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Between homologation and reinvention: the industrial areas of Geneva

A study on the transformation of the industrial areas of Geneva in the period 1990-2020

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Abstract

After the beginning of the 1990s, the industrial areas of Geneva entered a period – still ongoing – of profound urban transformations, alongside equally profound rearticulations in the organizational and regulatory structures underlying those same transformations. These transformations, although they are rapidly changing the face of this city, are generally little investigated and, where attention emerges, it's mainly about policy issues and processes.

This research aims to fill this gap by conducting an exploration that comes to terms with the multifaceted nature of urban transformation processes. This objective of restoring its thickness to the phenomenon of the transformation of space is pursued by working on three different levels. The first is the discursive one: how is change presented? What improvements justify it? From this perspective, the industrial areas of Geneva go from being seen as old, separate, devalued places, to becoming real laboratories for testing new production models such as “industrial ecology”. The second level is the technical one: how does the public infrastructure equip itself to convey these transformations? Which regulatory tools, which organizational models, which real estate strategies? Here emerges an intense experimentation work conducted by local public authorities which reposition themselves as the protagonist of the transformations. That is, who takes care not only of the task of setting goals and perspectives but also, mainly through a meticulous mediation work, of the concrete execution of the interventions. The third level is the spatial one: what kind of space emerges, for what uses, for what city? Here instead emerges a desire for homologation with the rest of the city. New open spaces and buildings have an appearance that mimics the residential neighborhoods of the city center and which contrasts with the processes and infrastructures they host within them.

These levels of investigation cross three independent – but mutually related – explorations. The first is an investigation on important dissemination channels which aims to grasp recurring themes and representations about these industrial areas. New value orientations, new paradigms, new discourses, which push for a relocation of the problem of production processes and places in the city. The second is a survey on the Geneva plans of the last twenty years. The plan documents – belonging to the *Projet d'agglomération*, the *Plan directeur cantonal*, etc. – constitute a precious lens for looking at the redefinition of Genevan production sites, illustrating the changes in objectives, priorities, representations. The third and last exploration is an investigation on the work of an actor. The FTI, a parapublic actor, that conducted an intense work of mediation, communication, management, coordination of territorial transformations, of control of the production methods of each of these. An actor who took on the task to spatialize a concept as poorly defined as that of écoParc.

Finally, this research aims to highlight the importance that the transition that is taking place in the industrial areas of Geneva has with respect to the city. The role that this transformation plays in the processes of reinvention of the city itself.