

Brownfields, from opportunities to development projects

Constraints that stakeholders face in the redevelopment process

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Abstract

As many other countries, Switzerland is today faced with problems linked to extensive-style urbanization. In the last few decades, urban development has to a large extent been taking place on the outskirts of cities, often in small municipalities. Demand-side elements have often been emphasized to explain this phenomenon: distaste for city dwelling, desire for individual homeownership, expansion of household living spaces (square meter living space/person) etc [1]. However, the planning system is also increasingly being seen as playing an important role, notably through the excessive supply of buildable zones in peripheral municipalities.

Currently, there is a political push to reverse this tendency. Firstly because this Swiss style urban sprawl is increasingly putting pressure on agricultural and nature areas. Secondly because the demographic growth in the main urban areas is strong, while housing production is having a hard time following. In these areas, there is a structural lack of housing [2] which is in turn making households go further into the “back country” to find housing. Real estate prices are soaring, and the transport infrastructures are more and more saturated. Consequently, the objective of reducing urban sprawl cannot be attained only through urban containment but also requires large scale urban development, within the urban areas.

In this perspective, brownfield land has a real potential. However, few systematic studies have been conducted on the issue of brownfield redevelopment in Switzerland. Valda and Westermann [3] estimate the total quantity of brownfield land in Switzerland, which could be redeveloped, to be around 17 million square meters, in other words more than the surface of the city of Geneva. 80% is located on the Swiss plateau (urbanized part of the country), of which a large part in the

important urban areas. Considering the current market conditions, the situation looks globally favorable to redevelopment. According to the study conducted, a large majority of the brownfields are at the stage where ideas or a redevelopment project exist. Nevertheless, in many cases the actual redevelopment is having a hard time moving forward. Both supply side elements and demand side elements are cited as causes. Thus in the study by Valda and Westermann, owners of brownfield sites name the lack of identifiable investors and final users as the main constraint, followed by land-use planning measures and the absence of financial help to engage in the preliminary measures (decontamination for instance). In other studies however [4] problems linked to ownership of the land - such as the presence of a large number of owners, or the difficulty to deal with owners unwilling to take part in the process - are also named as barriers to redevelopment. Though it is no doubt methodologically useful to separate the different constraints and look at them individually – as Adams et al. [5] have done on the issue of ownership constraints on brownfield sites in several UK cities – in many cases the interplay between them makes them hard to isolate. For that matter, Adams et al.’s analysis points out that many of the attitudes that landowners have towards redevelopment are in fact influenced by the estimated outcomes of the development process. Thus, the different constraints act jointly to increase the complexity of redevelopment projects and may in this way increase the dissuasive effect on the actors taking responsibility for development.

As such, this article aims to get a better image of the interplay between the different constraints within the process of brownfield redevelopment and the way they affect the developers’ decision to go forth with the project. Our starting point is the hypothesis that the complexity or perceived complexity of brownfield development plays a fundamental role in refraining development, for it increases uncertainty on possible outcomes. Our analysis is based on two case studies set in two medium size Swiss cities and comprising land owned at least partially by the Swiss railway company (CFF). The CFF are an interesting actor, for they are both a user of land for their main activities, but they also own an important stock of buildings and are increasingly trying to pursue profitable redevelopment opportunities. The focus of the study is primarily on the rational and strategies of the actor(s) acting as developers and their relations with the other “private” actors involved. For the purpose of analysis, we can distinguish three key roles in the process, the initial landowner(s), the developer(s) and the final investor(s), bearing in mind that these roles are at times taken up by the same actor. The development process can be segmented into two distinct phases: the land development phase, which leads to the securing of the development rights and fixes the contributions of the different private and public actors to public infrastructures and spaces, and the real estate development phase, which leads to the granting of the building permit and the construction itself. Our attention will be on the moment in which they enter the process and the rationale behind this decision. We expect to find that redevelopment has been more likely to occur in cases where the public has set up a strategy for reducing complexity.

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