Social Inclusion (ISSN: 2183–2803)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 3, Pages 186–198
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i3.6846

Article

A Residential Area at the Gates of the City: Controversies Surrounding "Quality of Life"

Arnaud Frauenfelder *, Nasser Tafferant, and Monica Battaglini

School of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO), Switzerland

* Corresponding author (arnaud.frauenfelder@hesge.ch)

Submitted: 15 February 2023 | Accepted: 2 May 2023 | Published: 28 August 2023

Abstract
This article looks at the different meanings of the argument for "quality of life" used in support of an urban densification project in Geneva destined for a suburban area located at the gates of the city. It sheds light on the different values that underline this argument and stresses the dangers of using the term "quality of life" in the promotion of inclusive and sustainable cities to justify socially burdensome choices framed by both ecological and rationalist debates without taking into sufficient account the underlying social realities and concerns of the different parties involved. This article analyzes the controversies surrounding an urban densification project, showing how they refer to differentiated visions of "quality of life," more or less socially and morally legitimized.

Keywords
moral controversies; quality of life; residential area; social and ecological justice; territorial regeneration; urban densification

Issue
This article is part of the issue "In/Exclusive Cities: Insights From a Social Work Perspective" edited by Karine Duplan (HETS Geneva, HES-SO / University of Geneva), Monica Battaglini (HETS Geneva, HES-SO), Milena Chimienti (HETS Geneva, HES-SO), and Marylène Lieber (University of Geneva).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, embodied in the relaunching of urban planning and policies (Pinson, 2009), we are witnessing an "urban return" (Le Galès, 2003). Associated with a "return to town life," evidenced by redensification, gentrification, and the rediscovery of heritage (Bidou-Zachariasen, 2003; Rérat et al., 2008), at a time when towns are judged on their "attractiveness" according to different norms and hallmarks of quality (Breviglieri, 2013), this relaunching of urban policies is not without risk as they can leave some spaces and populations exposed to the possibility of eviction or social stigmatisation (Pinson & Reigner, 2017; Tissot, 2015; Young, 1990). In analysing the moral and social tensions associated with urban reconfiguration, we know that the suburban neighbourhood remains an understudied space, though there is abundant literature on large urban complexes and their transformation (Girard & Rivière, 2013). Historically, in line with the concept of urbanisation "outside the city" (Léveillé, 2003, p. 7), which is typical of the second half of the 20th century, in response to a context characterised in Switzerland (as in other European countries) by a strong demographic increase and a general rise in the standard of living at the end of WWII, the development of housing estates and large suburban complexes first became part of a logic of territorial development known as "peri-urban areas" (Thomas, 2013, p. 107). However, by the turn of the century, this growth in the number of suburban areas in all regions of the country, which began in the 1960s (first on the outskirts of towns, then in the town centres themselves), had begun to decline. This golden age of the private house remains severely shaken by the new spirit of "inner-city'' urbanisation, nowadays concerned with the idea of "building the city inwards" (*construire la ville en*

ville), meaning (re)developing already used land rather than using virgin land (Léveillé, 2003, p. 7)—a new axiom that encourages the requalification of the peri-urban suburb, henceforth seen as an "intermediary city" subject to being more densely populated. A new dynamic emerged leading some specialist architectural practitioners in 2019 to declare that, "after many years of expansion, the golden age of the private house is coming to an end" (Pittet-Baschung, 2019). In this historical process of extension of the city to the suburbs (see Figures 1 and 2), this article analyzes the controversies surrounding an urban densification project at the gates of the city of Geneva, showing how they refer to differentiated visions of "quality of life," more or less socially and morally legitimized.

2. Context and Methods

In a context where the outskirts of a town remain the target of urban renewal (Matthey & Schuler, 2017),

Figure 1. Aerial photo of the Cointrin West area, 1959. Image courtesy of SITG: The Geneva Territory on the Map (https://ge.ch/sitg).

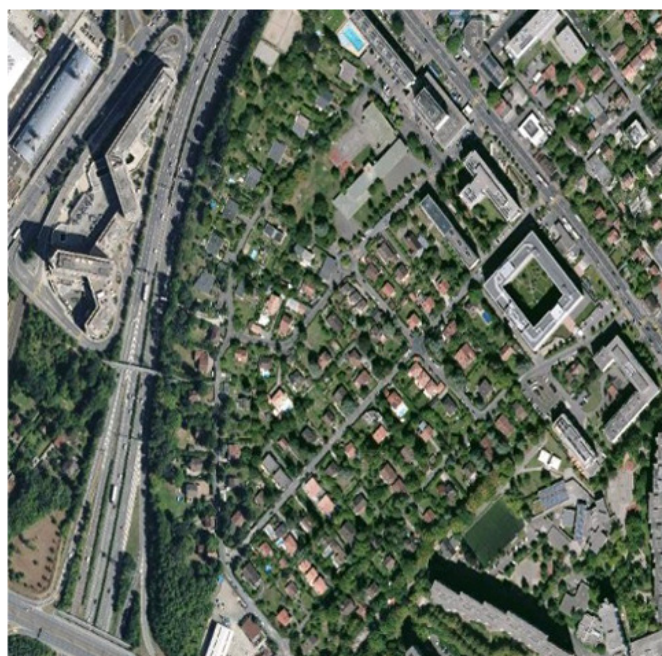

Figure 2. Aerial photo of the Cointrin West area, 2018. Image courtesy of SITG: The Geneva Territory on the Map (https://ge.ch/sitg),

the residential zone of Cointrin—an area geographically situated between the city of Geneva and its international airport—was designated by public authorities in the mid-2010s as a zone ripe for redevelopment and densification.

Although its current urban character, including its public transportation system, elevates this territory to the status of an area "ripe for development," the actual requalification of the zone would involve transforming it into an "urban complex with a high standard of living," to make it a genuinely "densely populated city district" (DALE, 2015, pp. 9, 82). However, apart from historical studies (Magri, 2008), most modern controversies between urban reformers and the inhabitants of built-up areas, deployed during any redevelopment project, remain understudied; concurrently, recent works have prompted new studies on these residential areas, notably underlining the heterogeneity of residential strategies and relations tied to the local space within the heart of a residential population situated halfway between the stable share of the lower classes and the smaller share of the middle classes (see Cartier et al., 2008; Lambert, 2015; Thomas, 2013; social characteristics also to be found in the ethnographic observations drawn from our fieldwork with the inhabitants of the district, as seen in Frauenfelder et al., 2022), while some researchers call for an international comparative perspective on the suburbs and their future (Ren, 2021).

Studies of the quality of life highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the concept (Ruzevicius, 2013). Situated at the crossroads of several disciplines (inter alia, health, wellbeing at work, the environment, marketing, or human and social sciences), this all-encompassing notion is generally defined by normative, objective, and/or subjective indicators; in sociology, it generally remains little used as such (Ferris, 2004). In a context of increasing intercity competition and faced with the emergence of the field of the economics of happiness (Guillen-Royo & Velasco, 2009), the issue of quality of life in an urban setting represents a major strategic challenge for public authorities (Bourdin & Cornier, 2017) keen to reinforce the attractiveness of cities in order to encourage new investments, new residents, and new "talent" (Florida, 2002). This preoccupation appears to resonate with the results of studies showing that the quality of a city and its degree of "sustainability" today partly influence the decision to locate mobile capital in one city rather than another (Bourdeau-Lepage & Gollain, 2015; Tremblay & Chicoine, 2008). Variably depending on historical context and accounting for the dimensions, scales, and actors involved (Bailly & Marchand, 2016), the notion of quality of life will be addressed in this sociological contribution not as an explanatory concept but from the perspective of the social and symbolic uses made of it in an urban densification project.

Our contribution aims to show, based on this case, how the apparently consensual reference to "quality of life" set off by this reformative company conceals heterogenous social and cultural significations dependent on the different types of actors involved. This article aims to study the social space of viewpoints—from the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984)—of the different actors involved: public and private town planners, communal project leaders, independent architects, local councils, associated office-holders and leaders, and the inhabitants of the residential area. Each of these actors holds a particular and important position in the field of local urban policy:

> [They are] caught up in an activity which is at the same time cognitive (the construction of the analytical frameworks of "social problems"), social (creation of a promotional network) and "activist." (Tissot, 2007, pp. 12–13; see also Frauenfelder et al., 2014)

Our analysis is composed of two elements. First, we reveal the "concerns," both quantitative (offers of accommodation and transport) and qualitative (aesthetic, moral, and ecological) of the "urban reformers" involved in the "urban development model" proposed for the residential housing district. These actors are represented in our corpus by politicians, public and private urban planners, independent architects, and municipal project managers who do not always see themselves as urban reformers, even though they spontaneously agreed with the notion and necessity of reforming the housing area of Cointrin. We will show how these concerns are not socially neutral.

Our second task will be, on the one hand, to document the critical reactions of the associations and the inhabitants of the district to the "negative" consequences associated with this urban renewal project, including their fear of "large complexes" and their defense of "green lungs" or green spaces. On the other hand, we will interpret—based on their trajectories of home ownership—the social reasons for their attachment to this area and to the quality of life that they are keen to preserve, which includes having access to a space of comfort and tranquillity, the feeling of control over one's own space, the desire to have something of one's own, and the idea of social promotion.

This sociological study is based on an ethnographic methodology that combines both primary and secondary data: fieldwork/participant observations, 17 in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. Over two years, we carried out participant observations in the field, crisscrossing the residential district with the idea of photographing the area and meeting some of its residents. The latter group invited us into their homes and recounted their memories of the district via long interviews and/or through personal belongings (photo albums, press cuttings, etc.). We then observed public meetings between urban reformers and residents, often in a somewhat tense climate. We also visited the offices of urban town planners with the help of

maps/plans retracing the historical evolution of the residential district in question. Finally, we closely followed and analysed the mediatisation and politicisation of the controversy surrounding the Cointrin reform project by combing through articles and observing on the ground the various actions taken against it.

3. The Concerns of the Reformers: Reconciling "Urban Density" and "Quality Of Life"

3.1. A "Source" for "Growth" and "Urbanisation"

Initially, in the mid-2000s, the project of densification of the district of Cointrin was inscribed within the framework of an agglomeration project by Grand Genève, which aimed at developing the supply of public transport and housing. Later, at the start of the second decade of the 21st century, the Grand Vernier–Meyrin–Airport project (GP VMA) gave as its general principle the pursuit of quantitative objectives that should take place on the ground through the development of new transport infrastructures and the construction of 50,000 new homes by 2030:

> [The GP VMA] stems from the planning of the Grand Genève project and is linked to the plans to extend the transport facilities towards CERN and to the co-financing by the Confederation. The idea is to coordinate urban development and the public transport infrastructure and this passes for what is commonly called densification, to allow a maximum number of people to have access to public transport. This policy had to be implemented to inform people that these urban transformations are needed now to enable you to welcome new residents, together with the equipment and infrastructures of transport. Densification will render these transport infrastructures operational. (Mr. Dubuis, collaborator of the Department of Territory)

Announced as a watchword, the goal of the project created pressure on the professionals working in the sector concerned. Fixed-term posts (renewable depending on the results obtained) have been created and, amongst these, departmental planners were set up as "pilots" of an institutionally desired urban development, even if public action by the Genevan authorities was and is directed in partnership with local government authorities. Mr. Dubuis continued:

> When the management of major projects takes off, the pilot is the urban planner but with pluridisciplinary and interdepartmental teams linking the communes together. In the proposition put forward between 2010 and 2011, the biggest projects were led by the policy managing committee both at cantonal and municipal level. This came about through the creation of posts for "special agents," of a term of four years, renewable once. The mindset is a bit like: "You have 2 × 4 years to realise the construction of new districts well served by a public transportation system and with a limited impact on the environment, and thus to produce housing." The group dynamics were guided by this willingness to respond quickly and collectively to housing needs. The major projects were accompanied by a methodology with guide plans, mandates for undertaking contracts, and a relatively systematic methodology. A collective energy and a shared desire were accompanied by an approach that was meant to be inclusive and qualitative.

However, it appears that, alongside these aims for the quantitative development of a sector designed to become a veritable "urban district with a certain density" (DALE, 2015, p. 82), urban reform also includes qualitative aspects such as experimenting with a "model" town and "lifestyle":

> This is where we find the reservoir of growth and urbanisation in Switzerland and where we can advance and design the tools needed for building the town of tomorrow. We can and must invent today a model of a town and a lifestyle that suits the area, its inhabitants, and its users. The VMA venture has drawn up the outlines of a response that could resemble a pilot project and example for the town of the future. VMA, Mernier Meyrin Aéroport, let the adventure begin! (DALE, 2015, p. 9)

Thus, the proposed objectives are to make GP VMA an attractive urban complex, with a dynamic economy, a comfortable contemporary town with a unique character and open to all, the leitmotif to which is "accessibility, density, mixedness, and identity," as stated in the DALE expert's report. It is within this prescriptive expectancy perspective, taking place over a 30-year period, that the operation to requalify this housing district as an "urban area" with a "high-quality lifestyle" is situated. The concerns of the reformers fit within the framework of an assumed consideration of the consequences, since the 1990s, "of a globalised economy which sees Swiss towns competing with the great world metropolises" and which sets "radical new conditions for urban quality, services, public transport, and the landscape" (Matthey & Schuler, 2017, p. 106). In this context, the notions of "urban quality" and of "quality of life" are invested with concerns and rationalities in line with the spirit of liberalism that characterises our advanced capitalist societies (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006; Pattaroni, 2011). As an illustration of this, in a "broad outline of a territorial organisation" expressed by the Federal Council in May 1996, the organisational strategies for the Swiss territory exposed:

> How much the quality of life and competitiveness of Switzerland underline the complementarity to be

> sought between large infrastructure and land occupation and usage. Towns and rural spaces, and the towns in and between themselves, are considered interdependent and complementary, the global quality of these elements together being seen to determine the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the country. (Matthey & Schuler, 2017, pp. 106–107)

3.2. Promoting Contemporary "Architectural Expressions" in Association With New "Residential Targets"

In the qualitative concerns of the reformers, the major subject of criticism is notably the actual aesthetic of the buildings in the residential quarter. The current specific peri-urban location of the district in the wider territory, with its high-traffic roads (and airways), large commercial infrastructures, and a large housing estate acts objectively as a negative social marker, positioning the district lower in the scale of social prestige. As some official documents give us to understand, "the territory is first and foremost functional. Today we are in the presence of a built patrimony whose historical/heritage interest is limited or leaves most people indifferent" (DALE, 2015, p. 42). At the same time, there have been reservations about a sometimes serious production process encouraged by certain, recent real-estate transactions in the area, where the monopoly of a linear construction of small houses is denounced. That said, aesthetic criticism of existing buildings is mainly indirect and remains in favour of a social redefinition of the "residential targets" that are expected to transform the district, audiences who are associated with new, more "contemporary" aesthetics and lifestyles. Among the social categories "potentially" targeted, we find both "improvised" and "established alternatives." Thus, the expert's report states that "places in the developed perimeter could be suitable for them if special attention is paid to typological diversity and contemporary architectural expression" (DALE, 2015, p. 76). Following the same logic, the category of the "urban avant-garde" is also retained for those for whom "places within the developed perimeter could offer the services, the typological diversity and the contemporary and urban architectural expression to which they aspire" (DALE, 2015, p. 76). Among the categories "naturally" targeted, there is mention of an "upper level focused on training" where areas on the developed perimeter could suit them if special attention is paid to typological diversity and nature-oriented contemporary architectural expression. The deployment of public services and facilities can also contribute to the attractiveness of the place.

Conversely, among the public described as distant from the "contemporary architecture" recommended for the collective housing likely to be developed in the area, mention is made to the "classic middle class," which "tends to favour individual or terraced houses with densities [that] are probably lower than the objectives," the "upper-middle class," who "want and prefer to live in detached houses located in luxury districts," and even the "traditional rural population," whom the site is hopefully "too urban to attract, as they aspire above all to live in the countryside" (DALE, 2015, p. 76). Undoubtedly, the "urban development model" (as it is often called) advocated in this urban project conveys an aesthetic model which is not socially neutral (Figure 3). The imagined new district is perceived as not only expected but

Figure 3. Sector Cointrin West, horizon 2030. Source: DALE (2015, p. 284).

also potentially desirable by some social categories; and less so by others. In general, "the residents of this area [East and West Cointrin] are likely to be more urban, living their neighbourhood life in their blocks of flats but remaining connected to the life of the agglomeration and its major service centres" (DALE, 2015, p. 82). A "window on the economy" is planned through these "exemplary buildings with their contemporary design" in line with the desired new architectural expressions:

> The economic showcase, a space of representation and "emblem" of the district will house the headquarters of major companies in exemplary buildings of contemporary design. In terms of tertiary administrative targets, "head offices," "parastatals," and "specialist performers" are the main targets for this area. (DALE, 2015, p. 168)

Sociologically, the definition of new residential targets for the requalification of the suburban district calls for characteristics of social belonging and lifestyles of populations situated halfway between the "gentrified quarter" and the "refounded quarter" (Paugam, 2020). It emerges that this imagined new population will tend to symbolically distance themselves from the current residents of the housing estate—seen in market studies as the "classic middle class"—whereas our fieldwork also reveals that the inhabitants we met are, for the most part, from the stable lower classes (Frauenfelder et al., 2022).

3.3. Avoiding the Privatised Nature of the Residential Area

Alongside these "aesthetic" and "social" assessment criteria, which form part of the proposed reform of the Cointrin housing estate, it is also (and perhaps mainly) the privatised nature of its residential area that is the subject of grievances. These are manifested through different discursive registers. This criticism of privatization is based primarily on technical, rationalist, and topographical arguments. The subdivision of the land into small plots is considered somewhat irrational in terms of the population's housing "needs."

Simultaneously, it is also the "recurring absence" of "public or shared spaces" promoted by the addition of "individualised systems" (e.g., a house with private garden) that give to the space in question a monotonous character—or the tendency to spatially enclose the green spaces, with "hedges often of considerable height" (DALE, 2017, pp. 8–9). More generally, it's also the housing district of Cointrin that is seen as inward-looking and too cut off from its external environment. In response to this perceived problem, this urban reform proposes, for example, to render the area "more open" to the surrounding districts. Mr. Luca (a town planner attached to the Planning Office of the Department of Territory) stresses that, on the outer edges of the housing area situated opposite the Avanchets housing estate, behind the fences, there is no link, "no connection" to the said estate. He goes on to explain that "our urban reform project" in the district, on which "we are working," is in fact designed to create a link between the two districts of Cointrin and Avanchet, "to promote a connection!" The proposed urban reform stresses the concern to work on networks between neighbourhoods to promote, for example, "open islands," which should be more inclusive, rather than closed ones.

Finally, in some articles published in the local press, an openly "ethical" critique of privatisation is sometimes to be found, focusing on the people involved. The people undermined by the reform project are described as "small-scale homeowners" defending their "private preserve" (Bézaguet, 2016, p. 19). A member of the government quoted in this article condescendingly criticised the lack of civic spirit evidenced by some proprietors:

> These people must understand the need to densify these spaces in order to then house ten families in small buildings rather than one in an individual house.

While conveying a moral judgment on the selfish interests of residents, the discourse relayed also remains factual: "They [the homeowners] love their district and want to stay there, in spite of the state's desire to demolish their houses and further populate the area" (Bézaguet, 2016, p. 19, authors' translation).

3.4. Limiting the Environmental Impact

While the peri-urban housing model is supported by the reformers for aesthetic, rationalist, and moral reasons, it appears clearly that the main motive is the ecological argument. With a semantic field that tends to expand (ecology, the environment, sustainability/sustainable urban development, durability, energy transition, the Anthropocene (climate change), etc.), the mobilization of this "ecological justification" (Lafaye & Thevenot, 1993; Pattaroni, 2011) is presented by the reformers as a major reason to support the projected urban reform.

This instrumentalisation of nature as an urban marketing tool is evidenced by several studies (Ernwein, 2019; Méliani & Arnould, 2012; Roy, 2011) that show nature has become an essential axis in discussions of the "entrepreneurial town"; other studies go as far as to qualify town planners as "traders of nature." In the case of the district studied, the concern for "limiting the impact on the environment" has become one of the creeds for the promotion of an "urbanisation–transport" agglomeration project (out of which grew the GP MVA) that took place in the years between 2000 and 2010. A project which, in supporting the development of a "dense" town for environmental reasons, also necessarily conveys a critique of the peri-urban, as suggested by Mr. Dubuis, collaborator of the Department of Territory,

urban sprawl being more harmful to the environment because it favours too much the use of individual motorised transport.

In the testimonials of local actors and the wording of public discourses, the "ecological" argument in favour of a peri-urban development is often factual (i.e., the example of an area of individual houses versus an apartment block is invoked) and technical (quantified estimates of savings in energy consumption). The critique refers to a specific cognitive space for computation built around easily objectifiable and measurable properties that is presented as not up for discussion in the evaluation. This peri-urban sprawl thus symbolises a way of living that is far from the standard required from an ecological point of view and for a sustainable "energy transition"—in other words, it reinforces a way of living that is harmful to the environment:

> From an ecological standpoint, or linked to the energy transition, a densely populated district is more efficient than urban sprawl. Theoretically, less energy is used in a block of flats housing a number of people than if the same number of people live in a housing estate. It has to do with the number of surfaces, walls, individual consumption, and ground cover. Therefore, within the paradigm of an ecological and sustainable energy transition, the issue of the density of a town's population versus the dispersion of medium density is important. (Mr. Aebischer, town and country planner working for the commune of Meyrin)

Behind these criticisms, the rise of the model of an "inclusive city," theoretically open to all and adorned with all kinds of technological, ecological, aesthetic, social, and economic virtues, is not without its contribution, as we have seen in an (in)voluntary way in the social and moral disqualification of suburban peri-urban space and its associated lifestyle. In the urbanistic critique in question, the peri-urban seems to represent shallowly the same offputting function as that occupied by the suburbs of the time, as Mr. Dubuis so thoughtfully puts it:

> In representations of the profession at the time, in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s…the virtue is in the densely populated town which can be served by public transport. The peri-urban is considered a sort of "sub-category." The term "third space" is notably proposed by Martin Vanier [Vanier, 2012]. In other words, truly it is a sort of negation [where one would say:] "That is not of sufficient quality to be of a town." This vision came up with the following thesis which, broadly, reminded people that the peri-urban, not carefully thought out and considered by town planners the surburbs of the time, was an actual reality and almost certainly the "town of tomorrow." Perhaps it should be thought of or conceived differently. At the scale of the agglomeration, due to the difference in professional culture, there was at the time a sort of territorial negation [which] can spill over into expressions critical the way of living such as the lifestyle is "bad," that it is not a "good town," it is not "a good way" of living. The risks, out of context, we understand only too well. Is it perhaps the same logic with a lack of consideration by town planners for housing estates in general—never mind the place or the employment?

Clearly distanced from the model of urban development planned for the sector in question, these "ways of inhabiting" individual houses close to the town and at one with a particular idea of "quality of life" were recognised not that long ago in town planning and upheld by some cantonal and federal legislation—a back-and-forth movement which is not without its destabilising and demoralising implications on those living in built-up areas.

4. A Reform Welcomed Somewhat Reservedly by the Associations and Inhabitants of the District

Defeated by the diverse critiques of which they are the target, the leaders of the district's housing associations and a good number of interviewed property owners made us privy to their reservations concerning the project of urban transformation of the district.

Faced with accusations of egoism, many proprietors recalled the "efforts" and "sacrifices" made in order to own their house. The obstacles many had to overcome to achieve this and the pride they felt at their success are quite revealing here. Mr. Silva, owner of a house in the district of Cointrin since 2003, where he has been living with his wife and two children and working at a hospital for 16 years, recounted:

> Of course I feel proud, if I stop for a moment and look back, after all this time. I have been here [Switzerland] for nearly 37 years. I am delighted, the more so because I arrived here with just 100 Swiss. It is true that, in my day, amongst the migrants from Spain, Portugal, or wherever, you came across a few home-owners, but not many.

Condescending criticism of the "little home-owner" defending their "patch" often clashed with our interviewees on moral grounds because such points of view tend to ignore the deep social meaning attached to becoming a home-owner and the latter's often modest social origins (see Figure 4). Underneath the desire to own "one's own house" lies a willingness, tacitly accepted, to create a permanent group, united by a good community spirit, and have a space for which the "actor can take the credit" (Schwartz, 2002, p. 31). The public relationship with property implies that it derives "from values to merits—through sacrifice and effort, the 'house is earned'—and the mastery of a singular world commensurate with private space" (Groux & Lévy, 1993,

Figure 4. Family album of a resident of the Cointrin area, 2019. Image courtesy of Nasser Tafferant.

p. 209); there is the feeling of controlling one's own space, "which is not the same as being in a flat" (Thomas, 2013, p. 394).

Invited after a long interview to reflect on his housing trajectory, Mr. Voll is reminded of his parents' advice: "Invest in stone," an action of "social foresight" in the face of the unexpected (see also Girard et al., 2013; Magri, 1991). Too young at the time to comprehend the truth behind this recommendation, it was only recently that this adage started to "mean something" to Mr. Voll, who took over the house he was living in 1976, aged 36, at his own expense:

> It took me many years to appreciate that. I am only just appreciating it now, as I get older. My reaction is the same. And maybe I am a bit swayed by these words from my childhood, which did not shock me but struck me. When you have sweated blood and tears, and then suddenly you lose everything because of a financial crash. Today, this could be a terrible clash, a stock exchange that explodes. It is your social future which goes up in smoke. So yes! Investing in something solid is imperative! We have a house, we know that it is solid and we know that we have something that we can leave to our children. We know that it will increase in value, even if we don't know what the future holds.

A number of studies have shown that, after WWII, access to "comfort" in the domestic sphere and to "property" was a central element in the deproletarisation of workers and employees (Faure & Gilbert, 2019; Groux & Lévy, 1993; Schwartz, 2002). From the 1960s onwards, with the development of housing zones in the suburbs, the private house is at the heart of a new threshold of comfort and quality of life that remains attractive for a whole mixture of social categories, whether stable or on the rise, of which the parameters are:

> The security and the freedom inherent in the owner status; the gap between time at work and away from work and consequently the valorisation of leisure time linked to the presence of an individual garden and to a country lifestyle; a relative increase in the habitable surface, especially of additional spaces. (Antipas, 1988, pp. 134–135)

In this context, much more than a comfortable place to live, the private house—especially for those who were once of the lower classes—represents "the distance travelled from their lower-class origins, as much as the desire to 'live like everyone else'" (Cartier et al., 2008, p. 16). It is a symbol of collective and social advancement that bears witness to the path travelled and rejects moral accusations of selfish attitudes. Nonetheless, these inhabitants also expressed reservations about an increase in "social problems" brought about by the project to densify the Cointrin district.

4.1. Fearing an Extension of the Town and Its Social Issues

The larger complexes (rental properties of around 50 metres) and problems associated with the development of "future ghettos" are the residents' main objects of criticism. Following a public information session about

the projects for urban development in the Cointrin district, the fears of the inhabitants were published in the local press:

> My only motivation is to see a town created with a human dimension, but I really have my doubts. If our future extra-densely populated districts are then transformed into ghettos, which, as history shows, is quite probable, the community will find itself, in spite of the planners, once again called upon to face social problems. (“Modification de zones,” 2016, p. 19)

Skepticism towards this form of high densification seems to be linked to a more or less fantasized perception of future social problems. Faced with this fear, residential space—likened to “a village”—appears to be a safe haven (“Help! Save our village,” “stop the maniacal project, no more concrete!” cf. Bézaguet, 2016). At the same time, these fears about the future also resonate with (more or less remobilized) memories of the near past. The example of the Avanchets district, a major complex built in the 1970s near the residential district of Cointrin, seems to have left an abiding social memory in the minds of the local inhabitants (Figure 5).

The propositions of Mr. Cédric, town planner with the local authorities, reveal how much the “town” is represented in the minds of the inhabitants of the residential area studied as an extension of the Avanchets district. The densification project is perceived as a threat to the “little paradise” the inhabitants have nurtured over the years:

> We, as town planners, bring a certain violence with us. This “little paradise” that the people have lived in and looked after for years will be partly destroyed. And the type of town which the Avanchets represents somewhat, in the minds of the inhabitants, will be built in their district. So it is, understandably, quite difficult for these people.

The residents also care about the risks of a depreciated district both socially and economically. They fear that the model of urban development could attract the “poor” with a “minimum of fiscal potential,” as Mr. Bühler underlines:

> When you know that rented accommodation is often occupied by those who live on social benefits and who are exempt from paying income tax, how can you expect the Genevan economy to grow?

It turns out that the fears expressed about the consequences of building vast complexes, on the one hand, and a defence based on moral effort and merit on the other, reveal a sense of communal social belonging to which the residents interviewed referred implicitly, over and above their internal differences when their housing estate is qualified as neither “chic” nor “a commuter hotspot.” An indirect way to also class oneself socially as neither at the top nor at the bottom of the social scale.

4.2. Defence Based on “Green Spaces”

Some arguments in support of the housing estate are also based on its “green” character. A banner in Cointrin, as published in *Pic-Vert*, read: “People in towns also need green spaces. No to office blocks” (“Modification de zones,” 2016, p. 18).

Figure 5. The adjacent neighbourhood: Social housing in the Avanchets district, 2019. Image courtesy of Nasser Tafferant.

In tune with the spirit of the time (Dubost, 2013), the ecological argument sometimes reminds us—more generally—of the advantages of green spaces, as such stances are often accompanied by a tendency to "fall back" on the "heritage" of the green qualities of a neighbourhood, which deserves to be protected for their aesthetic and ecological value, as underlined by Mr. Bühler (who moved to Cointrin area in 1961, at the age of 12):

> When you go for a walk and you see the number of cedars, ancient oaks—in short, beautiful trees—it is a beautiful neighbourhood….I say beautiful neighbourhood because we have these green spaces, we have beautiful trees which are considered noble, I don't know, like the Cedar of Lebanon, ancient trees which have an economic value in the CO2 plan, and I repeat "beautiful" [too] compared to the horrors which the developers are constructing around here and if you take the pond or the wonderful eco-district of Meyrin where you have virtually no space at all between the blocks of flats, it is from this perspective that I believe that Cointrin is starting to become a beautiful neighbourhood.

In the people's referendum of April 2019, against the project of modification of the housing district in question, it appears that references to "green spaces" seem to have been one of the population's main arguments. According to Mr. Aebischer (town and country planner working in the commune of Meyrin):

> In the referendum, one of the main arguments put forward by the inhabitants, especially in Cointrin, was: "Let us save our green spaces at the scale of the right bank." The green spaces within private plots, the houses, preserving the trees which are there, preserving the houses.

Thus, generally, in this defence of the district, by locals concerned with environmental issues, we find attitudes similar to those of a popular relationship (in terms of attitudes by the lower classes) with the dominant ecology (Comby & Malier, 2021). The attitude of the inhabitants appears, in effect, to be marked by a "scepticism towards the technological window on conventional ecology," or again by a "weak interest in the gratifications of the ecological moral" (Comby, 2015, pp. 27–28) and associated distinctive struggles; a logic that we mostly see employed in the middle or upper classes, and which we can also find in the arguments used by the urban planners we interviewed. As an example, our study shows that the presence of public transport facilities is a much-appreciated reality in surveys, even though these facilities are not used so much for ecological reasons but for practical uses. Having said that, the attitudes observable in the narratives of home-owners we interviewed—we stress—in no way exclude a preoccupation with environmental issues (an attachment to the verdant areas of the district, the benefits of green spaces) but these discourses appear far removed from the dominant ecological narratives by proposing a different interpretation of the environment: a vision that "patrimonialises" different ways of life in the district backed up by the protection of green spaces and, more generally, of the built-up peri-urban landscape.

5. Conclusion

At a time when "quality of life" is a referent often employed in the promotion of inclusive and sustainable cities, our study has underlined the difficult issues linked to social justice and ecology susceptible to accompanying urban development projects. In highlighting the role of the framing of public action on the perspectives and options left out of the debate due to the accent placed on the densification and the transformation of various subdivisions of the cities, our sociological analysis aimed to contribute to a more complex representation of the associated social issues. If it is important to remember that "there is no one quality of life valuable for all but as many conceptions of the quality(ies) of life as there are ways of life" (Thomas & Pattaroni, 2012, p. 115), it is clear that the urban reform studied tends—as an ordinary effect of symbolic violence—to pass off specific conception of urban quality of life as a universal standard and to disregard all other conceptions as local particularities. Finally, although the "intermediary" city represents a potential for densification at the heart of a new age of urbanism, the recent sanction by the results of the government's densification project for Cointrin's peri-urban suburbs reminds us of the non-inevitable or automatic character of the fabric of a town within a town. The controversy likely to come concerning the zone, between the different actors, no doubt remains a promise for the future, the analysis of which is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Antipas, M. (1988). Du logement salubre au logement aseptisé [From sanitary housing to sanitized housing]. *Les cahiers médico-sociaux*, *32*(3/4), 131–138.

Bailly, E., & Marchand, D. (2016, April 20). La ville sensible au cœur de la qualité urbaine [The sensitive city at the heart of urban quality]. *Métropolitiques*. https://metropolitiques.eu/La-ville-sensible-au-coeur-de-la.html

Bézaguet, L. (2016, May 6). Des petits propriétaires font de la résistance à Cointrin [Small owners resist at Cointrin]. *Tribune de Genève*. https://www.tdg.ch/des-petits-proprietaires-font-de-la-resistance-a-cointrin-219770146346

Bidou-Zachariasen, C. (2003). *Retours en ville. Des processus de "gentrification" urbaine aux politiques de "revitalisation" des centres* [Back to the city. From urban gentrification processes to policies for the revitalization of city centers]. Descartes.

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2006). *The new spirit of capitalism*. Verso.

Bourdeau-Lepage, L., & Gollain, V (2015). *Attractivité et compétitivité des territoires: Théories et pratiques* [Attractiveness and competitiveness of territories: Theories and practices]. CNER.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Harvard University Press.

Bourdin, S., & Cornier, T. (2017). Au-delà de la mesure du bien-être en milieu urbain: Quelle perception de la qualité de vie dans les villes européennes [Beyond the measurement of well-being in urban areas: What is the perception of the quality of life in European cities?] *Géographie, économie, société*, *19*(1), 2–31.

Breviglieri, M. (2013). Une brèche critique dans la "ville garantie"? Espaces intercalaires et architectures d'usage [A critical gap in the "guaranteed city"? Infill spaces and use architectures]. In E. Cogato-Lanza, L. Pattaroni, M. Piraud, & B. Tirone, B. (Eds.), *De la différence urbaine: Le quartier des Grottes/Genève* [Urban difference: The Grottes/Geneva district] (pp. 213–236). Métis Press.

Cartier, M., Coutant, I., Masclet, O., & Siblot, Y. (2008). *La France des "petits-moyens." Enquêtes sur la banlieue pavillonnaire* [The France of the "small-middle class." Investigations on the suburbs]. La Découverte.

Comby, J.-B. (2015). A propos de la dépossession écologique des classes populaires [About the ecological dispossession of the working classes]. *Savoir/Agir*, *33*, 23–30.

Comby, J.-B., & Malier, H. (2021). Les classes populaires et l'enjeu écologique. Un rapport réaliste travaillé par des dynamiques statutaires diverses [The lower classes and the ecological issue. A realistic relationship worked by various statutory dynamics]. *Sociétés contemporaines*, *124*(4), 37–66.

DALE. (2015). *Grand Projet Vernier, Meyrin, Aéroport* [The Grand Vernier Meyrin Airport Project] (Summary Report T3).

DALE. (2017). *Les nouveaux quartiers-jardins du 21e siècle. Guide pour une densification de la zone 5 sans modification de zone* [The new garden districts of the 21st century. Guide to densification of zone 5 without zone modification].

Dubost, F. (2013). *Vert patrimoine. La constitution d'un nouveau domaine patrimonial* [Green heritage. The constitution of a new heritage domain]. Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.

Ernwein, M. (2019). *Produire la nature dans la ville néolibérale: Une écologie politique du végétal urbain* [Producing nature in the neoliberal city: A political ecology of urban plants]. Editions de l'Université Grenoble Alpes.

Faure, S., & Gilbert, P. (2019). Des parcours résidentiels sous contraintes. Les classes populaires des cités HLM face à la rénovation urbaine [Constrained residential paths. The lower classes in low-income housing estates faced with urban renewal]. In S. Faure & D. Thin (Eds.), *S'en sortir malgré tout. Parcours en classes populaires* [Getting by despite everything. Trajectories through lower classes] (pp. 89–107). La Dispute.

Ferris, A. L. (2004). The quality of life concept in sociology. *The American Sociologist*, *35*(3), 37–51.

Florida, R. (2002). The economic geography of talent. *Annals of The Association of American Geographers*, *924*, 743–755.

Frauenfelder, A., Delay, C., & Scalambrin, L. (2014). Potagers urbains vs jardins familiaux? Réforme urbaine et controverses autour du beau jardin et son usage légitime [Community gardens vs allotments? Urban reform and controversies around the beautiful garden and its legitimate use]. *Espaces et sociétés*, *158*, 67–81.

Frauenfelder, A., Tafferant, N., & Battaglini, M. (2022). *La réforme de la "ville intermédiaire." Enquête sur des propriétaires de villas exposés à un projet de requalification du territoire. Une étude sociologique réalisée en partenariat avec le Département du territoire (DT)* [The reform of the "intermediate city." A survey of homeowners exposed to a land requalification project. A sociological study carried out in partnership with the Department of Territory (DT)]. CERES/HETS.

Girard, V., Lambert, A., & Steinmetz, H. (2013). Propriété et classes populaires: Des politiques aux trajectoires [Property and the lower classes: From policies to trajectories]. *Politix*, *101*(1), 7–20.

Girard, V., & Rivière, J. (2013, July 3). Grandeur et décadence du "périurbain." Retour sur trente ans d'analyse des changements sociaux et politiques [The rise and fall of the "peri-urban." A look back at thirty years of analysis of social and political changes]. *Métropolitiques*. https://metropolitiques.eu/Grandeur-et-decadence-du-periurbain.html

Groux, G., & Lévy, C. (1993). *La possession ouvrière. Du taudis à la propriété (XIXe–XXe siècle)* [Working-class possession. From slum to property (19th–20th century)]. Les Editions de l'Atelier.

Guillen-Royo, M. G., & Velasco, J. (2009). Happiness economics in developing countries. In K. C. Land (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social indicators and quality of life research* (Vol. 3). Springer.

Lafaye, C., & Thevenot, L. (1993). Une justification écologique? Conflits dans l'aménagement de la nature [An ecological justification? Conflicts in the management of nature]. *Revue française de sociologie*, *34*(4), 495–524.

Lambert, A. (2015). "*Tous propriétaires!*" *L'envers du décor pavillonnaire* ["All owners!" The other side of the suburban decor]. Seuil.

Le Galès, P. (2003). *Le retour des villes européennes.*

Sociétés urbaines, mondialisation, gouvernement et gouvernance [The return of European cities. Urban societies, globalization, government and governance]. Presses de Sciences Po.

Léveillé, A. (2003). *1896–2001. Projets d'urbanisme pour Genève* [Urban planning projects for Geneva]. Georg éditeur.

Magri, S. (1991). Des "ouvriers" aux "citoyens modestes." Naissance d'une catégorie, les bénéficiaires des Habitations à Bon Marché au tournant du XXe siècle [From "workers" to "modest citizens." Birth of a category, the beneficiaries of the Habitations à Bon Marché at the turn of the 20th century]. *Genèses*, *5*(1), 35–53.

Magri, S. (2008). Le pavillon stigmatisé. Grands ensembles et maisons individuelles dans la sociologie des années 1950 à 1970 [The stigmatized house. Large housing estates and individual houses in the sociology of the 1950s to 1970s]. *L'Année sociologique*, *58*(1), 171–202.

Matthey, M., & Schuler, M. (2017). *Aménager le territoire. La gestion d'un bien commun* [Planning the territory. Managing a common good]. PPUR.

Méliani, I., & Arnould, P. (2012). "Marchands de nature": 20 ans de communication institutionnelle dans la métropole lyonnaise de 1989 à 2009 ["Merchants of nature": 20 years of institutional communication in the Lyon metropolis from 1989 to 2009]. *VertigO-la revue électronique en sciences de l'environnement*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.4000/vertigo.12960

Modification de zones et développement de Cointrin. Réaction d'un habitant de Cointrin [Zoning changes and development at Cointrin. Reaction from a Cointrin resident]. (2016, June 2). *Pic-Vert*, 18–19.

Pattaroni, L. (2011). Les luttes urbaines sont-elles recyclables dans le "développement urbain durable"? [Are urban struggles recyclable in "sustainable urban development"?]. *Mouvements*, *65*(1), 43–56.

Paugam, S. (2020). Les quartiers riches se replient-ils sur eux-mêmes? [Are rich neighborhoods turning inward?] In S. Paugam (Ed.), *50 questions de sociologie* [50 sociology questions] (pp. 215–223). PUF.

Pinson, G. (2009). *Gouverner la ville par projet. Urbanisme et gouvernance des villes européennes* [Governing the city through projects. Urban planning and governance of European cities]. Presses de Sciences Po.

Pinson, G., & Reigner, H. (2017). Politiques urbaines et (in)justice spatiale [Urban policies and spatial (in)justice]. *Sociétés contemporaines*, *107*(3), 5–1.

Pittet-Baschung, M. (2019, August 20). Densification douce des zones villas. *Lutz Architects*. https://www.lutz-architectes.ch/article/densification-douce-des-zones-villas-350087

Ren, X. (2021). Suburbs and urban peripheries in a global perspective. *City & Community*, *20*(1), 38–47.

Rérat, P., Söderström, O., Besson, R., & Piguet, E. (2008). Une gentrification émergente et diversifiée: Le cas des villes suisses [Emerging and diversified gentrification: The case of Swiss cities]. *Espaces et sociétés*, *132–133*, 39–56.

Roy, P. (2011). Non-profit and community-based green space production in Milwaukee: Maintaining a counter-weight within neo-liberal urban environmental governance. *Space and Polity*, *15*, 87–105.

Ruzevicius, J. (2013). Qualité de vie: Notion globale et recherche en la matière [Quality of life: Global concept and research]. *International Business: Innovations, Psychology, Economics*, *2*(7), 7–20.

Schwartz, O. (2002). *Le monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord* [The private world of the workers. Men and women of the North]. PUF.

Thomas, M.-P. (2013). *Urbanisme et modes de vie. Enquête sur les choix résidentiels des familles en Suisse* [Urbanism and lifestyles. Survey on the residential choices of families in Switzerland]. Alphil.

Thomas, M.-P., & Pattaroni, L. (2012). Choix résidentiels et différenciation des modes de vie des familles de classes moyennes en Suisse [Residential choices and lifestyle differentiation of middle-class families in Switzerland]. *Espaces et sociétés*, *1*(148/149), 111–127.

Tissot, S. (2007). *L'Etat et les quartiers. Genèse d'une catégorie d'action publique* [The state and neighborhoods. Genesis of a category of public action]. Seuil.

Tissot, S. (2015). *Good neighbors. Gentrifying diversity in Boston's South End*. Verso.

Tremblay, R., & Chicoine, H. (2008). Qualité de vie et attraction des entreprises hi-tech dans la banlieue montréalaise de Laval [Quality of life and attraction of hi-tech companies in the Montreal suburb of Laval]. *Géographie, économie, société*, *10*(4), 493–515.

Vanier, M. (2012). Dans l'épaisseur du périurbain [In the thickness of the suburban area]. *Espaces et sociétés*, *1*(148/149), 211–218.

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.

About the Authors

Arnaud Frauenfelder is a sociologist and full professor at the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (HES-SO Geneva). His work focuses on public problems, the regulation of the social question, the relationship to institutions, the lower classes, and modes of socialization.

Nasser Tafferant (PhD in sociology) is a sociologist and senior researcher at the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (HES-SO Geneva). He conducts research at the crossroads of urban sociology, social work, health, and education. He also experiments with different media of scientific valorization such as photographic exhibitions, museum narration, and documentary film.

Monica Battaglini is a political scientist and associate professor at the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland (HES-SO Geneva). She works in the field of social policy and public policy analysis at the federal and local levels. She is also interested in the study of participation, particularly in the context of social diversity.