

Glatt!
**From Suburb
to City?**



Résumé International Summer Academy Zurich

Markus Schaefer

Thanks a lot for the invitation Daniel and Mathias. It is an honor to be here and it has been a really fantastic day of reviews. I will try to summarize my impressions, which will be hard with all the input we received in just one day, but with a bit of support, I think I can do it. Unlike the studio presenters before me, I have no movie, no music, and no background activities, so I need your help. I propose that whenever you think I make a good point, when I get something right, you give me an *ay*, and when you disagree, you give me a *nay*, a bit like in the English parliament.

You are here at arguably one of the best architecture schools on the planet. I hope I can say this without any bias as I did not study here myself. However, urbanism and urban research still have a difficult position at this institution. I believe there are four different reasons for this: First, the generation of architects before us has with great skill and determination established the architectural object as the paradigmatic Swiss project, and this is what most students come here to study. *ay!*

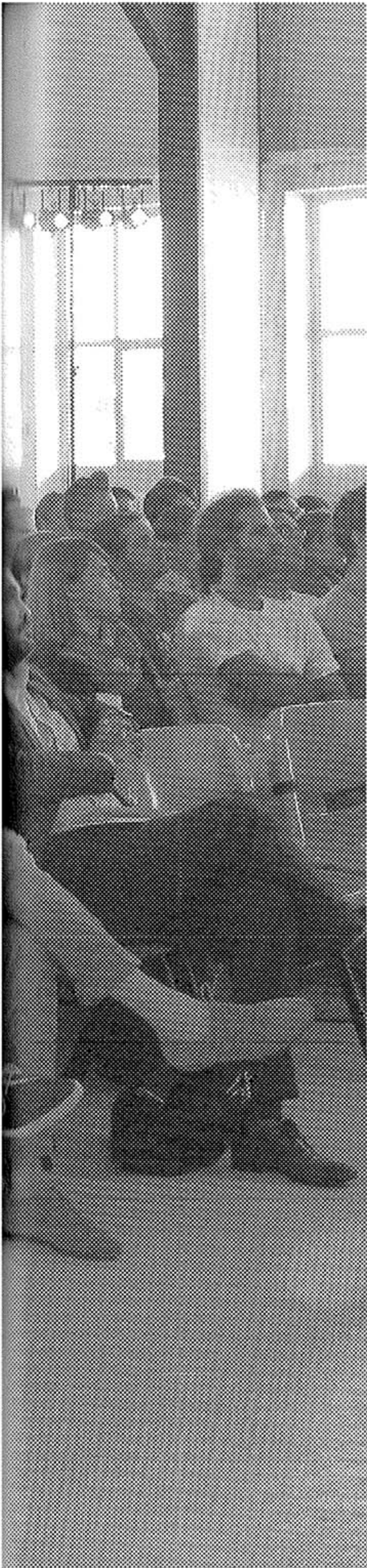
Second, the Swiss building economy is still experiencing a boom that does not seem to be slowing down yet. Working on buildings is more lucrative than producing urban plans, and thanks to the open competition system, the market is also accessible to young architects. There is very little need for a niche strategy in today's economic climate. Third,

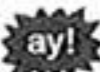
Switzerland does not have a very strong urban design culture and has few instruments to design the large scale.

Regional *planning* on the other hand is well established. As a result, Zurich, like many other regions, is shaped mainly by infrastructure, not by design. Lastly, and this is critical, from my outsider's point of view,

there is a lack of a clear academic basis, a theoretical foundation for urbanism that is both coherent and innovative.

Studios are either interested in new ideas and lack foundation—so there is not quite enough *Think in the Tank* *clapping* *nay!* *ay!*—or they are steeped in erudition but lack trust in the new. Compared to the precision with which architecture studios are taught, urban design lacks clarity and is often treated, by students and professors alike, as an afterthought, a discipline struggling for recognition. Even professionals outside academia bemoan the fact that precisely in an era of urban growth we have few instruments and very little theory to work with. I assume that this is about to change



through a series of initiatives, new appointments, and platforms like the ONA building we are currently in, but in today's situation, producing such a master plan for a city in the Glattal as well as organizing the summer course you participated in is a much bigger achievement than you visitors can probably imagine. The organizers of this course therefore deserve a lot of credit.  clapping

In this summer course you worked in the very specific context of Switzerland.

Ours is a nation which for years and even centuries stubbornly resisted the accumulation of power and the development of an urban center.

We are as proud of our process of decision-making as of the distribution both of political power and urban mass. This tradition stems from the peculiar make-up of the country where a lot of responsibility is vested in the municipality leading to a distributed and often fragmented decision-making process. And in few countries in the world do politicians on the provincial and national levels have so much responsibility yet so little actual power. Only recently has an understanding of the metropolitan scale of Zurich been emerging. Zurich is increasingly understood as a polycentric urban region, a functional region, which is much larger than the core city. Only as the sum of its parts is it able to compete on a global scale. We need a better understanding of the metropolitan region as well as a political process and planning instruments to ensure that the region withstands current development pressures and retains its qualities.

Now *you* of course, or at least many of you, come from very different backgrounds.

Cities all over the globe are changing rapidly, and in our current multi-polar world system they develop in many different directions. Some cities transform in a well-planned manner, some grow informally. Some cities grow, others shrink. Cities sprawl, functional regions emerge, and new contenders appear.

According to McKinsey, the middle-weight cities will be the largest source by far of overall global economic growth. And each individual city by no means develops homogeneously. In a process of *urban splintering*, cities fragment into areas well connected to the global economy and areas left behind. We also observe a decoupling of cities from nations. London as a city, for example, is a successful, globalized urban center. England, as a nation, on the other hand, is a struggling State suffering from an ailing infrastructure, lack of an industrial base, and demographic as well as social shifts. The contemporary city system is truly global and interconnected in many ways. A global periphery no longer exists. Almost every place on earth is part of the contemporary urban system in one way or another. There is no place we can go and start anew.

As a result of this development, we can observe a high degree of volatility and instability. We experience a lot of change, but have only a limited understanding of how this change comes about and how it could be controlled. We have no clear answers or directives.

We are still working on cities very much like alchemists with many preconceived notions, some dogmata, the occasional brilliant insight, but very few hard facts.

We are a frustratingly fragmented discipline. At the same time, we are faced with two new developments that question our methods: On the one hand, large corporations are discovering cities as the next big thing. Siemens started a new division focusing on cities and infrastructure. IBM, Cisco, McKinsey, and many other multinationals are entering the area of urban development because the scale and complexity of cities legitimize their business models and global perspectives. Eco-cities or *smart-cities* are being developed like products. We will be forced to deal with these complex and complicated technological cities in the future. It would be very good to have alternatives to them. The other extreme is the informal city, the phenomenon studied by Urban-Think Tank. Many of the most rapidly developing urban centers are characterized by a lack of control. In order to work on such cities, we will need to employ informal processes and new, technologically driven, bottom-up processes, which we have yet to understand. As a discipline, we are confronted with this spectrum of phenomena. Solutions—each with their own complexities—range from the total control seemingly required to achieve sustainability to the informal processes observed in reality.

Now what are cities exactly? Can we not come to a basic understanding of cities that informs and directs our work?

Cities are a technology for civilization invented eight to ten thousand years ago. They enable people to live close together and accumulate resources from a hinterland, which early on comprised the entire known world at the time.

Based on this resource surplus, social differentiation is possible. We call this variously culture, society, or public life. Cities enable interactions and protect transactions, constituting markets and economies.

Cities are about exchange and access, and access is defined not only by space but also by time.

Time in turn is governed by infrastructure, and our infrastructures today are so incredibly powerful that they lead to large, sprawling cities, which are difficult to control. The suburbs you have been studying are ultimately the result of technological progress reshaping an ancient model. Cities act as catalysts, bringing people in contact to interact, transact, and live complex and differentiated lives.

Now, if we look at the studios as a series of case studies, we can see quite well the range of concepts and tools that architects and urban designers currently have at their disposal to deal with this complex situation. And again, I believe that these tools are not adequate yet, but let us analyze them quickly.

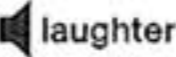
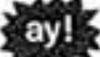
Some of these tools as well as the concerns they address are foreign to us Swiss practitioners because we live and work in very specific conditions, making your contributions all the more valuable.

Globalization makes us question hierarchies. *You* are teaching us as much as we can teach you, because there is no silver bullet for the current challenges we are facing.

If we compare the studios, we see different degrees of clarity regarding how the disciplines of architecture and urban design assert themselves in respect to other fields. I will now discuss the studios proceeding from the autonomous to the, let's say, *trans-disciplinary*. Autonomous architecture, originally referring to the work of Aldo Rossi, posits that architectural forms have intrinsic value and historic permanence while functions and social concerns change. By studying the material manifestation of architecture and its urban context—typology, iconography, and their history—new architecture can be inferred. Unfortunately, autonomy is often misunderstood to mean having a very clear idea of what the architectural object is while not being so interested in what this object does to its context. The architect as author, so the belief goes, is responsible to his own discipline only and his will to form in an act of utopian defiance against the vicissitudes of reality. Trans-disciplinarity is the other end of the spectrum. It rests on the belief that only in the exchange between disciplines can architecture be relevant, culminating at its most extreme in a deep mistrust of the discipline and its responsibilities.

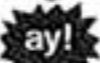
This brings us to Mark Lee's Studio, which I would describe as a kind of *Autonomous Urbanism*. The studio attempts to define urban form with the tools of the architect.

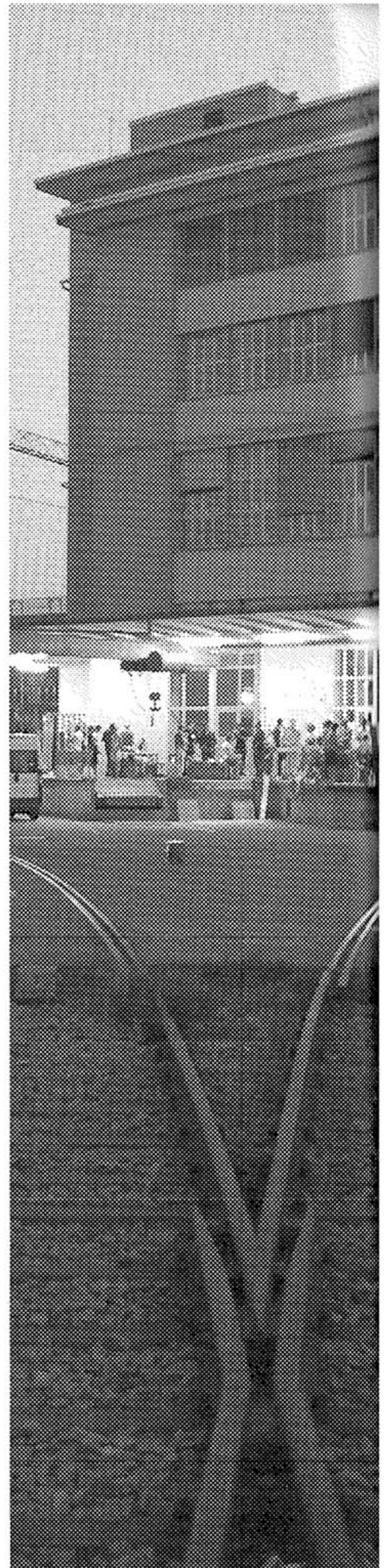
Form is seen as an act of resistance, an act against the entropy of suburbia.

But what kind of political power would someone need to produce a project on this scale, and what financial means would be required to take risks of this magnitude? Inherent in autonomous form, therefore, is a political message. It is a thought experiment in absolutist control, but all too easily this approach remains a utopian statement. And in today's permissive discourse, utopia more often than not is a safe haven, an academic game, which under the guise of *provocation* skirts real responsibility. That would be my assessment of this first studio. That would be my assessment of this first studio. You can give me an ay or a nay of course.  

We have a second autonomous proposal in my opinion with David Trottin's "périphérique—drawing the line."

This proposal claims that an act of planning can be strong enough to contain this sprawling beast called suburbia.

The proposal consists of a line of infrastructure encircling and containing a settlement area. It advocates clear functional planning, ultimately a very modernist idea. It is inspired by the Transit Oriented Development movement that originated in the United States. But if cities are about access and if access is always resulting in gradients from the very accessible to the least accessible, then hard lines are not likely to occur, especially when the demarcation is infrastructure. The concept of a hard line in urban design is a desirable but difficult concept, hard to do and defensible only under very specific circumstances, as in the case of a city wall for example in the Middle Ages or as an internal void, such as New York's Central Park. Ay or nay? 





The third studio was taught by Martin Rein-Cano from Topotek and takes landscape as its starting point, a landscape “project” to be precise. There is a visible belief in the “project,” a precise professional engagement with a found condition, both as a statement and as a tool for communication. Two points are noteworthy: first, the seductive appeal of form. The project is well done, worked out and detailed. It garners sympathies and with its precision allows for a concrete discussion. It cannot be trifled with. Second,

landscape is very much about defining relationships.

In cities that are not densely packed, landscape is a useful organizational element. If we occupy an open space with an architectural volume, it is difficult to make relations work, **but if**

we design a really well-considered open space as a kind of scaffold from which a stretch of peripheral city can draw identity, we have a surprising amount of power. 🗣️👏 **So landscape is a powerful tool for organizing territory.**

Even though the park is a formal statement that is quite alien to its context, it is more than a nicely shaped buffer space. It becomes a core element for the urban condition of the airport to transform into something new, for this infrastructural moment to be activated as an urban potential.

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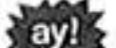

So these are three varieties of autonomy. The landscape is currently the frontrunner. It’s a bit like the Olympic Games. We have a hypothetical winner. 🗣️👏

We have two studios that worked with the large scale. Boštjan Vuga’s studio proposes to turn infrastructure into architecture. This idea also originated in modernity and was rediscovered in the 1990s in various academic settings.

Since infrastructure is so effective in shaping a territory, is it possible to join forces, co-opt it, and take advantage of it? Can we not architecturize it and turn it into something urban?

Since “form follows infrastructure” in many different ways, this is not a bad idea. But in this project, the devil is in the details. The highway would need to be changed in many ways to allow for multiple access points. As a result, transit traffic would suffer. The proposed train line would be expensive and lack passengers. The infrastructural axis would need to be bridged in many more locations for the two sides to grow together. But do these areas have enough urban potential to warrant such an investment? For this infrastructural strategy to work, a detailed understanding and development of accessibility is critical, accompanied by a precise understanding of development mechanisms, finances, and political processes between the different stakeholders.

The next studio also proposes a landscape scheme that proves again to be quite successful. Christophe Girot and Lukas Schweingruber employ landscape as an armature of identity that orchestrates and structures peripheral growth. Landscape is an interesting tool because it

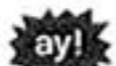
provides identity and legitimacy. It seems to represent the non-human, the non-semantic, and the absolute. It is hard to contest a landscape concept as it is not immediately read as a cultural object. It organizes a form of urbanity, with financial means only available in an urban context, yet it is not understood as urban. So one more point for the landscape architects.  

The project takes ideas from the network city concept (“Netzstadt”) that has been developed at the ETH. It is concerned with orchestrating metabolic flows in the context of an ecological urbanism. Identity and ecological quality of a landscape can really add value to the mosaic of locations, which in the end makes the metropolitan region of Zurich work, like any urban region.

An urban region should allow for as many options, as much potential, as many choices and niches, on as small and accessible a terrain as possible.

Another person working on the large scale is Don Murphy from VMX with the project *coastline management* as I would call it. He started his studio with a series of *blind dates* to illustrate the many random interactions that constitute urbanity. In the process, he managed to charm his students into absolute submission and make them state that we should not hate suburbia. The studio argues that Switzerland is about suburbia, is about idyllic life in a green landscape. We have the good fortune to live this idyllic life so close to an urban center. With large scale measures that increase the quality of this green area and at the same time direct growth, the studio proposes to manage sprawl almost like a natural phenomenon.

It is attractive to think that in the end, the metropolitan region of Zurich, in fact, Switzerland as a whole, might be nothing more than a well-made Los Angeles.

Is this an  

The last of the large scale studios was taught by Anne-Julchen Bernhardt and Jörg Leeser from BeL Associates. I am not sure what I should call their approach, maybe *reinventing pragmatism*? Their project is about accepting a pre-existing context, both the territory and the cultural mechanisms acting upon it.

They propose a forced marriage between the ideal of the public commons (“die Allmend”) and the Oklahoma land rush, the belief that in the balance of power between collective ideals and a liberalized market something unexpectedly public could emerge.

Behind this proposal is the idea that simple rules can have complex results, that planning can emerge from bottom-up processes when the mechanisms are well designed. The large scale, therefore, is

the sum of all individual decisions held in check by a few deeply held collective convictions—a surprisingly apt description of the status quo. We have now seen three autonomous studios, three large scale studios, and even though the project of this studio was not entirely clear to me, the general idea behind it is interesting. **Ay or nay?** **ay!**

We now reach the next contenders. I would call them *transfers*. Again, there are three of them. Kunlé Adeyemi proposes a version of “learning from” introduced into the discourse so famously by Venturi and Scott-Brown. The studio starts from urban research and studies three prototypical cities that are all uniquely defined by specific forms of access, by foot in Mumbai, by bus in Curitiba, and by telecom services in Lagos. Here once again, form follows infrastructure. The physical structure of these cities is a result of their regime of accessibility. Soft forms of access, such as telecom networks, are a key to understanding, and play a role in any urban design proposal. At the same time, they are hard to plan and difficult to control, but what is so inspiring about the cities the studio looked at is urbanity in its raw form. **These cities**

develop without much control and hence offer the possibility of looking at urbanity as something almost ecological. Urbanity is visibly emergent, iconoclastic, and vital.

Compared to this, our understanding of European cities seems overly static, too proper, and fatally binary in our clear differentiation of private and public, of perimeter block and open space.

European cities work well when they are dense, but they reach limits when the space requirement is multiplied by the aspirations and needs of today’s individuals, such as the 54 m² of average gross living area of an individual in Zurich. The city becomes bloated and exhibits all the problems that we see here in Zurich-Oerlikon.

Kunlé’s concerns are an important antidote to that. **ay!** It’s an ay. Fantastic!

Then we have Urban-Think Tank, Hubert Klumpner and Alfredo Brillembourg who propose a process of negotiation. They take inspiration from cities that grow, from cities that change, which have that kind of fertility. They take Kunlé’s preoccupation to the next level. However, in cities that are shaped by such bottom-up processes, power takes the role of the legal framework and rules that are imposed top-down. Depending on the culture, this means brute force, money, or access to authorities. In the case of planners, it means power of persuasion. I think the two tutors exemplify this very clearly when they, like two community workers or process master planners, by sheer force of personality, energy, and persuasion, move their studio in a particular direction. I think this approach has great potential and will be indispensable in the growing cities of the future. But Switzerland resists the accumulation of power. Decisions are taken by consensus and governed by rules and regulations. I do not mind consensus if it guarantees me a good quality of life.

Yet, are we flexible enough in Switzerland to keep up with rapid developments in the world? Will we be competitive in an urban future? This is an interesting discussion to have. A key insight from this studio is that globalization does not generate sameness everywhere. When we transfer methods and insights from one context to another, we need to understand both the original as well as the new context in order for the transfer to be meaningful. This is an insight that EM2N contributed to our symposium *Learning from Tokyo* earlier this year in Zurich. I think this is an **ay** too. **ay!**

Now, the last studio taught by Arno Brandhuber, Christopher Roth, and Sam Chermayeff, proposes a *discourse*. We reached the very end of our spectrum from the very clear disciplinary and autonomous, via the large scale and planning, to the newer approaches, the non-project-oriented approaches.

This studio represents the most extreme case. It focuses entirely on discourse. Behind this position is the understanding that when architects work, they always define. Any line an architect puts on paper excludes other possibilities.

By remaining on the level of discourse, the studio proposes to keep possibilities open longer, avoid jumping to conclusions, and delaying the rigidity of a project. The approach offers to charge a project with meaning in an almost poetic and purely semantic way and at the same time, keep all possibilities open. But how can we achieve this? Already the Structuralists told us that the definition of opposites is always a first response in semantics, that opposite terms are to semantics what platonic forms are to geometry. Whenever we do not engage with context or do not have a very clear idea where we want to go, generating opposites is always a good first step because you generate meaning without having to understand the situation too precisely. The danger is that the discourse becomes purely self-referential.

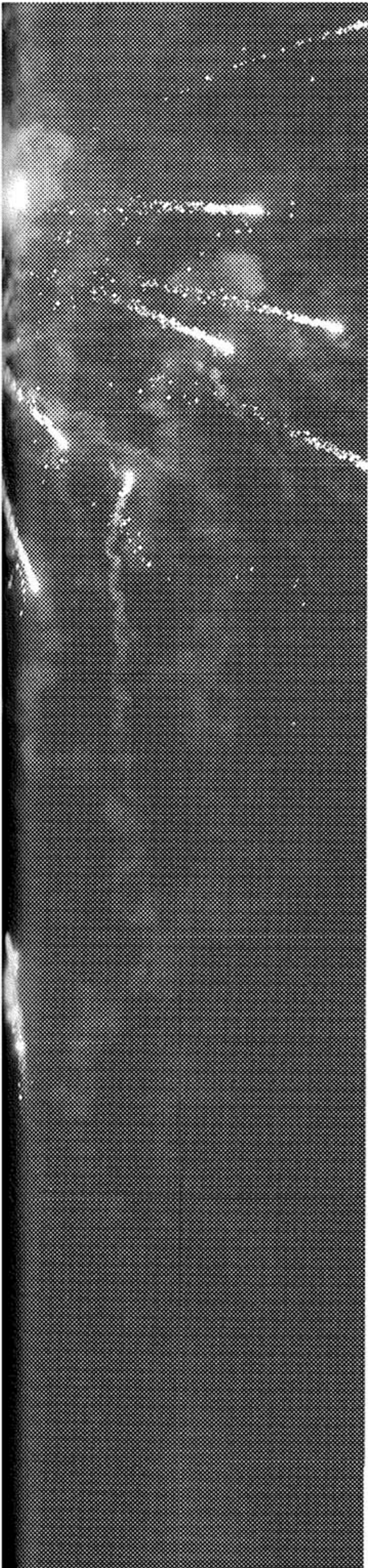
And with that, the circle closes and we reach again the autonomous architects and planners in the very beginning, so we have a circle where we went from autonomy to the large scale to different urban research studios again to a discursive autonomy. This shows how limited our tool set still is, how easily we get caught up in self-referential discussion, and how hard it is to deal with reality.

So what is the conclusion? What are the lessons we have learned? How can we teach the crocodile to plan? **laughter** The group envisions a master plan for a city of 400,000 inhabitants. In the Swiss context, this project is important. It is a political provocation, it is an illustration of a potential and it is agitation. I think this is quite interesting even though

I am doubtful and critical about the use of the tool master plan to convey this kind of concept. Nevertheless, they produced a project that is readable, understandable, and clear.

I hope that this infusion of global intelligence that you provide enables the crocodile to evolve in a more mammalian direction. **laughter** **clapping**





And what can *we* take from it? As I said at the beginning, we will face enormous challenges with cities in a future of volatile development. On the one hand, cities are the source of many of the problems we are facing in terms of resource depletion, a shortage of space, and demographic changes. On the other hand, our global urban system is the only solution to house and feed so many people on this increasingly small planet. So cities will be the main problem in the near future.

I already explained that many people are interested in this business of cities. It should be our generation's goal to ensure that we do this as intelligently and honestly as we possibly can, since the future we are facing will not be easy.

We need cities that are resilient, cities that can thrive also when parameters change, because they will. For this we need an almost ecological understanding of cities that is supported by a phenomenology of the specific and a science of the generic.

We need to end the era of alchemy, we need to come out of our postmodern niches, put our historicizing dogmata behind us, and leave academia's ivory towers. We need to rediscover the project *city* in all its many aspects and we need to do it now. And I believe that the work of the Architects Group Krokodil and this Summer Academy is truly a great contribution in this direction. Thanks a lot.

👏 clapping 🗣️ shouting

Text based on *résumé* delivered on August 4, 2012 at the International Summer Academy Zurich

