représente une possibilité; une ultérieure urbanisation en est une autre. Cet essai s'occupe de trois thématiques: les dynamiques socio-économiques actuelles; la manière dont elles influencent les régions urbaines; les décisions qui auraient des effets positifs sur le développement urbain.

### **Urbanización y sub-urbanización: hipótesis sobre el futuro de las regiones urbanas europeas**

El autor afirma que las ciudades europeas se han convertido en regiones urbanas que van a cambiar de forma drástica. Las regiones urbanas contemporáneas son un producto, un espejo y una etapa evolutiva de la sociedad industrial. En futuro otras pre-condiciones gobernarán las regiones urbanas. El renacimiento de los centros de las ciudades es una posibilidad; la otra es una mayor sub-urbanización. El sabio se enfrenta a tres temáticas: las dinámicas socio-económicas, como éstas dinámicas afectan a las regiones urbanas y cuáles decisiones tomar.

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## Städtelechen und unter-städtebau hypothesen ueber der zukunft der europaeischen stadt landschaften

Der Autor behauptet, das die europaeischen Staedte sich in Stadtlandschaften verwandelt haben, die sich in Zukunft drastisch veraendern werden.

Die heutigen Stadtlandschaften sind ein Produkt, der Spiegel und eine Entwicklungstufe der industriellen Gesellschaft.

In Zukunft werden andere Einflusse der Stadtlandschaft beherrschen.

Eine Moeglichkeit ist das Wiederaufleben des Stadtkerns, eine andere ist die noch weitere Stadtausdehnung.

Der Artikel beruehrt 3 Themen: die heute soziale und wirtschaftliche Dynamik; wie diese die Stadtlandschaften beeinflussen und drittens welche Entscheidungen eine positive Wirkung auf die Entwicklung der Stadt haben koennte.



*Lipsia. Shrinking city*

## Urbanization and suburbanization. Assumptions about the future of european urban regions

by *Harald BODENSCHATZ*<sup>1</sup>

The renaissance of the city is a hot topic in Europe. But what does the term renaissance mean? Generally it designates the renaissance of the inner city, the complex, mixed used inner city. The term renaissance is often applied to the city center only. Is such a perception appropriate?

Does it mean that suburbanization is in decline? I assume that European cities have turned into urban regions which will change drastically in the future. Contemporary urban regions are a product, mirror, and stage of the industrial society. In the future, other preconditions will rule urban regions. What preconditions are these? The renaissance of the inner city is one option, whereas further suburbanization represents another one. It mainly depends on the farsightedness of politicians that keep radical socio-economic changes in mind that determines which option is going to prevail. We will probably experience a partial renaissance of the inner city as well as partial growth of suburbia. Both will be accompanied by either partial decay of suburbia or partial decay of the inner city. There are already vast and increasing differences among cities. Since the breakdown of communism we have witnessed a development unmatched in its disparities. Even locations within cities face different futures.

I would like to address three topics:

1. What socio-economic trends can be seen today?
2. How do they affect the urban region?
3. Which decisions would have positive effects on urban development, hence should be made? My questions regard Europe, and when speaking of Europe I am predominantly thinking of Central Western Europe. There is one point I would like to clarify in advance: I will not be able to give satisfactory answers to all these questions.

### 1. Departing from industrial society

Where do we stand today? What socio-economic trends are taking place? We all know that European cities are exposed to drastic economic and social changes. They face tremendous new challenges such as globalization, aging societies, shrinking population figures, shrinking household sizes, increasing social divisions, decreasing resources of public authorities, and partial decline of cities. Typical features of post-war European societies are about to vanish, of these I would only like to mention comparatively short periods of education, clearly defined lifestyles of different age groups, stable jobs, a defined daily routine, a defined yearly

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Il saggio è già apparso su *The Urban Reinventors Issue 1 June 07 Confronting Strategies in Urban Reinvention*, bollettino di ricerca universitario. La traduzione dal tedesco è di Annette Weichel.

routine, a clear position of political and social institutions, relatively stable sources of public income, and low energy prices. The departure from a relatively stable industrial society towards a postindustrial society, as we may call it, is the major characteristic of change in our urban regions.

This particular characteristic shapes others as well, e.g. ageing societies, diminishing numbers of inhabitants, increasing numbers of single households, and shrinking resources for public authorities. None of these developments should be examined on its own. Only against the background of the departure from an industrial society do they turn into hot topics. In this context, the current change of European urban regions gains a different significance than the changes that occurred during the post-war era.

## 2. Development trends of urban regions

Some trends underlying this change impair the chances of European suburbia, for example long educational periods and the demand for lifelong learning will turn the inner-city into a preferred living space for a longer period of time. Generally speaking, educational facilities tend to be located in the inner city. The ageing of society will make the inner city even more interesting because services for elderly people will be located here. In addition, persons employed in the so-called creative business will settle in the inner city, because irregular working times oblige them to demand services at unorthodox times. Employees obliged to remain extremely flexible with their jobs will prefer to live in the inner city, too. If somebody is to work for the same enterprise only for a few years it makes sense to live close to the place of action. Singles, on the other hand, rely on places of social gathering predominant in the inner city.

Knowing all this, the rise of the inner city seems certain and only a question of time. This impression is deceptive though, since there are trends contradicting the rise of the inner city. On one hand, many inner city venues for daily shopping disappear and noise, exhaust, and cars clog up public space. On the other hand, the everlasting search for parking spaces, as well as annoying traffic jams turn car driving into a nightmare. Safety and cleanliness are anything but perfect. The same applies to schools. Rising social tensions degrade the quality of living. Suburban space holds the following pull-factors: Work and living space close to nature, relatively homogeneous social neighborhoods, lower property prices, less stress, less noise, less exhaust, more safety, an environment supposedly fit for children, etc.

Please allow me to briefly comment on German suburbia. In contrast to the inner city we know fairly little about suburbia in Germany. Experts rarely discuss negatively connoted suburbia, as priorities of magazines, conferences, and faculties of architecture show. This is different in the United States. There seems to be consent on urban correctness: Suburbia disintegrates the traditionally compact European city. Suburbia promotes de-settlement, accelerates the growth of a non-sustainable urban region, intensifies socio-spatial segregation, and symbolizes the middle classes giving up their responsibility for the city as a whole. Suburbia expresses the egoism of the middle classes, pollution, as well as anti-urban culture of the middle classes. Such a point of view does not allow for a differentiated approach to suburbia.





Not only is the absence of knowledge not the problem, but rather the surprising fact that society ignores the modest knowledge that does exist. Indeed, suburbia does not seem to be too big of a problem in Germany: neither a problem for society, nor a problem for the expert society, and absolutely no problem for big politicians.

Many Germans believe suburbia to be a typically American phenomenon. Without a doubt, the situation in Germany is different: German suburbia seems less terrible than American suburbia.

Until now, we set neat borders to our suburbia, borders that cannot be crossed or, more precisely, borders that will only be crossed if planners create the possibility to do so. Thus, suburbia cannot occupy as much space as in the US. German suburbia comprises neat borders and a certain architectural density. Hence, Germany is used to a nicely planned suburbia that grows rhythmically step by step and plan by plan, a suburbia that does not spread out like an oil puddle. Another basic reason adds to our complacency: our suburbia does not waste as much energy as the American sprawl. The American system depends on low energy prices: On the lowest fuel prices that keep mobility affordable, on low electricity prices that make air conditioning and other achievements of civilization a cheap matter of course. Low oil prices are a precondition of American suburbia. In Europe, we do not depend on oil to the same degree, since gasoline is a lot pricier and we have managed to sustain public transportation systems, which nowadays have to be re-invigorated in the States. What is further, we try to build our vehicles as fuel efficient as possible, which applies to the other states of Central Western Europe as well.

Suburbia varies throughout Europe depending on its provincial location, urban spatial typology, the social structure of its users and inhabitants, as well as its functions. Today, suburbia appears as a mosaic of mainly isolated fragments of different housing facilities enriched by infrastructure facilities, by retail stores and offices as well as subdivided by transport networks.

Small historical centers are a characteristic of European suburbia.

Central Western Europe, especially France and Great Britain, has experienced a tough social exclusion of non-privileged classes that had to settle in compact suburbs consisting of social housing facilities. In the USA, publicly financed apartments are mainly located at the margin of downtown.

Another characteristic trait of Central Western Europe is the coexistence of suburban social tenement facilities and one-family houses of different quality standards. In Central and Eastern Europe, the togetherness of different housing types was unwanted. Housing construction was limited to huge, industrialized mass housing estates. Western style suburbia never developed, which is one of the core differences between Eastern and Western urban development. Today, this inequality has disappeared. Luxurious housing estates mushroom in suburban areas of socialist cities. They drastically contrast those simple apartments for the masses created under socialist industrialized housing construction programs.

European suburbia is not a monotonous structure of the middle classes, an appendix to the socially mixed urban center-as often stated. Suburbia reflects the disparities of society. Hence, it is neither coherent nor common. Suburbia is split-or colorful, as you wish-in

a social and functional way. Suburbia's disruption appears more coarse-grind than the compact inner city's disruption. Altogether, European suburbia is a dynamic formation; a formation whose dynamics emancipated themselves from other dynamic processes. Nonetheless, its spatial and social dynamics apply to a few places only because the majority of suburbia hardly changes. Urban regions are losing their inhabitants while suburbia grows as a whole-this was particularly true in Eastern Germany.

Given European suburbia's dynamics, not only is its dimension slowly changing, but its inner structure. Older suburban regions are in danger of losing their attractiveness. This does not only apply to publicly financed



housing estates but to one-family houses as well, e.g. when functional and architectural components depreciate or the housing area turns into a transit zone. However, parts of suburbia do not deteriorate as tremendously as in the USA because European home owners and home producers are not as flexible. Europe has no experience with dying suburban shopping centers.

Why is it so difficult to politicize suburbia in Europe? The answer probably depends on the political explosiveness of the topic. Subsidies and low energy costs affect our current spatial way of living. Anybody touching one of these issues provokes weighty parts of the economy and the voters. This problem incriminates any urban policy supposed to actively influence adverse socio-spatial trends.

### **3. Policies for the urban region**

Due to the diversity of highly different urban trends, the future of European urban regions remains uncertain. It will certainly depend on political action though. I would like to distinguish three parts of urban development policy: the city center, the inner city, and the suburban periphery. Subsequently I would like to ask: Which fundamental political decisions are desirable for urban regions?

#### **3.1 Policy of the renaissance of centers**

If we discuss the renaissance of the European city, we refer to its center. Private investment focuses on the center, urban policies aim to strategically re-centralize, and the perception of, as well as the controversy about architecture and urban design, revolve around the center. The center represents the modern urban region to the inside as well as the outside. Pictures of the center are a means of luring tourists into a city; they are the advertising envoys of competing cities. Only the center can fulfill this role. It is unique and symbolizes the characteristics of a city, its history and architectural climax, as well as its most important institutions. For a long

time, many people believed that the center would lose its significance and that hierarchies would vanish. They were wrong. An attractive center can offer the best service locations, plus it can tie a highly mobile urban-middle class to a city in the long run.

There is no better publicity for a wider urban region—a spatial and economic entity of an increasingly globalized public—than a renewed city center. Local policies have been adapted to this development: They support the renaissance of the center by means of a radical re-centralization instead of de-centralization—the prevalent policy of past decades. Note: this policy does not apply to all city centers nor does it apply to all parts of the city centers.

In most European cities, architectural efforts concentrate on the city center. The most eminent one being London. Berlin surely sets a special example: Since the Nineties, major construction projects, the attention of the public and inevitable discussions about urban design issues have concentrated on the city center.

### **3.2 Policies for the renaissance of the remaining inner city**

Strengthening the center simply is not enough. Parts of the remaining inner city are characterized by decreasing purchasing power, insufficient investment, and the concentration of social problems. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the center and the rest of the inner city.

Altogether it can be noted that the gap in development between the center and the remaining inner city has widened over the past decades, i.e. the renaissance of the inner city means often a mere renaissance of the center, whereas vast areas of the remaining inner city do not prosper. Stagnating or dissipating areas demand their own strategies because downtown can only develop if the surrounding areas do not remain disconnected. When strengthening quarters of the inner city, one should concentrate on strengthening their district centers as well. Their revitalization affects the inner city as a whole. People often underestimate and hence do not care for the enormous development potential inherent in district centers: the bundling of economic activity. In these small centers, districts can develop and display their distinct and different profiles. District centers represent certain districts both to their inhabitants and to strangers; they display local identity.

Centers of inner city districts were not appropriately taken care of. Public funds for urban renewal were spent on housing estates instead of public buildings and space. Nonetheless, there is a social dimension to the revitalization of district centers: Good shopping opportunities, cultural facilities, and well cared-for public space increase their social status, ameliorate the quality of living of their inhabitants, and strengthen the pride in their district.

### **3.3 Limitation and stabilization of suburbanization**

Suburbia belongs to the European city, and a policy of urban renewal should qualify it. Suburbia is not the product of a natural process but the result of a social framework implied by political means. I would like to remind you of tax deductions, road construction, infrastructure development, artificially low fuel prices, and other automotive subsidies.

Today we complain about shrinking cities instead of sprawling cities. Generally speaking, even shrinking cities tend to be sprawling. The European sprawl is a severe social problem and

it ought to be reduced. Most of all, the conditions allowing for, respectively encouraging, the sprawling of cities have to change, for example subsidies should be cut, construction outside of urban areas should be rendered costlier, less inhabited areas should be partially densified, the new use of conversion areas should be encouraged, and the life in inner cities should be made especially attractive. Cooperation within the urban region is vital. Ideally, there would be incentives to construct within existing built-up districts or within brownfield conversion areas. It should become a general law for people willing to construct somewhere outside of town to have a good reason. In addition, they should mainly be allowed to do so at traffic junctions of public transportation.

In April of 2001, the previous German government appointed a council for sustainable development. This council formulated the well-supported target of lowering the enormous daily spatial consumption to 30 hectares. It can be very helpful to set a goal such as the 30 hectares since it is easier to bundle initiatives and to reach the public with one idea. Experts, on the other hand, should still feel obliged to ask how a decrease in spatial consumption should look like in detail and how the existing urban sprawl can be reduced; how suburbia can be made denser and more valuable. Perhaps they could even ask if suburbia should be deconstructed in one place or another at a certain point of time. In suburban space, the urban design quality is often low. Its aim should be the positioning and design of small centers or central meeting points, the design of public space, non built-up space, and transport corridors, as well as the design of borders, respectively transitions, linking suburbia to the rest of the city, building areas of onefamily houses or attached houses, increasing architectural quality, promoting an adequate functional mixture and social diversity, rebuilding parts of suburbia more densely, creating space for parking, connecting suburbia with public transportation, designing landmarks to promote a common identity, etc.

The quality of urban design is increasingly becoming a factor of sustainability and a factor of economic reason. We should fight against its leading to social discrimination. Good urban development should be available to everyone, not only to the privileged class as can be seen in most third-world and US cities. We urgently need to ask ourselves how life, work, and relaxation in compact cities can be made more attractive—a key condition in fighting further sprawling. In brief: We need a strategy to professionally design urban regions.

### *Conclusion*

A few weeks ago the Biennale of Architecture started once again in Venice. This time its motto was very ambitious: city, architecture, society. Richard Burdett, one of the most experienced urban planners in Europe, professor at the London School of Economics, adviser of the New Labour Party and of the mayor of London in urban planning, was its director. In a few interviews he announced his fundamental message: In a time of tough economic and social changes, cities urgently require political leadership, controlled suburban spatial expansion, and a revitalization of the compact city. Who is the political subject of such a policy? Richard Burdett has not told us yet.