

Whither sustainability? Governance and regional integration in the Glatt Valley¹

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Abstract

This paper problematises the concept and practice of integrative planning – one of the central tenants of sustainability. We contend that, in practice, planning for the broader goal of spatial integration has the effect of producing a fundamentally paradoxical and contradictory social space, a form of urbanisation (or suburbanisation) that reinforces some of the problems which sustainability seeks to address. Drawing on an empirical base of observations of transport integration initiatives in the region of the Glatt Valley, and interview work in the field, this paper examines how integrative spatial planning strategies sanction further fragmentation. Observed in the Glatt Valley were attempts to consolidate infrastructure towards optimising capital accumulation along particular axes of flows. Housing, transport, and economic development were three key areas that required integration. The apparent integration of the region, however, is contrasted against a fragmented field of governance and an ambiguous set of winners and losers. The research confirms that integrative strategies can entrench and exacerbate existing tendencies of fragmented governance, and in fact, generate new rounds of fragmentation with respect to land use and social worlds.

Introduction

There is not much dispute about the broad definition of sustainable development – that it spans economic, social, and environmental issues, and that while these can be conceived as pillars, concentric circles or a Venn diagram (Rydin 2010), the main goal towards achieving sustainability is the integration these three dimensions. In the field of planning, some further maintain that sustainable development necessitates new cross-disciplinary approaches that break out of old planning modes clearly ill-equipped to address foundational change. ‘Integration’ thus became a key concept in the sustainability discourse (Nadin 2001; Cameron et al. 2004; Holden 2012). As Holden (2012, 308) explained:

Integration is considered one of the first order principles to implement and institutionalize sustainable development [...] It is the primary legacy of sustainable development institutionalization internationally in the 1980s and 1990s [as it's] implementation demands unprecedented levels of cooperation and collaboration since solutions are beyond any one sector, any one discipline, or any one government to solve, and process matters from the grand plan to the fine detail.

The notion of 'integration' with respect to the provision of transport infrastructure, however, has been the subject of much debate – particularly concerning attempts to integrate transport infrastructure towards the seamless movement of capital. Enright (2012), Cowen (2010) and Martin (2013) are prominent authors on this subject. Examining the integrated mass transit infrastructure project aimed at developing a Grand Paris, Enright reveals that the investment of public transportation planning was not aimed at facilitating movement of the public, as much as it was about strategically ensuring investment flows in the area. Essentially, new train stations were intended to attract investment in real estate and development, and subsequently inflated property values generated micro growth poles around these new stations, where the upper class, mobile elite would take up residence. Likewise, Martin (2013) and Cowen (2010) examined logistical integration in the freight industry. They show that the boundaries thrown up by spaces where water meets land were supposed to be overcome by technological advancements and the standardisation of infrastructural modernisation: The goal being the production of a seamless "logistical surface" (Martin 2013), where container ships are just "giant floating warehouses shuttling back and forth between fixed points," (Sekula 2000, quoted in Martin 2013), "promoting the continuum from door to door" (Martin 2013, 1023), and maximising the efficiency of flows of capital. The problem, as these authors showed, was that the de-linking of alternate pathways was also made possible. In the case of Enright's work, mobility for low-income or unemployed residents was reduced. Martin (2013) and Cowen (2010), respectively, securing integrated links in the production chain also depend on disconnecting of transport networks from localised contexts.

In earlier research as well, Hesse and myself (Carr and Hesse 2013; Hesse 2014) have built on these ideas. We looked at the “space of flaws” to denote the difficulties in synchronising integrated development under conditions of accelerated economic and urban-regional growth pressure. It was reminiscent of rapidly industrialising regions, where planning institutions tried to keep up with the dynamics and consequences of rapid growth. Urban historians termed this ‘flawed urbanisation’ (Reif 2012, quoted after Hesse 2014).

With respect to sustainability, this inevitable delinking and production of flaws confirms the research of Krueger and Gibbs (2007) – that sustainable development is invariably a paradox. On the one hand, sustainable development signifies the normative of generating a better world. On the other hand, in the process of addressing and resolving problems, it is often the realisation of other problems, if not also the preservation of current problems (e.g. capitalist relations), that results.

In the Glatt Valley – an area under growth pressure – we show that infrastructural integration maintains, or leads to further, fragmentation. We confront challenge the intentions of integrative planning with the ‘hard’ realities political economic development. It is the improbability of an integrated sustainability transition that we will show you here.

Object of Study & Methods

The Glatt Valley - the primary object of our study – spans roughly across the 11th and 12th Districts of the City of Zurich and spreads northeast towards the Zurich Airport, encompassing a number of neighbouring municipalities sitting on, or near, the Glatt River. The area is currently transforming under growth pressure, forcing municipalities – which are sparsely staffed, characterised by very close-knit relations, and function on systems of ‘militia government’ – to co-ordinate beyond traditional and administrative borders. Generally perceived as a collection of colliding as well as overlapping spaces of negotiation and engulfing a complex set of institutions that have varying sets of responsibility and jurisdictional arrangements (Thierstein et al. 2006), the ‘Glatt City’ (*Glatt Stadt*) refers to the urban landscape currently in transformation.

To understand infrastructure provision in the Glatt Valley, we reconstructed the discourse using qualitative methods. First, relevant documents, websites, magazines and newspapers were surveyed. Then, after establishing a general overview, we attended a variety of public presentations, community meetings, journeyed on professional tours, and had informal conversations with local scholars. Finally, over twenty-five conversational interviews were performed with planners, municipal and cantonal governing officials, real estate agents, architects, urbanists, and neighbourhood associations in the area. Participants were asked about their perceptions of spatial planning in their jurisdiction, of their capacities to address these issues, the role of local democracy and participation in such processes, and about how they perceived the overall trajectory of development.

Observations

What we heard and observed in the Glatt Valley were attempts to consolidate infrastructure towards optimising particular flows of capital accumulation. New housing, provision of transport, and local economic growth were the key targets of policy development. The apparent integration of these sectors throughout the region, however, was contrasted against a fragmented field of governance, and an ambiguous set of advantages and disadvantages.

Transformation in the Glatt Valley is steered by a particular constellation of private developers and their relation to governing institutions. Like municipalities across Switzerland, those of the Glatt Valley retain a high degree of autonomy, and operate along the tenants of direct democracy that manifests in at least two ways: 1) community meetings where problems and proposed solutions are deliberated and voted upon by those present (an active minority who tend to be land-owning citizens who have lived in the area for a long time) (Interview with Community Organization, 9.4.2014; Interviews with Government Official 5.5.2014 and 11.6.2014); 2) referendums where Swiss citizens can vote upon a given “initiative”. As most Glatt municipalities are also only sparsely staffed with planning professionals, infrastructural development is contracted out to urbanists and real estate agents. To emphasise inter-municipal cohesion, many – although not all – municipal heads have even joined forces in the branding of

the corridor as “Airport-Region Zurich” (*Flughafenregion Zürich*) (formerly ‘Glow.das Glattal’) highlighting its strategic, business-friendly location. Proponents of this group tend also to support the notion of a ‘Glatt Stadt’, and perhaps more importantly, the notion of a unified political force to counterweigh the City of Zurich (Interview with Architects, February 2014).

In this steering arrangement, ‘density’ was the buzzword that was understood to deliver the desired integration. Architects, urbanists, planners, developers, and politicians were unanimous in the view that density was the recipe for development success. This was often rationalised as the result of ratified legal instruments that restrict the amount of developable land, the financial need to respond to subsidy programs provided by upper layers of government, the desire to preserve green space and cultural heritage, and most importantly, the need to provide apartment blocks along the ‘Airport corridor’ to accommodate new high-income labour. It is important to note that many of these are not cheap: the average price for an apartment at the Richti Areal, for example, is 1.2 million Swiss Francs. The design of these stand in contrast to the single-family housing districts or historic municipal centres that remain disconnected to the primary public transit corridors. It is also important to note that many confided that the existing development was not intended for their own use. Rather, the goal of developing the airport corridor was to provide infrastructure that would sustain economic activity that would, in turn, sustain pre-existing lifestyles and organisational modes: i.e. private property, municipal autonomy – two tenets held in high esteem among those interviewed. In this respect, the strategies have been very successful.

Transport infrastructure was designed to follow functional pathways: The primary goal was to attract, assist, and provide for business development. Having grown concurrently with Zurich and the city’s emergence as a global financial centre (Diener et al 2006: 490), the airport has been a primary engine of growth in the area (Interviews, 11.6.2014). Representatives from the airport confirm a strong growth pressure, claiming that infrastructure has already reached its limit, although traffic is expected to continue to rise (Presentation 2014). Respectively, corporate headquarters have established in the large, mixed-use area of the Glatt Valley, benefitting from the dual advantage of strategic proximity to the growing airport, as well as the

availability of land on which to develop (Diener et al. 2006: 634). This has created what is now described as an ‘airport corridor’ between the airport and central Zurich (Schaafsma 2009: 175). Likewise, there was another transportation infrastructure project that was celebrated: the Glatt Tram. Built on derelict industrial sites, and completed in 2010, its purpose was said to be to strengthen this ‘airport region’, creating corridors of mobility as it winds through productive areas, connecting the City of Zurich to the airport.

In privileging economic growth and stability through the functional integration of the Glatt Valley, several potential spaces of polarisation were identified, showing the spaces of flaws that would likely result:

- *First*, rural versus urban: At one community meeting where planners and politicians expounded upon the emerging Glatt City, an elderly man stood up and ranted that this was not the trajectory he desired. He clearly wanted to retain his farming lifestyle. There were nods, as well as shaking heads, in the audience as he spoke.
- *Second*, opinion leaders versus politically disenfranchised: Several interviewees (Interviews with Community Association, 9.4.2014; Interview with Governmental Official, 14.5.2014) remarked that turn-out at the community meetings was low, and that it was always the same faces, leading to a situation where opinion leaders are particularly powerful agents if they can connect with the motivated voting population. Meanwhile those that do not, or cannot, participate are marginalised, or pushed to the receiving ends of policy decisions. This latter group tends to be composed of younger, newer community members who moved to the area to be close to Zurich or the airport.
- *Third*, labour versus residents: Growth pressure is fuelling an ambivalence about where new labour should be housed. High-income earners can afford the new apartments. Lower income earners, however, will face longer commutes. This fosters a planning dilemma concerning mobility versus housing, and forges life style divides between urban apartment dwellers and older rural residents.
- *Fourth*, stronger versus weaker municipalities: Some municipalities refuted the ‘Glatt Stadt’, seeing little advantage for their constituents, and charging that some municipalities

were using the notion of an integrated Glatt Valley for their own political economic agendas (Interviews with Government Officials 7.5.2014 and 11.6.2014). This reflects the general jurisdictional limitations of municipal authorities that tend to react along NIMBY logics concerning costs and YIMBY logics concerning gains.

Conclusion

The Glatt Valley is, without a doubt, a crucial component of the Zurich agglomeration. However, despite efforts to unify the area, our analyses suggest that policy aims towards integration have the potential to reinforce or ignite further divides. Our research thus confirms the critical work of Enright, Martin and Cowen – that integration generates new rounds of fragmentation and contradiction. Claims of integrated planning at the level of the Zurich region contrast with practices of policy-making and participation that are quite local and segmented, and lack a certain rationale for dealing with the whole.

The question then, is whether or not ‘integration’ is even possible. And, if it is not where does that leave sustainable development? In the Glatt, measures targeted sector integration towards functional development without addressing existing axes of political marginalisation and polarisation. Current transformations indicate that while some problems may be addressed (such as sustainable economic growth), others will deepen (land prices, mobility), and new ones are *likely* to emerge (social stratifications). Municipalities in the Glatt Valley are building their own “spaces of flaws” (Carr and Hesse 2013; Hesse 2014). In this way, we thus add to and confirm Krueger and Gibbs’s argument (2007) that sustainable development is a paradox.

Endnotes

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