



Research Paper

Are suburbs perceived as rural villages? Landscape-related residential preferences in Switzerland



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The Swiss population has a high preference for rural villages.
- Many people also state that their place of residence is a village.
- At the same time, most Swiss live in places statistically classified as urbanised.
- The population's and experts' discourses on urbanisation diverge.
- Because of this, urban densification might very well face political opposition.

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ABSTRACT

The current land use planning discourse in Switzerland highlights the need for urban redensification and the limitation of sprawl. However, little is known of the population's residential choice and preference related to urban or rural surroundings and how sub- and peri-urban residential environments are judged. We therefore analyse preferred and perceived residence, focusing on the urban-rural dimension and related urban-rural residential preference to landscape features, amenities, and the availability of public services in the immediate living environment, controlling for socio-economic, lifestyle, and life stage characteristics.

The analyses of a 2014 representative online survey (N = 1208) show that a majority of the population prefers living in "rural villages", even though, from a more functional point of view, most of the places in which these people live could be considered suburbs at the fringes of metropolitan regions. "Suburbs", however, are among the least preferred residential environments. Moreover, an additional expert survey (N = 53) reveals a discrepancy between planning professionals and the population: experts in the fields of urban planning, nature conservancy, and monument preservation show a higher urban preference. The findings of our analyses are discussed in light of the literature on landscape and residential preferences and lead to conclusions regarding spatial planning practice.

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1. Introduction

Urban sprawl, particularly low density urban sprawl in peri-urban areas at the fringes of metropolitan regions, is widely considered to be a negative trend in the development of the built environment. Sprawl is described as wasteful with regard to natural resources (Johnson, 2001; Kahn, 2000). It changes and fragments landscapes not yet affected by housing development and transport infrastructure (Burchell, Downs, McCann, & Mukherji, 2005) and

is considered damaging to social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Therefore, planners and politicians in many countries seek to limit urban sprawl.

One concept that is widely discussed and implemented to curtail sprawl is densification, a way of limiting urban sprawl by allowing settlement growth only inside already built places with relatively low building density. Frequently, densification is related to ideas aimed at a more urban character of the built environment, using concepts such as the closed block city (e.g., Sulzer & Desax, 2015). The aim of densification is not only to reduce sprawl and minimise its negative effects, but also to create attractive residential surroundings that offer many opportunities for informal contact and bringing together work, leisure, and habitations (Castrignanò & Landi, 2013; Jacobs, 1984; Putnam, 2000).

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However, notwithstanding considerable planning efforts, sprawl continues in many places (Couch, Leontidou, & Petschel-Held, 2007; Kasanko et al., 2006; Schwick, Jaeger, & Kienast, 2011; Schwick, Jaeger, Bertiller, & Kienast, 2012), which raises the question of the reasons for this persistence despite its negative impacts on landscape and residential quality. Such reasons might include (1) many people's residential preferences towards rural environments, as well as (2) their perception of peri-urban, but not yet densified, areas as rural or "rural-like". The first reason explains that the ongoing demand for not densified (rural) areas leads to sprawl; the second explains why peri-urban areas remain satisfactory and attractive places of residence for many people, and hence why residential preferences contribute to increasing sprawl instead of decreasing it. At least in the Swiss case – which is in the focus of this paper – the following observation can be made: rurality is evidentially important to the housing market as there is a considerable demand for rural or at least rural-like, low-density peri-urban residential environments in the housing market, at least for particular groups of the public (Rérat, 2012; Salomon Cavin & Marchand, 2010; Thomas, 2011). Moreover, media reports on local referenda in not yet densified, and thus still rural-like peri-urban, municipalities show that policies to densify less densely built and populated peri-urban municipalities face opposition by the local inhabitants (e.g., *Neue Luzerner Zeitung*, 2015; Salzmann, 2014; Signorell, 2011).

Thus, the overarching aim of this paper is to examine the assumption that residential preferences for rural environments, as well as the perception of not yet densified peri-urban areas as "rural-like", lead to respective choices of rural – or at least rural-like, not densified peri-urban – residential areas, and hence contribute to the (further) sprawl of these areas and, thus, hinder the implementation of urban concepts for the densification of peri-urban areas. Moreover, we aim to explain this phenomenon and show possible new approaches towards resolving the sprawl problem in rural and peri-urban areas.

2. State of research

Residential choice and preference are studied in many disciplines and fields, ranging from economics, housing studies, sociology, and psychology to architecture and urban planning, with topics ranging from analysing the influence of specific factors on housing choice to discrepancies between different preferences or mathematical models describing housing choice as an interaction of different influences (see e.g., Timmermans, Molin, & van Noortwijk, 1993). As both literature and common knowledge show, residential choice and preference depend on a wide range of factors that are discussed in the following sections, beginning with the main topic, the urban-rural divide, and then elaborating on other factors influencing housing choice.

2.1. Residential preferences and the urban-rural divide

Scholars have analysed people's opinions and preferences regarding urban or rural residential environments and associated these with landscape and nature (Cadieux & Taylor, 2013). People diverge in their preference for different settlement types, as well as in the subjective perception of these settlement types (e.g., Herzog, 1989; Matsuoka & Kaplan, 2007). Moreover, independent of individual urban or rural residential preference, people associate different landscape elements and settlement structures with these residential categories (e.g., Feijten, Hooimeijer, & Mulder, 2008; Hocevar, 2012; Jones, 1995; Lyons, 1983; Otte & Baur, 2008; van Dam, Heins, & Elbersen, 2002). In these empirical studies on both residential preference and the individual associations of particular

residential environments with the concepts of "urban" or "rural" (and also partly "suburban"), ideas and concepts play an important role, as explained by (Bunce, 1994; Halfacree, 2007). Thus, not only the preferences regarding rural and urban residential areas are important, but also what people perceive as a rural or urban area.

Correspondingly, a second part of the literature on the urban and rural analyses historical discourses concerning ideas associated with urbanity or rurality, and anti-urbanist traditions (Cloke, 2006; Jetzkowitz, Schneider, & Brunzel, 2007; Rennie, 1991; Salomon Cavin, 2007; Walter, 2004; Williams, 1973). Anti-urbanist traditions emphasise the attractiveness of the rural as a residential environment, and associate the development of suburban areas with the longing for more rural residential surroundings (Salomon Cavin & Marchand, 2010). Studies on rurality can be divided into five fields. First, some studies analyse the concept itself (Cloke, 2006; Marco & Tironi, 1997) and discuss it with regard to planning at the urban fringe (Daniels, 1999; Qviström, 2007; Scott et al., 2013; Taylor, 2011). Second, scholars are concerned with different concepts of rurality found among the inhabitants and potential inhabitants of rural and suburban regions (Howley, 2011; Munkejord, 2006; Urbain, 2002; van Dam et al., 2002). Third, rurality is studied as a commodity in the housing market (Baylina & Berg, 2010). Fourth, studies examine which kinds of landscapes are considered important among inhabitants of rural regions (Kaplan & Austin, 2004). Fifth, there is growing literature on counter-urbanisation; i.e., migration to rural regions outside metropolitan regions (Halfacree, 2007, 2012; Mahon, 2007; Mitchell, 2004).

As already discussed in the introduction, ascriptions of urban or rural are of particular interest in the Swiss context, where discourses of anti-urbanism are important in spatial planning (Marco & Tironi, 1997; Salomon Cavin, 2007; Walter, 1994). Nevertheless, more recently the professional view on Swiss spatial planning has evolved towards conceptualising the entire country as a "network city" (Corboz, 1990; Diener, Herzog, Meili, de Meuron, & Schmid, 2006; Eisinger & Schneider, 2003) and with the most recent planning policies, urban densification has become one of the central guidelines of spatial planning (UVEK, KdK, BPUK, SSV, & SGV, 2012). However, as political studies on electoral behaviour and residence show, regarding political worldviews there is still a divide between the core cities on the one hand and suburbs and rural regions on the other (Hermann & Leuthold, 2005; Kübler, Scheuss, & Rochat, 2013; Ströbele, 2012).

2.2. Factors influencing residential preferences

2.2.1. Socio-economic influences

Residential preference is influenced by socio-economic factors. First, housing price and household income play an important role, as people with low incomes are more restricted in housing choice (Shlay, 1985; van Ham, 2012). Moreover, housing prices are higher in areas with better services and natural amenities; thus, these places are preferred by higher income groups and less accessible to lower income groups (Friedman, 1981; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011).

Second, life stage (i.e., the position in life trajectory) is an important determinant of actual residence and residential preference (McHugh, Hogan, & Happel, 1995). Younger people and perhaps also the elderly have a tendency to live in cities, while families with children tend to prefer suburban residence. This has been especially true in the second half of the 20th century (McAuley & Nutty, 1982; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). Yet, these life stage-related differences are counteracted by family lifestyles; i.e., household employment structure and daily life organisation among household members, as studies from different countries have shown (Ernst Stähli, Le Goff, Levy, & Widmer, 2009; Howley, 2009; Karsten, 2003; Miller, 1995). Besides income, wealth, and the location of residence, life stage is also an important influence on the size of housing

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