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Reconversion of Military Wastelands: the Cultural Refuge as a Unique Scheme

Fabien Jakob

Dismantling of an Alpin "réduit national"

- ¹ Given the evolution of the strategic situation in Europe since the end of the cold war, the neighborhood of countries that have most adhered to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the reduced threats to Switzerland (terrorism, extremism, etc.), the Federal Council has redefined the mission of the army, which continues to professionalize (to the detriment of militia army); it now decomposes into three priorities: "contributions to international support for peace and crisis management, sectoral security commitment and defense, as well as subsidiary engagements to prevent and control existential dangers" (Federal Council, 1999, p.5). Following successive reforms (Army XXI), among others the partial revision of the Law on the population protection¹, the regrouping of certain functions on strategic arms places and other sites abandonment (place firing squad, regional arsenals, barracks and cantonments, logistics centers, training centers, etc.), about 13,500 military installations, various bunkers, shelters, barricades, heliports, railways, power lines, telecommunication facilities, gravel pits, firing ranges, weapon positions, caverns, ammunition stores and underground tunnels that are difficult to access may now prove to be superfluous (Stavan, 1991; Dorsaz, 2004). Notably erected in 1930 on defense principles that were theorized by Alphons Maximilian Pfyffer von Altishofen² and developped by General Henri Guisan into a fortification system in the Swiss Alps (*réduit national*), these buildings, whose construction have accelerated since 1940 (the army builds 21,000 fortified buildings between 1940 and 1945), are indeed obsolete, unsuited, expensive to maintain while no longer meeting the requirements of the army (Ambrosino & Andres, 2008, p.38).

Map 1. Military sector plan

Source: Département fédéral de la défense, de la protection de la population et des sports, 2017, p. 66.

- 2 Following a preliminary diagnosis of territorial, social and cultural assets that questions the scope of a defense service (Federal Department of Defense, Protection of Population and Sports, 2017), the future of certain infrastructures is put forward in debate; army representatives, land-use planners, other political delegates and individuals who have granted the army surface rights confront then in moments of rapprochement their capacity to coordinate a plurality of possible interests, different grammars of law, justice or freedom, various motivational contexts and semantic repertoires, while engaging into qualifying and evaluating the very sense of common good. Uncertainties about "what is, what is about and, inseparably, what matters, what is valuable" (Boltanski, 2008, p.18) are then scrutinized and conventions of coordination are tested with regard to "the effectiveness and relevance of what is done to the test of what remains to be done" (Cefaï, 2009, p.212). Exploiting new potentials that favour the "passage from the old to the present, the past to the future" (Raffestin, 1997, quoted by Janin & Andres, 2008, 63), Armasuisse Immobilier, created in 2006, is then responsible for implementing restructuring campaigns based on an industrial efficiency and optimal functionality ideal, while ensuring that a sufficient rate of return is generated by this property portfolio which is in Switzerland one among the largest with almost 88 hectares (Wüest & Partner, 2008, quoted by Froidevaux & Rey, 2009, p.27).
- 3 In line with Viollet-le-Duc's approach pleading for an integral restoration, some buildings are transformed, reused, "which, historically, has been the case for the great majority of urban ruins" (Federici, 2008, cited by Leblanc, 2010, p.255). Some are thus reinvested by the Swiss Army or reassigned to other state functions (Fort Savatan hosts the Police Academy³), while others are redeveloped into civilian shelters⁴. Without giving too much information on their typology (shelter against thermal radiation,

radiation, electromagnetic pulse effects, etc.), their equipment or their access priorities in case of force majeure, these spaces and their reconversions tend to serve a conception of general interest, although it is not excluded that it is sometimes diverted to the benefit of those who establish them (shelters being in insufficient number, only people having a privileged role in the government and in the industries which are considered as essential can access those shelters).

- 4 Others undergo further forms of reassignment sanctioning an exchange value which meets suppliers' and applicants' interests⁵ ; to the satisfaction of entrepreneurs and other businessmen some are thus redeveloped into profitable hotel infrastructures (such as the Teufen shelter, now the Null Stern Hotel⁶), explosives or pyrotechnic elements storage facilities (such as the artillery fort at Champillon in Corbeyrier bought by NL Pyrotechnique SA⁷) or run as wine cellars (Fort de Chillon at Veytaux⁸). In a competitive market where more than ever everything is mobilized to satisfy multiple expectations and ever more precise market segments, others are rented as secure deposit sites, like the Swiss fort Knox and the bunker Gotthard⁹ or put in a lease according to different surface rights. Driven by showcase projects which are articulated around a cultural pillar (Bianchini, Parkinson, 1993, Pine & Gilmore, 1999, Pratt, 2009, cited by Andres & Grésillon, p.17), some of these wastelands are also transformed into museum, as the forts of Scex, Cindey and Pré-Giroud, which are often run by associations¹⁰, or made available to private institutions, for instance the Swiss Army Museum or the Musée de l'aviation and DCA).
- 5 Since it is often a question of incurring significant sanitation costs, such as asbestos removal, renovation, electricity and running water equipment or a matter of renegotiating a rezoning, these measures are not a sinecure; following an impact study based on a series of highly standardized instructions, prescriptions and indicators at the heart of an industrial organization model (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991, p.254), several brownfields prove difficult to get revalued. Either transposing an aestheticization and romantic exaltation of vestiges or Ruskin's and Brandi's approaches which respectively assume that restoration and reconstruction are disrespectful of history, some wastelands cede before "a desire for blurred aesthetics where can grow here and there the tall herbs, the strength symbol of a spontaneous living" (Lizet, 2010, quoted by Frauenfelder & al., 2014, p.74) and bow to time passing which "is considered by some theorists as the normal vocation of ruin" (Stanford, 2000, quoted by Leblanc, 201, p.255). Vegetation infiltrating, soil sinking, stones withering which stem from an ecological dynamic resulting from a natural clearing that would have reached a state of climax, some brownfields testify to bunkers colonization by rare animal or plant species, cavities re-use in communal water reservoirs, trenches transformation into biological corridors between protected areas or installations immersion in marshy areas that are conducive to fauna and flora development. Mobilizing consequently associative causes which are animated by ecological principles, wastelands are then put in reserve according to practices favouring the rehabilitation of ecosystems that have been degraded by multiple social uses.
- 6 Despite this revegetation phenomena, "wastelands and the problems that accompany them (biological infections, crumbling structures, loss of shape) remain the most expressive metaphors of the human skeleton, showing a representation of death, total disappearance and permanent oblivion" (Marconi, 1995, quoted by Leblanc, 256); at the request of some people wishing them to get erased, the most affected ruins are thus

destroyed, sometimes with the help of the army¹¹. In contrast to the painful demolitions of both industrial wastelands, often revealing an economic recession, and agricultural brownfields, which reflect a form of rural exodus, the destruction of these buildings, that are no more able to support a concrete form to the imagination of the national identity, do not arouse much emotion. Expressing attention to aesthetic criteria and the intention to restore virginity to an environment that is too humanized, this dismantling aimed at returning to an original stage is on the contrary hailed by the environmental protection associations, as it sometimes promotes the recreation of natural spaces. Revitalizing a renaturation, these demolitions find thus their grandeur in a world giving a place to an ideal of green city.

- 7 Testing a patrimonial context, its historical conditions of emergence and its anthropological dynamism, actions are nevertheless carried out in order to patrimonialize certain buildings, support of history, culture(s), and identities, thanks to their architectural or historical characteristics (Fort of Pré-Giroud in Vallorbe¹², the Dufour fortifications between Bex, Saint-Maurice and Vérossaz¹³, etc.) (Federal Department of Defense, Protection of Population and Sport, 2009). To the satisfaction of Swiss history enthusiasts and nostalgic people for an idealized conception of the militia army, these operations which are based on the respect of traditions bring to the Inventory of military constructions (HOBIM)¹⁴, the Inventory military combat and command structures (ADAB) or the Inventory of combat and command infrastructures of ecological value (IFKÖB)¹⁵ cultural goods which combine myths, beliefs and values relating to national resistance (armed neutrality), the Swiss Sonderfall (Dézé & Girod, 2008).
- 8 Underpinning in a domestic world a form of attention to transmission phenomena that introduce the idea of continuity, which is intrinsically linked to the beauty of an immutable order that idealizes the traditional community, other wastelands are eventually developed into spaces that are devoted to cultural heritage protection. In fact, the amended version of the Law on the population protection encourages the use of surplus bunkers into shelters which are intended to protect cultural objects of national importance that are threatened with destruction, particularly during natural disasters. Representing a total volume of some 227'000 m³ (Büchel, 2004), nearly 300 cultural shelters have been equipped by the Cultural Property Protection Section of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Population with ventilation devices, air heaters, thermometers and hygrometers, gas filters and dehumidifiers¹⁶; they are currently used mainly for depositing funds from institutions such as archives and cantonal libraries¹⁷.

From wasteland to cultural refuge

- 9 Following successful initiatives that proved their worth during the Spanish Civil War, when a large number of cultural properties found shelter in Geneva (Julliard, 2003), and during the 2000s, with the opening of the Bubendorf Museum¹⁸ which intended to host key Afghan cultural objects that were under threat of destruction in their own territory¹⁹, the Federal Council has decided to convert wastelands into a cultural refuge which is entrusted to the Swiss National Museum²⁰. Planned as part of the total revision of the Federal Law on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, Disaster or Emergencies²¹, this scheme is a world-first.

- 10 Inscribed on the International Register of Cultural Property under Special Protection²² and placed under the auspices of Unesco²³, the refuge is thus conceived as a temporary storage space, in a fiduciary capacity, for seriously threatened with destruction cultural property²⁴ whose historical, artistic or archaeological value contribute to a great extent to the importance of cultural heritage. It satisfies various normative, procedural, technical and inherent to the industrial world criteria; following the Guidelines for the Establishment and Conduct of Safe Havens (ILA, 2008)²⁵, it responds not only to the collected assets inventorying principle²⁶, an immunity rule under the terms of the Draft Convention on the Protection of immunity from jurisdiction²⁷, a cultural property seizure principle but also to a restitution guarantee in accordance with the Act on Transfer of Cultural Property in Exchange of Cultural Goods between Museums²⁸. While this scheme is primarily used for safe custody and preservation purposes²⁹, it does not prevent cultural property exposure, which seems to imply that salvaging cultural, social, historical, cognitive, aesthetic and artistic heritage can not completely be carried out without considering the economic profitability of such an operation (Greffé, 1990, quoted by Duyck & Riondet, 2008, p.178).
- 11 Being objectified in prestigious operations that reconcile international scientific cooperation (Strasser & Joye, 2005), humanitarian diplomacy (Harroff-Tavel, 2005) and cultural influence policies (Reichert, 2015)³⁰, these hardly endorsed measures also aim at consolidating abroad a certain image of Switzerland³¹. Custodian of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Red Cross International Committee host country, Switzerland intends thus to present this mechanism as an extension of a long humanitarian policy (Fleury & Soutou, 2005), since "attacks on cultural property, any people they belong to³²" deny the equal value of human beings, degrade their artifacts, beliefs and practices, provoke an alteration causing a narrowing of human identity which leads to a prejudicial dehumanization to the continuity of the human being.
- 12 Looting in Iraq³³ and Syria where the archaeological sites are massacred by excavators and sifted end³⁴, the Federal Council, supporting the idea of a common sense of justice, takes then the initiative of setting up a shelter for Iraqi and Syrian cultural goods threatened with destruction or spoliation³⁵. Underlying a principle of equal dignity, this action also aims to empower the most vulnerable ones to defend the signs of their humanity. Despite the Federal Foreign Affairs Department State Secretariat and the Directorate of International Public Law representatives (acting on behalf of the Federal Council) efforts to contact property holders³⁶, the refuge remains empty, which may testifies to some diplomatic impotence in the Middle East.
- 13 However, the institutionalization of the shelter is not without effect; reinforcing a normative apparatus deriving from the Federal Act on the Implementation of International Sanctions, the Iraq³⁷ and Syria³⁸ ordinances and the Federal Act on Cultural Property Transfer³⁹, it reinforces a set of measures fighting against international crime⁴⁰, strengthens cooperation between the Specialized Service for Cultural Property Transfer, the attached to Fedpol and the General Directorate of Customs Federal Security Service, Interpol, the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, the Art Theft Program (the program for art looted by the FBI)⁴¹ and ICOM which publishes emergency red lists of Iraqi⁴² and Syrian⁴³ cultural property being at risk.
- 14 Designed to protect from depredation the "exceptional supports of the enchantment of the world" (Cousseau, 2015), the institutionalization of the shelter also promotes,

beyond the Iraqi-Syrian borders, an awareness of the need to preserve material goods, but also cultural beliefs, practices and know-how that contribute to the revitalization of norms and institutions which are essential for the survival of a community and by extensions human being (Touscoz, 1993, quoted in Carillo-Salcedo, 2000, p.62); it thus initiates not only an inter-state dialogue, the emergence of new synergies through the sharing of knowledge and heritage expertise, but also the establishing of an international network of museums which will be serving as a refuge for art and cultural goods in areas threatened with conflicts.

- 15 These measures initiate the creation of the first international significantly capitalized fund which is dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage threatened with destruction, whose foundation, the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Zones, is based in Geneva. Despite its laudable objectives, some critics question the relevance of such a foundation with regard to the functions devolved to other interstate institutions specialized in the field, such as the International Committee of the Blue Shield, ICOMOS, ICCROM or the ICRC. Joining civic concerns, other controversies, revealing that the board of this foundation is overwhelmingly composed of imminent personalities of oil monarchies and commodity traders, also question the links and interplay of influence between some cultural and political representatives, industrial and financial circles, indirectly suspected of privileging issues of reputation or image, selfish interests or commercial motives, to the detriment of an ability to serve a shared conception of the common good (Cohen, 1986, cited by Brooke 2007, p.425).

And not to conclude

- 16 It appears that a careful study of the requalification of the vast network of subterranean galleries and military fortifications located in the Swiss Alps can not be reduced to an analyze in terms of consensus of representations, congruence of motivations or aggregation of commitments; on the contrary, it proceeds from a tensioning of heterogeneous repertoires of actions, projecting different motivational contexts. The whole issue of this study has therefore consisted in an interpretative and argumentative work clarifying how compromise operates by domestic logics readjustments articulated with traditional and patrimonial dimensions, inspired phenomena testifying to affects or aesthetic values, ecological concerns and civic arguments presented as the fruit of the general will. This research supports also the idea that this alpine wastelands reconversion process, which is based on a prior diagnosis of territorial assets, real estate, social and cultural, results from underlying functional principles which are based on a criterion of functionality, though the ability to plan, manage and operate over the long term. According to the various reforms of the army that have reshaped its resources and needs, this study shows, due to these obsolete infrastructures maintenance costs, the limited human resources and declining public budgets, that these redevelopment processes also support mercantile concerns which bring into in circulation and place on sale cultural goods, to the satisfaction of entrepreneurs and wise businessmen, and possibly to the detriment of a service of defense of general interest. Nevertheless, because of the army objectives reorientation, which also meet certain foreign policy priorities, these requalifications, considered the institutionalizing of a cultural refuge, certainly help promoting prestigious operations

aiming at consolidating abroad a certain image of Switzerland, but also express a certain sense of justice articulated to a common superior good of the widest extension; in this case, they aim to empower the most vulnerable ones to defend the signs of their equal dignity, while supporting the preservation of the cultural traces that underlie the very foundations of the human community and its durability over time.

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ABSTRACTS

Through different official communication channels (websites, brochures, reports, etc.), minutes of meetings, interviews, this research, conducted between May 2015 and October 2017, examines an operation to reassign a vast underground galleries and military fortifications network located in the Swiss Alps into a unique scheme dedicated to the cultural heritage preservation. Thanks to a pragmatic approach inspired by the sociology of emancipation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991) under which the commitment to action is coordinated around a shared conception of common good (civic, industrial, inspired, fame, domestic and market), it aims at analyzing the heterogeneous representations and actions registers which are mobilized during this reassignment attempting a compromise between technical, cultural dimensions, market concerns, political issues and diplomatic aspirations.

INDEX

Keywords: Swiss Alps, military wasteland, reassignment, refuge, sociology, justification

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