

(Re-)reading Rossi's Residential Areas: Zurich as a Case Study

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PRIMARY ELEMENTS AND THE CONCEPT OF AREA Residential Districts as Study Areas

In Rossi's studio at ETH Zurich between 1972 and 1974, students were asked to produce detailed surveys of the city's central districts. The analysis of historical urban fabric in its existing form was part of a design methodology based on typology, which he cultivated as a practical application of *Architettura della Città*. Based on the premise that the chapter "Residential Districts as Study Areas" was a theoretical precursor to Rossi's ETH semesters, it is possible to review the Zurich of today in relation to Rossi's 1966 text.

Seen conceptually, Zurich's ascendance to a global status is consistent with a pattern correlating political events, physical changes in the urban fabric, and population growth. Throughout its history the city was animated by an impulse towards centrifugal expansion. In the sixteenth century, the militant effort to impose the Reformed faith on other cantons rendered Zurich the centre of Protestant Switzerland, lending it a Europe-wide significance. In the nineteenth century, its drive for political reform and modernisation led to Zurich hosting two important federal institutions, the Polytechnikum and the first section of the railways, both programmatic elements for the creation of a unified, modern Switzerland. In 1855, the same year the Polytechnikum was founded, the medieval walls were torn down, initiating a long-term trend of urban expansion. 19 outlying mu-

nicipalities were politically incorporated in a first stage in 1893 and a second one in 1934, practically doubling the size of the city. At the same time the population increased greatly with industrialization and the creation of large factory quarters, both along the railways and to the north and west of the main city.

This process of urban growth underlines the creation of what Rossi calls "residential districts": characterful, relatively small areas, clearly distinct from each other yet stitched together into an urban collage. Zurich's heterogeneity provides an excellent illustration of the Rossian city as "a system" of "relatively autonomous parts", "each with its own characteristics".¹ In Zurich these "parts", each with its own personality, are at the same time familiar equivalents of pan-European urban tableaux. The narrow, winding medieval streets of the historical core, the palatial grandeur of the tiny old banking district, the working-class housing colonies of Red Zurich, 1930s stone-clad rationalist institutions and 1950s residential towers appear like conceptual miniatures of European urban episodes. Like a precursor of Rossi's later *Città analoga* collage, Zurich thus becomes a cabinet of urban fragments, each with its *raison d'être* and own limited order.

Since the city is so small, the various cityscapes occur in restricted territories, sometimes only a few hund-

¹ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* 1966, p. 65.

red meters long and a couple of streets wide. Characteristically of Zurich, the borders between these districts, be they natural or man-made, are prominent and final. The natural constraints that first defined the settlement, two low mountain ranges and the glacial lake between, have continued to shape its development leading to a paradoxical, “bipolar” growth. When natives refer to the split structure of their city, they perceive a rift between one unit formed by the historical centre and its immediately adjacent quarters, and another comprising industrial and postindustrial growth to the West and the North. The northern expansion towards Schwamendingen, the Oerlikon industrial district and Kloten Airport is interrupted by the artificial rural idyll of Zürichberg, a carefully untouched, forested hill overlooking the city. Its introverted culture of exclusive villas, little isolated farmyards and luxury hotels is replicated by the smaller settlements stringing southwards along the shores of Lake Zurich. Together they signal the formation of a “clear topography of prosperity” centered around central Zurich and extending to the so-called Goldküste along the sunny side of the lake.²

² Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron, Christian Schmid. *Studio Basel, Switzerland: An Urban Portrait*, Birkhäuser 2006, 618-620.

³ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 1966, p. 65.

Zurich’s division along the central and northern development nodes does not presuppose either is a unity. The centre is profoundly divided, sliced three ways by the river Limmat, its confluence with the river Sihl, and the wide stretch of railway that cuts across the western side of the city. In its dimensions and decisiveness, the presence of this transport infrastructure is equivalent to that of a third river in the way it cuts across the industrial city fabric. In contrast to the tendency of great European cities to conceal the railways beneath raised parapets and under ground, here they are on display, structuring the urban fabric and influencing the way people move through the city. The new apartment and office towers built along this stretch are oriented towards a panoramic view grounded by a field of steel rails, its horizon underlined by parallel cables and passing trains.

The character of the medieval centre and that of the nineteenth-century bourgeois and industrial residential districts and the contrast between modernist insertions and the gentrified old factory quarters attest to the fact that Zurich’s heterogeneity is not the effect of simple functional zoning. Rossi’s reading helps us understand that Zurich is an assembly of “morphological and structural units, [each] characterized by a certain urban landscape, a certain social content, and its function”.³ Its characteristic heterogeneity is the prerogative of residential districts as “complex urban artifacts”, densely grouped together yet abruptly separated into distinct units of collective meaning.

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