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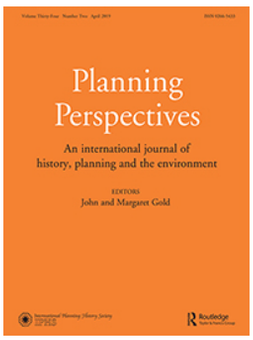

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Questioning public histories of urban planning: an investigation of '*urbanisme horloger*' narratives in the Unesco site of Le Locle/La Chaux-de-Fonds

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ABSTRACT

The recent, joint inscription of Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds on the World Heritage List (2009) offers an interesting example of public use of planning history within the context of a heritage-making process. The notion of 'watchmaking town planning' that was coined for the Unesco campaign of these two Swiss cities suggests that a fundamental unity existed between their planned spatial organization in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and the social organization of their industrial communities. The paper questions this narrative by discussing the interpretation of a specific planning document – the 1835 scheme for La Chaux-de-Fonds drafted by Ponts-et-Chaussées inspector Charles-Henri Junod – that seems to play a central role within the conceptual framework of '*urbanisme horloger*'. The analysis aims to suggest that there are both difficult challenges and promising intellectual opportunities to be taken by closely observing the ways in which planning histories are publicly disseminated and appropriated by a plurality of social actors.

KEYWORDS

La Chaux-de-Fonds; Charles-Henri Junod; Unesco World Heritage; public history; nineteenth-century planning

The recent, joint inscription of Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds on the Unesco World Heritage List (2009) has contributed to bring new attention to these Swiss cities, historically marked by a strong specialization in watchmaking production.[1] The two localities were included on the List as a unique site presented under the heading *urbanisme horloger* – a French expression translated into English as 'watchmaking town planning'. The essential assumption behind the notion is that a fundamental unity existed between the planned spatial organization of the two cities and the manufacturing culture of their industrial communities (Figure 1).[2]

The narratives associated with the 'watchmaking town planning' Unesco site offer an interesting example of public use of planning history within the context of a heritage-making process.[3] To what extent are historical narratives on urban plans 'chosen' and appropriated by a plurality of social actors for the negotiation of images and identities related to a place? Which are the implications of these processes for the daily practice of scholarly work? Such questions are often overlooked in planning history research despite having inspired a number of interesting studies coming from

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[1]Walter, *La Suisse urbaine*, 69–74, 88–121.

[2]Jeanneret, *La Chaux-de-Fonds*. Documents on the process are available on the websites http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1302/ and http://www.urbanisme-horloger.ch/ (accessed 27 August 2018).

[3]Di Giovine, *The Heritage-Scape*.

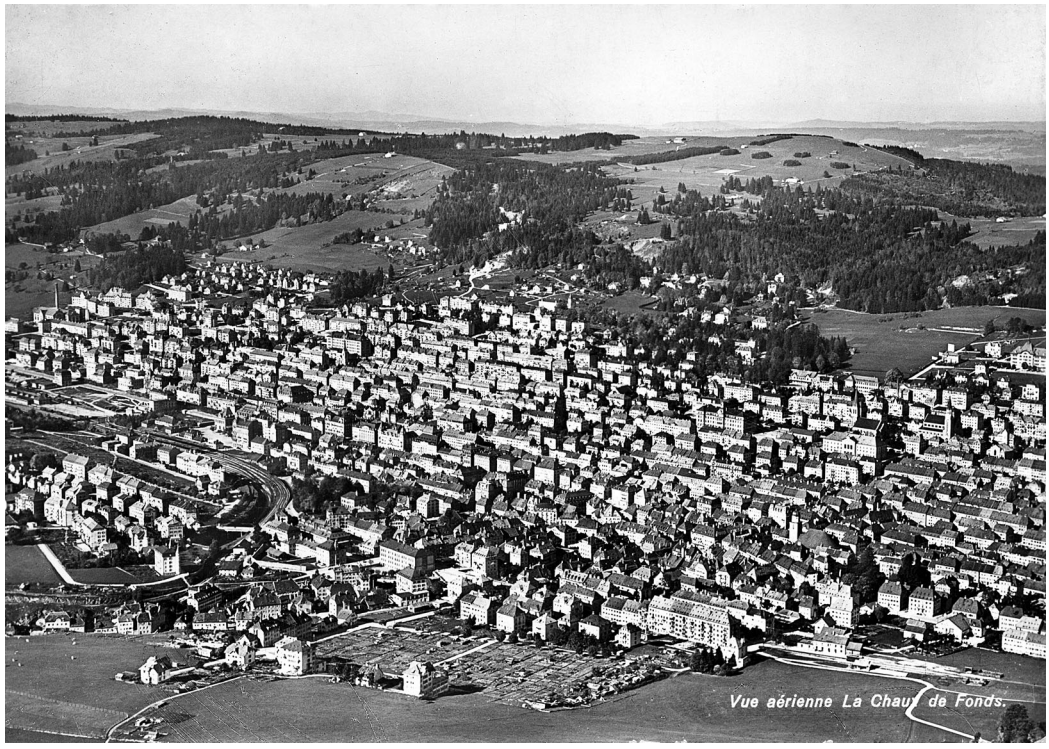

Figure 1. View of La Chaux-de-Fonds, postcard, 1939 (Bibliothèque de la Ville, La Chaux-de-Fonds).

nearby fields such as architectural and environmental history.[4] In the following pages I will address them by taking the Le Locle/La Chaux-de-Fonds site as a case study. I will focus in particular on the interpretations concerning one planning document – the scheme for La Chaux-de-Fonds drafted by Ponts-et-Chaussées inspector Charles-Henri Junod around 1835 – that seems to play an important role within the conceptual framework of *urbanisme horloger*. My aim will be to analyse some of the public histories of the Junod plan that have been proposed in connection with the Unesco listing as part of a broader reinvention of the cultural identity of the region.[5] I will discuss these narratives by making use of a hybrid methodology that combines fieldwork observation with ad hoc investigations of archival and printed historical sources. The point I wish to suggest is that the growing role played by the public use of planning history narratives within contemporary processes of urban transformation presents both problems and opportunities for planning historians, who need to integrate a stronger awareness of the forms of social appropriation of historical knowledge into their research interrogations and strategies.

Narratives of 'watchmaking town planning' and the Junod plan

Visitors entering the 'watchmaking town planning' Unesco site for the first time, be it virtually or in person, are exposed to a nearly ubiquitous storytelling, displayed through various forms of public

[4]Hayden, *The Power of Place*; Melosi and Scarpino, *Public History*.
[5]Marti, *L'invention de l'horloger*; Munz, *La transmission*.

communication: posters and leaflets, websites, tourist information points and exhibition spaces, guided tours, and dedicated sections of local museums. These multi-faceted materials articulate *urbanisme horloger* as a broad narrative that focuses on the historical connections between watchmaking production, the built morphology of the place, and urban planning schemes. Such narrative is characterized by a remarkable degree of flexibility: it emphasizes a different combination of historical factors according to the situation and public to which it is addressed. However, a few facts and documents, among which the 1835 Junod plan for La Chaux-de-Fonds, are recurrently given special relevance. In particular, the Junod plan tends to be brought to the foreground whenever *urbanisme horloger* public discourses target a non-specialized audience, a sign that the history of urban planning is perceived as an instrument of popularization that can encapsulate the sense of a multi-layered urban history in a simple and effective way.

The Unesco World Heritage website offers an interesting example of the metonymic relationship between the Junod plan and 'watchmaking town planning'. The page that introduces the latter notion states that the 'planning and buildings' of Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds 'reflect watchmakers' need of rational organization' and that 'their layout along an open-ended scheme of parallel strips on which residential housing and workshops are intermingled reflects the needs of the local watchmaking culture that dates to the seventeenth century and is still alive today'.[6] This description, supposedly outlining the spatial traits of the two cities over more than two centuries, is in fact a detailed illustration of the 1835 scheme for La Chaux-de-Fonds. The reasons why this particular plan is used as a blueprint for a more comprehensive storytelling are not difficult to grasp. Of the many plans that were drafted for the two sites in the nineteenth century – La Chaux-de-Fonds had a reconstruction plan approved in 1795 and both localities witnessed two distinct phases of planning in the 1830s and in the 1850s – it was by far the most iconic and the one that most clearly embodied an idea of regularity.[7] The scheme proposed a linear expansion that followed the main axis of the valley and adhered to the existing natural slopes, reorganizing them through a sequence of parallel strips of building blocks, gardens and streets (Figure 2).

Urbanisme horloger narratives often present the Junod plan as a document that responded to the needs expressed by early nineteenth-century watchmaking elites, while foreshadowing future patterns of industrial development. The Unesco exhibition space in La Chaux-de-Fonds, opened in coincidence with the 2009 listing, dedicates an entire section to the scheme, describing it as 'the proper starting point for the modern La Chaux-de-Fonds', one that allowed the city to become 'a huge, rational and economically efficient factory'.[8] The plan is praised for its functionalist traits, identified in the search for best exposure of buildings to natural light and in the rational organization of streets, but also for its flexible character – that is, for its capacity to serve as a support for a mixed-use urban development (Figure 3).

The notion of *urbanisme horloger* is a recent invention: it was formulated in 2006 by the *comité directeur* entrusted with the drawing up of the nomination dossier – a committee including local, cantonal and federal representatives – in an attempt to find an effective form of place branding.[9] However, the origins of the idea that the regular spatial structure of La Chaux-de-Fonds is a defining trait of the place's identity date back to the late 1970s, when historical research on the city dedicated closer attention to its nineteenth-century planning, with the twofold aim of promoting systematic

[6] http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1302/ (accessed 27 August 2018).
[7] Gubler, "La Chaux-de-Fonds"; Jeanneret, *La Chaux-de-Fonds*, 55–107.
[8] Exhibition texts in the *Espace de l'urbanisme horloger*, La Chaux-de-Fonds, visited in January 2018.
[9] Novarina, *L'urbanisme horloger*, 7, 10.

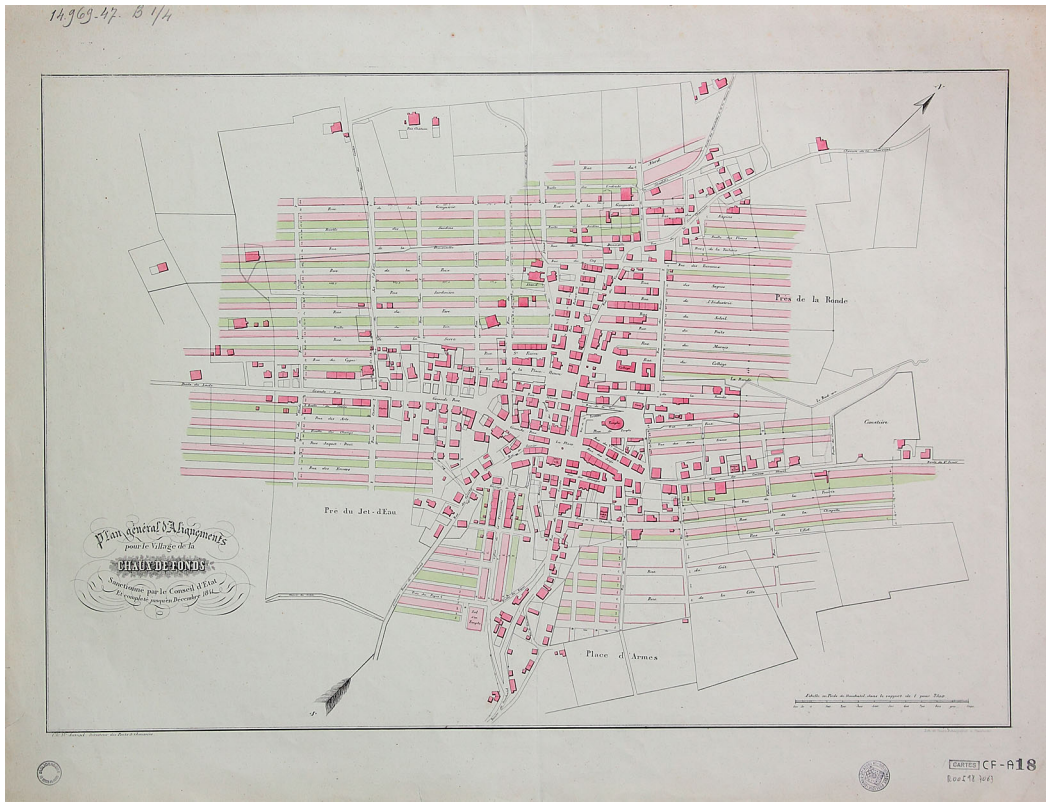

Figure 2. Charles-Henri Junod, 'Plan général d'alignements pour le village de La Chaux-de-Fonds, sanctionné par le Conseil d'Etat et complété jusqu'en décembre 1841,' lithography, Neuchâtel: Nicolet & Jeanjaquet, 1841 (Bibliothèque de la Ville, La Chaux-de-Fonds).

forms of protection of modern Swiss architectural heritage[10] and of understanding La Chaux-de-Fonds as the context in which the young Le Corbusier received his education and moved the initial steps of his career.[11] Recent Unesco elaborations can be seen as a continuation of this tradition, albeit with a stronger emphasis upon the alleged coherence between space, production and planning. Such emphasis brings to the foreground at least two questions: which kind of planning rationality was behind the choices made for the two cities? To what extent did the proposed urban forms reflect the spatial organization of manufacturing activities? I will discuss these problems in the following two paragraphs by returning to some of the available knowledge concerning the Junod plan.

Expertize and negotiations behind the 1835 scheme

The understanding of the Junod plan as a turning point for modern La Chaux-de-Fonds implies a number of assumptions concerning the rationality of the document and the culture of the Ponts-et-Chaussées 'engineer' behind it. On the one hand, such an interpretation highlights the role of the planner in shaping the scheme; on the other, it insists on the agency of the plan itself as a long-

[10]Borella, Pecon and Steiger, *Modes de production*; Gubler, "La Chaux-de-Fonds."
[11]Gubler, "From Feeling to Reason"; Von Moos, *Le Corbusier*, 13–45; *La Chaux-de-Fonds et Jeanneret*.

Figure 3. Posters in front of the Espace de l'urbanisme horloger, La Chaux-de-Fonds, illustrating two of the 'five points of watchmaking town planning'. (photo by the author, June 2017).

term factor in shaping the urban environment. Already in the early 1980s, Marc E. Albert Emery proposed to see Junod as a cultivated urban theorist and considered his plan as possibly influenced by the *Sonnenbau* schemes put forward in the 1820s by German physician Bernhard Christoph Faust.[12] To what extent are this and other similar views supported by documentary evidence?

Born in Auvernier, Charles-Henri Junod (1795–1843) received a technical training in which the essential part was played by practical experience. Between 1809 and 1811 he attended the *pensionnat* opened by pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in Yverdon, where he received basic notions of mathematics and geometry. His subsequent work brought him into close contact with early nineteenth-century Ponts-et-Chaussées culture, initially in Napoleonic France as he collaborated on the establishment of a new cadastre in Dijon. After 1814, when the Principality of Neuchâtel joined the Swiss Confederation while remaining part of the Prussian Empire, Junod moved on to work for various Swiss cities.[13] By 1829, his technical competence was sound enough for him to be appointed as inspector of the Ponts-et-Chaussées Office of the Principality, which had been created in 1816.[14] He later (1837) became a member of the Neuchâtel State Council and of the *Société neuchâteloise de sciences naturelles*.[15]

The series of reports written by Junod during the 1830s makes it possible to appreciate the broad articulation of his tasks as a Ponts-et-Chaussées inspector, which consisted in road tracing and

[12]Emery, "Faust et Le Corbusier," 10–13, 24–30.
[13]Courvoisier, "Un élève de Pestalozzi"; Jeanneret and Bonhôte, "Charles-Henri Junod."
[14]Merlotti and Homayoun, "Les Ponts-et-Chaussées."
[15]Evard, "Charles-Henri Junod"; "Liste des nouveaux membres."

maintenance, in technical support to the resolution of conflicts arising in the local communities, and in the supervision on various other engineering works.[16] Plans were not prominent in this list: Junod drafted schemes for the extension or the post-fire reconstruction of just four villages during his career in the Neuchâtel office – La Brévine (1831), Le Locle (1833 and 1836), La Chaux-de-Fonds (1835) and Coffrane (1841) (Figure 4). His sporadic activity in the field makes it difficult to consider him as a specialist, and anyone seeking traces of a fully-fledged urban theory in his concise and eminently practical report on the plan for La Chaux-de-Fonds would no doubt be disappointed.[17]

Sources regarding the history of the plan for La Chaux-de-Fonds allow a wider gallery of characters to enter the scene. The plan was initially requested by a group of local notables, with arguments that referred to the need to coordinate future land uses and building alignments. The village community wrote to Junod in June 1834 observing that 'numerous projects for buildings exist at present in this place and it is therefore of utmost importance to incessantly study the means to regularize these new constructions'.[18] The process had a parallel top-down impulse, as the parliament in Neuchâtel, with a law approved on 19 March 1834, encouraged local communities to carry out planning actions concerning fire prevention. This combination of factors led the governing body of La Chaux-de-Fonds to nominate a committee that collaborated with Junod for the elaboration of the plan.[19]

The reports and letters from Junod place great emphasis on the negotiated character of the document, which was 'agreed between the Communal Committee and myself'. He pointed out that the great majority of local landowners had embraced the plan 'with pleasure' and had signed an agreement by which they accepted to solve future conflicts on planning matters through a special, simplified procedure.[20] The plan, which was approved by the Neuchâtel State Council on 10 January 1835, was not accompanied by specific building regulations. It was bound to be progressively implemented by the local community, which entrusted a '*Commission des alignements*' with the task of superintending the execution of the scheme. Detailed records of the committee's meetings and decisions exist for the years 1834–1854, although they have been largely ignored by recent histories of the plan.[21]

Available sources, in short, suggest that the plan might have been a more collective affair than some depictions of it have been willing to claim. It was most probably not the product of an all-knowing, all-predicting engineer but rather the result of a negotiation in which local elites seem to have played a relevant role. Which leaves us with the paradox of a Cartesian scheme that was the outcome of a much less Cartesian process of adaptation and bricolage.[22] Further research is certainly needed on these aspects, especially since documents are ambiguous and incomplete in many respects. The 1835 plan – to mention just one major problem – is not preserved in its original version but only in a number of partly divergent engravings executed in 1841–42 and of which it is known that they integrated a number of unspecified changes.[23] Whether the most ambitious traits of the scheme were already defined by the mid-1830s or whether they emerged at a later stage is still partly an open question.[24] In 1981, a thesis discussed at the University of Geneva – to my knowledge the

[16]Archives de l'État, Neuchâtel (henceforth: AEN), Routes, 79CB-8, 'Rapports de l'Inspecteur des Ponts et Chaussées', vol. 2–4, 1834–42.
[17]Charles-Henri Junod, 'Rapport sur le plan général d'alignement pour le village de La Chaux-de-Fonds', 12 December 1834, AEN, Routes, 79CB-8, vol. 2, 1834–37, 17–18.
[18]The Community of La Chaux-de-Fonds to Junod, 3 June 1834, Archives Communales, La Chaux-de-Fonds (henceforth: ACLCDF), vol. 26, 'Commune. Copie des lettres du 9 Janv. 1826 au 12 Sept. 1840' (my translation).
[19]Arrêt du Conseil d'État, 30 June 1834, in ACLCDF, vol. 15, 'Registre de la Commune de La Chaux-de-Fonds du 4 mai 1828 au 17 novembre 1835', 727–8.
[20]Junod, 'Rapport' (see note 17).
[21]ACLCDF, vol. 271, 'Régistre des Délibérations de la Commission des Alignements établie à la Chaux-de-Fonds en 1834'.
[22]Cop, "L'avènement."
[23]AEN, Cartes et Plans, PLA 283, PLA 1042; Bibliothèque de la Ville, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Cartes, CF-A16 to CF-A23 and CF-B34.
[24]ACLCDF, vol. 271, IV, 'Pièces concernant les plans du village' (O. Jacot to Junod, 15 February 1841; Junod's reply, 27 February).

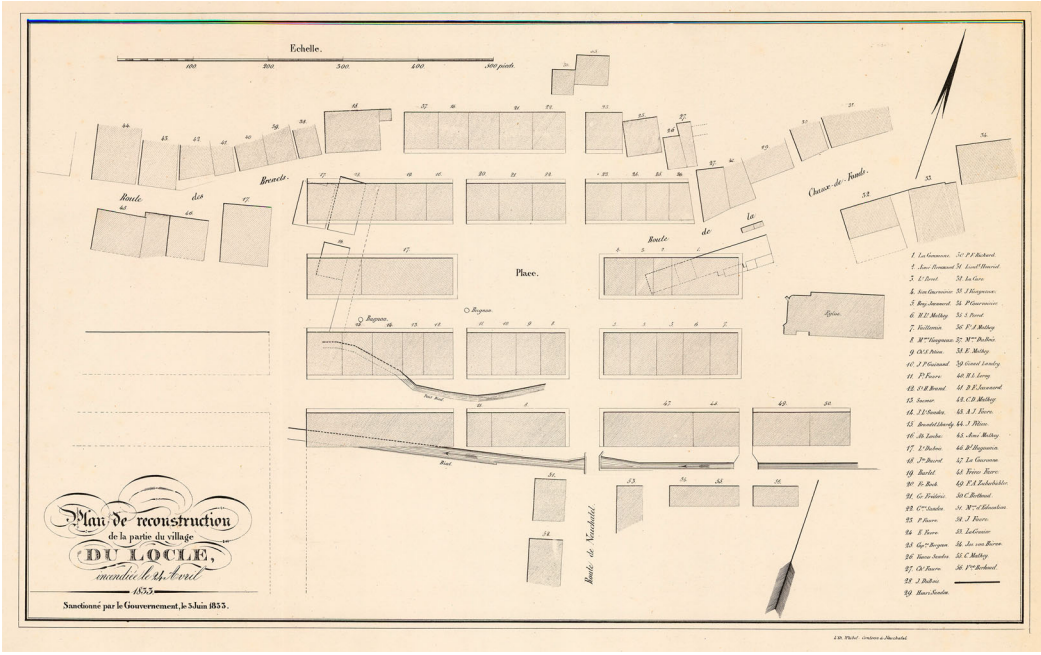

Figure 4. Charles-Henri Junod, 'Plan de reconstruction de la partie du village du Locle incendiée le 24 avril 1833,' lithography, Neuchâtel: Weibel-Comtesse (Archives de la Ville du Locle).

only modern work to raise the issue – argued that major changes to the scheme were introduced in this six-year interval.[25]

Industrial production and built spaces

The documents evoked in the previous paragraph contain no explicit reference to watchmaking production, while they offer a number of statements regarding fire prevention issues and the need to coordinate building and land development initiatives. Such arguments do not appear very different from those that can be found relating to other early nineteenth-century European planning schemes. What remains then of the stated link between planning and industrial production? Despite the lack of strong evidence, the hypothesis still deserves to be further investigated, especially by observing in closer detail the strategies and interests of the local actors that took part in the planning process and by asking to what extent the plan might have been influenced by ideologies aiming at introducing a greater degree of rationalization in the physical organization of the site. Recent prosopographic works dedicated to the watchmaking elites of the region might represent a useful starting point for such an undertaking.[26]

There are two additional perspectives from which the planning/industrialization link can be usefully discussed, the first of which concerns the architectural morphology of the place and its permanence over time. Available visual sources on the eighteenth-century village of La Chaux-de-Fonds, which are abundant both before and after the 1794 fire, show to what extent the built environment of

[25]Borella, Pecon and Steiger, *Modes de production*, 61–4.
[26]Donzé, *Les patrons horlogers*.

Figure 5. Henri Courvoisier-Voisin, View of La Chaux-de-Fonds before the 1794 fire, aquatint (Musée d'histoire, La Chaux-de-Fonds).

the village was based on the combination of a few multi-story, multi-functional blocks, called *massifs* (Figure 5).[27] The Junod plan did not aim to radically alter these elements but rather took the architecture of the *massifs* as one of its starting points and sought to reorganize vernacular forms in order to adapt them to a new perspective of expected growth. In this respect, the plan amounted less to a bold assertion of new principles than to a subtle work of reuse and contamination that made the best out of existing materials. This calls into question the idea that the plan represented a radical game-changer in the organization of La Chaux-de-Fonds, and rather emphasizes its role in facilitating the translation of long-established spatial forms into new patterns. In fact, from what we know, no significant reorganization of manufacturing activities came either before or after the mid-1830s planning phase.

A second perspective concerns the spatial patterns of production. The regularity of the Junod scheme seems to evoke the existence of a manufacturing culture based on the serial repetition of actions in time and space. However, watchmaking production in the Neuchâtel mountains had particular traits that received early attention in Marx's *Capital*[28] and have been investigated in greater detail by a number of recent studies.[29] Manufacturing practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries followed a pattern of production, generally referred to as *établissage*, the nature of which is the object of some debate between economic historians.[30] Most scholars would, however, agree that one of the traits of the system lay in its being fragmented and flexible enough to adapt to a remarkable variety of spatial situations: watchmaking activities took place in isolated mountain farms as well as in multi-story housing blocks, in sparse rural settlements as well as in villages and towns. This observation has at least two implications. First, the fact that production was distributed

[27]Calame, "Henri Courvoisier-Voisin."
[28]Marx, *The Capital*, I, 14, 3, 461–3.
[29]Bujard and Tissot, *Le Pays de Neuchâtel*, 15–32; Donzé, *History of the Swiss Watch Industry*, 7–14; Blanchard, *L'établissage*.
[30]Donzé, "Organisation industrielle."

on a wide regional territory challenges the identification between watchmaking and urbanity that lies at the heart of Unesco narratives. Second, no available information suggests that the form privileged by the Junod plan was the inevitable functional outcome of the requirements of local manufacturers. The plan, in fact, saw the light in a socio-technical setting in which production was characterized by an uncommon degree of spatial adaptability: from this point of view, its serial and regular organization poses more historical problems than it solves.

Conclusion

This discussion of the ways in which the planning history of La Chaux-de-Fonds is treated in public narratives associated with the recent Unesco listing arguably leads to a twofold conclusion. On the one hand, a close observation of these narratives exposes the debatable representations of the past implicit in the 'watchmaking town planning' slogan. These fail to understand the Junod plan on its own terms and offer stereotyped images of urbanity and rationality, sidestepping many of the most interesting issues potentially linked with the history of these territories, such as their hybrid rural/urban nature, or the complex geography of watchmaking production. On the other hand, it is possible to recognize that the *urbanisme horloger* notion, despite its shortcomings, has the potential to inspire future investigations into the planning and social history of the region, be it only because it points to space as a central object of inquiry and poses questions that are still largely unanswered by the current state of the research (albeit with a few, promising exceptions).[31]

These remarks allow some degree of generalization. In recent years, planning history debates have come to see author-based interpretations of plans or deterministic views of the relationship between plans and the built environment as old-fashioned approaches that are increasingly at odds with the developments of contemporary urban theory.[32] However, these notions have anything but disappeared from view and enjoy a continuing popularity within public history processes in which they can be sought for because of their narrative simplicity and persuasive power. This poses specific questions to specialists working in the field, who are still far from developing a critical understanding and an in-depth discussion of the ways in which planning histories can be disseminated and appropriated by a plurality of social and institutional actors. Planning historians may have something to learn from the methodological challenges and intellectual opportunities that come with the recent development of public conversations on the implications and scope of their work.

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[31]Maillard, "Les habitats horlogers."
[32]Avermaete, "Death of the author."

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