

# Breaking Ground Workshop / Geneva

## Strategies for Gradual Urban Densification

September 21-25<sup>th</sup>, 2015



### Context

Geneva is literally booming. It is currently experiencing its fastest population growth since the 1960s. The canton, which had 400,000 residents at the beginning of the millennium, is projected to have a population of 550,000 in 2030. Geneva already has the highest population density in Switzerland (it is twice as densely populated as Zurich, which is the second densest canton in the country).

This dense urban condition is a hallmark of Geneva, which is one of Switzerland's most international and culturally vibrant metro areas. Over 40% of its population is from outside the country. English is the primary language of 11% of its population and for another 12% it is Italian or German. About 30% of the residents speak more than one language at home.

The only thing that seems to be slowing population growth in the canton is the scarcity of housing – of all types and for different income groups. An increasing number of people commute for work to Geneva from nearby towns in France or the Canton of Vaud. The vacancy rates for rental apartment (0.4) is the second lowest in Switzerland. As a result, rental prices have skyrocketed to San Francisco levels, making it hard for everyone to find a place to live in, especially the youth and some vulnerable groups, who are increasingly pushed to the agglomeration's outer periphery.

Geneva is landlocked territory. Being one of Switzerland's smallest cantons, it doesn't have much land left for development. Federal laws protect the generous agricultural greenbelt around the city. This means that, if Geneva's population keeps growing as projected, the cost of housing will continue to escalate in the coming decades and only the richest will be able to live in the canton.

The last frontier for Geneva's urban growth is its low-density residential zones, which cover 50% of the canton's buildable space. The government has now restricted the construction of low-density constructions in parts of the canton. But that doesn't constitute a strategy in itself.

What is needed now is a concerted effort to envision how density in these areas could be accentuated and what kind of habitats could emerge out of this process. We not only need to imagine how neighbourhoods could offer more living spaces, but also how their liveability could be enhanced for all residents and users. How could neighbourhoods become better while becoming denser?

What is already certain is that no densification strategy can work without the active involvement of residents and homeowners. Geneva has a long history of local resistance against urban development and it is quite typical for plans to be delayed for years while conflicts are settled in court or at the political level. Scenarios for local development, in areas that are already inhabited, must thus necessarily be based on residents' knowledge and initiatives.

The city of today is the foundation of the city of tomorrow.

## **Objectives**

Workshop participants will conceive new strategies and scenarios for the densification and improvement of Geneva's residential zones.

At the end of five intense days, the teams will present projections for case studies, showing how these neighbourhoods could look like in 2030 –after 15 years of gradual densification and improvement.

Visual projection will only be one aspect of these scenarios. The description of the various measures that will allow this densification, and the gradual way in which it takes place, is at least as important.

More specifically, the workshop will address the following questions: How will current homeowners and tenants be associated or even become the initiators of this development? What kind of economic incentives, policy framework or legal code is required? What kind of tools would help municipal and state authorities to dialogue and collaborate with residents and stakeholders? How could a neighbourhood change while retaining its character? How would these densified spaces relate to the urban conurbation at large, in particular when it comes to having access to transportation and other civic amenities?

On the last day of the workshop, the participants will be asked to present their work in the form of an A1 panel, a 1 to 2 minutes video, and a 1500-word description of their

project. Each team will have 10 minutes to present their project orally to the public at the *Quinzaine de l'Urbanisme* (September 14-30<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

The output of the workshop will be subsequently uploaded on the workshop's web page, and compiled in a report to the intention of the Office of Urbanism, the media and the general public.

### **Organization**

- 5 days long workshop.
- 9 am to 7 pm everyday.
- 60 participants from the fields of planning, architecture, sociology, economics, law.
- 10 teams of 6 people each.
- 10 team coordinators.
- 7 guests who will act as resource people at different times in the workshop.
- 4 workshop staff.

### **Guests**

Yehuda Safran, Columbia University, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, New York (Confirmed)

Rahul Srivastava, URBZ, Mumbai (Confirmed)

Andreas and Ilka Ruby, Ruby Press, Berlin (To be confirmed)

Luca Pattaroni, LASUR, EPFL, Lausanne (Confirmed)

David Prudente, Envar, Geneva (Confirmed)

Nicolas Pham, HEPIA, Geneva (Confirmed)

Philippe Bonhôte, HEPIA, Geneva (Confirmed)

Lorenza Barconcelli, Domus, Milan (To be confirmed)

Julian Schubert, ETH/Something Fantastic, Zurich (Confirmed)

More TBA

## **Organisers**

### **URBZ: User-generated cities**

URBZ is a collective specialized in participatory planning and design. URBZ's mission is to facilitate the exchange and production of knowledge and ideas among all urban actors. URBZ has held participatory workshops in Tokyo, New York, Istanbul, New Delhi and Mumbai. It regularly organized studios and seminars for institutions such as EPFL, ETH, New York University, Columbia University, Pratt University, UMEA University (Sweden) and the Royal Institute of Art (Sweden). URBZ's work has been exhibited and presented at various institutions around the world including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the MAK Museum in Vienna, the Biennale of Design in Istanbul, the exhibition Sao Paulo Calling at the Sao Paulo Cultural Center, and at the Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanisme. URBZ has teams in Geneva, Mumbai and Sao Paulo.

The workshop is part of the *Quinzaine de l'Urbanisme*, an annual exhibition organized by several institutions active in the fields of architecture and urbanism, to present the current urban themes and projects of importance in Geneva. It will take place in the last two weeks of September 2015.