2018 annual meeting of the Danish Political Science Association

**Achieving a compromise between local autonomy and efficient use of common resources. Evidence from the Swiss land-use planning policy**

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## Abstract

## The autonomy of local governments and the efficient use of land are constitutional principles in Switzerland. In the context of today’s sprawling urbanization, the highly fragmented Swiss local level of government appears to be less and less successful in managing land use in an efficient way. Thus, a tension exists between, on one hand, the autonomy granted by the federation to the local governments and, on the other hand, the efficient use of land. The goal of this paper is to discuss the redefinition of the respective roles of the Swiss municipalities (the Swiss local level of government) and cantons (the second-tier state level in the Swiss federal system) in the framework of the land-use planning policy. 21 interviews with the cantonal public officials in charge of land use planning, as well as 2 municipal–level case studies were carried out. The results show that the task of managing the building zones should be centralized from the municipal to the cantonal level, thus indeed reducing local autonomy. By contrast, the preservation of the citizens’ quality of life in the urban environment should be recognized as a crucial municipal task. Urban quality in a given context needs to be co-constructed by the different local actors: political, economic, professional and the inhabitants.

## Introduction

Urban sprawl is a worldwide phenomenon (Hamel and Keil 2015) and can be defined as the spatial expression of the inefficient use of land. Urban sprawl manifests itself through increased dispersion and decreased density of urban areas (Couch et al. 2007; Schwick et al. 2012). Between 1985 and 2009 in Switzerland, urban areas increased from 264 to 281 m2 per inhabitant and job, equivalent to an increase of 6.5% (OFS, 2015). Schwick et al. (2018) developed several complementary metrics showing a steady increase in urban sprawl in Switzerland between 1935 and 2010.

The Swiss Federal Land Use Planning Law (LAT) first entered into force in 1980. This law set forth the primary aims in the field of land-use planning, most notably the objective of the “appropriate and economic use of land” (art. 1 LAT). However, in the context of the federalist Swiss political system, the Swiss cantons (the regional level of government) enjoy relative autonomy vis à vis the federal government. As a result, the implementation of the Swiss land-use planning policy is heterogeneous. In turn, this heterogeneity leads to varying degrees of autonomy at the municipal level (the local level of Swiss government).

The revision of the Swiss Federal Land Use Planning Law entered into force in 2014, after being accepted by popular vote in 2013 (with 63% voting affirmatively). This law is now clearer regarding the goals in terms of urban development in Switzerland: the aim is to achieve a compact urban development (art. 2, al. 2 LAT) and a qualitative densification of the urban areas (art. 1 al. a bis LAT). This revised law also demands that the cantonal land-use planning masterplans more precisely define the size and the distribution of the designated building zones (art. 8a and art. 15 LAT), potentially limiting municipal autonomy in this field. The cantons are currently revising their masterplans in order to adhere to these more stringent federal provisions.[[1]](#footnote-2) At the municipal level, the prevalent concern is of a rigid, top-down application of these provisions with insufficient coordination, leading to reduced municipal autonomy (Association of Swiss Municipalities 2014).

Both municipal autonomy (art. 50 Cst.) and the “appropriate and economic use of the land” (art. 75 Cst.) are principles stated in the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation.[[2]](#footnote-3) Within the framework of land-use planning policy, there is tension between these two principles. The question framing our research is whether a reduction in the autonomy granted from the federal state to the Swiss municipalities is justified in order to cope with urban sprawl. In other words, does municipal autonomy stand in the way of effective anti-sprawl policies? Does it stand in the way of the appropriate and economic use of the land? In a previous paper (Klaus *in revision*), the systematic comparison of the 26 Swiss cantons was carried out. The QCA approach was utilized (Ragin 2008; Schneider and Wagemann 2012) and corroborated the hypothesis that high municipal autonomy is linked with high urban sprawl in Switzerland. The present paper aims to address the limitations of our previous study by gathering complementary evidence of a qualitative nature.

## Theoretical framework

### Distinction between quantitative and qualitative aspects of land-use planning

We make a critical distinction between the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of land-use planning. The quantitative aspect concerns the size, the distribution, and the density of urban areas. Urban sprawl can be measured by quantitative metrics, based on these three parameters (EEA and FOEN 2016; Schwick et al. 2018). Meanwhile, the qualitative aspect of land-use (and urban) planning concerns the formal, the functional, and the environmental features of the urban areas. These features cannot be measured through purely quantitative metrics.

In the theoretical framework presented in Klaus (*in revision*) we derived one hypothesis from the model of the “Tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968). Highlighting the limits of Tiebout’s (1956) *Public choice* approach, also discussed in Keating (1995), this model draws attention to the risk of overexploitation of common resources when the actors who exploit such resources are too strongly focused on the maximization of their individual profit. Eventually, the lack of coordination between the users of the common resources leads to collective costs which are, for each individual, higher than their short-term profit. In this work, we draw a parallel between this concept and the municipalities that, in order to attract development, overexploit land by providing the space necessary for new inhabitants and activities. Recent contributions highlight a similar dynamic in both the United States (Buzbee 2009; Pendall 1999), and in Europe (Couch et al. 2007; Tosics et al. 2010). In the case Europe, Couch et al. (2007) make clear that “it appears to be generally the case that the smaller and more independent the units of local government, the more there will be competition between them to attract development and thereby encourage sprawling patterns of urban development” (Couch et al. 2007: 18). This quote appropriately refers to the size of the municipalities and their autonomy. In light of the above points, in our previous study we formulated and tested the following hypothesis: “High rates of urban sprawl are expected in the context of simultaneous high municipal autonomy and high institutional fragmentation if demographic and/or economic urban development drivers are present”. The results of our previous QCA analysis presented in Klaus (*in revision*) corroborated this hypothesis.

However, the theoretical elements presented above only focus on the quantitative aspects of land-use planning, whose outcome in terms of efficiency can be measured, for example, with the urban sprawl metrics developed in Schwick et al. (2018). The qualitative densification of the urban areas must be considered a separate outcome. However, this is problematic as “urban quality”[[3]](#footnote-4) lacks a univocal definition (Da Cunha and Guinand 2014). Urban quality is ideally co-constructed by the actors present in a given context (Kyttä et al. 2013). Nevertheless, urban quality can at least be translated into three distinct dimensions that help to clarify this concept. These three dimensions remain general enough in order to be operationalized according to the specificities of each local context. These dimensions of urban quality are identified in Da Cunha and Guinand (2014): they are the *formal*, the *functional*, and the *environmental* dimensions of urban quality. The formal quality of urban areas concerns the physical, architectural aspects, such as the aesthetic integration of new construction into the existing urban context. The functional quality concerns the adaptation of urban spaces to the uses and needs of citizens. The environmental quality is linked to safety and health (e.g., the absence of air pollution) in the urban environment. The contemporary discourse on urban quality emphasizes public spaces. Gehl (2010) developed twelve criteria for the quality of public spaces, divided into three categories: protection, comfort, and enjoyment. These categories overlap with the three dimensions of urban quality: protection relates to the environmental dimension; comfort to the functional and environmental dimensions; enjoyment with all three dimensions.

### Link between quantitative and qualitative aspects of land-use planning

While clearly distinct, the qualitative and quantitative features of land use are linked in the perspective of urban sprawl reduction. Multiple sources (Arnberger 2012; Kyttä et al. 2013; Wehrli-Schindler 2015) advocate for increased attention on urban quality in the framework of the densification of urban areas. In other words, in addressing urban sprawl, it is not enough to only focus on quantitative densification. The potential congestion and reduction of space would result in cities becoming less-inhabitable. Thus, both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of land-use and urban planning contribute to the more general outcome of the “appropriate and economic use of the land”.

The above-mentioned hypothesis concerning the link between municipal autonomy and high urban sprawl cannot be applied to the discussion concerning urban quality. Nothing in the existing literature supports the notion that municipalities possessing a high degree of autonomy in the field of land-use planning are less effective than municipalities with low autonomy in implementing the federal objective of the qualitative densification of urban areas. Thus, in this paper we adopt a more explorative approach, which we present in the next section.

## Method

Two institutional levels must be distinguished: cantonal and municipal. At the cantonal level, we collected data on the perception of cantonal administration employees responsible for land-use planning. A series of 21 telephonic interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in the respective native languages of the respondents. The interviews were semi-structured and contained questions relating to three main sub-topics: “Urban sprawl in your canton,” “The implementation of the revision of the Federal Land-Use Planning Law,” and “The instruments for land-use control before and after the revision of the federal law.” The interviews sought to develop a deeper understanding of the discourse of the cantonal public officials on urban sprawl, the role played by municipal autonomy, and the redefinition of the role of the municipal and cantonal governments.

Twocase studies are presented in this paper concerning the municipal level. Municipalities currently dealing with urban densification were selected. The goal of the case studies is twofold: first, they facilitate a shift in the focus form the cantonal to the municipal level of government. Second, the case study approach (Gerring 2006) is well-suited for the in-depth analysis of complex phenomena and in complex contexts, were multiples actors and conditions are present and interacting. The selected municipalities are located in two different cantons. This aspect is crucial in order to isolate the impact of different degrees of municipal autonomy on the outcome. Municipal autonomy is inversely proportional to cantonal control of land-use, thus it is subject of inter-cantonal (but not intra-cantonal) variation. We based our choice of cantonal typology on Mahaim’s (2014) work. We intentionally selected a canton with high municipal autonomy (Valais - VS), and a canton with low municipal autonomy (Geneva - GE). Table 2 illustrates the cantonal typology. In bold the selected cantons.

*Table 2: Typology of cantonal land use planning policies in 2012 (Mahaim, 2014)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Value** | **Cantons** |
| 1  Strong cantonal land use control  = low municipal autonomy | Basel-Stadt, **Geneva**, Zurich  (n = 3) |
| 2 | Aargau, Neuchâtel, Solothurn, Schwyz, Zug  (n = 5) |
| 3 | Basel-Landschaft, Bern, Lucerne, Schaffhausen, Ticino, Thurgau, Vaud  (n = 7) |
| 4  Weak cantonal land use control  = high municipal autonomy | Appenzell Innerrhoden, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Fribourg, Glarus, Graubünden, Jura, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Saint Gallen, Uri, **Valais**  (n = 11) |

The selection of the municipalities is based on the “most similar systems with a different outcome” (MSDO) approach (Rihoux and Ragin 2009), which is in turn based on the Przeworski and Teune (1970) “most similar systems” design. In our study, the positive outcome is the *successful implementation of a qualitative urban densification strategy*. A municipality where this outcome was observed is compared with another municipality where this outcome was not observed. The two municipalities are similar with regards to their main characteristics. The most salient point in common is that both anticipate demographic growth in the near future, thus they elaborated an urban densification strategy in order to accommodate the future development according to the new federal provisions (cf. Introduction). Both municipalities belong to urban agglomerations, and have comparable populations. In both cases, the political majority leans right-wing, with conservative social positions and liberal economic positions.

The selected municipalities were the City of Monthey (VS) and the City of Veyrier (GE). Employees of the municipal administration in charge of local urban and land-use planning were interviewed in both municipalities, and an analysis of the land-use plans and regulations was carried out. Finally, the documents reporting the political process (e.g., transcripts of the municipal council meetings and of the decisions of the local executives) accompanying the adoption of such plans and regulations were consulted. Table 3 shows the implementation of the MSDO approach selection criteria along with the selected cases. Table 3 is not conceived as a definitive analysis model, but represents a starting point which will be completed with the empirical information presented and analyzed in the next section (Results).

*Table 3: implementation of the MSDO approach*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Outcome: qualitative urban densification** | | |
| **Different outcome:** | ***Negative outcome*** | ***Positive outcome*** |
| **Most similar design:**  - anticipated demographic growth  - size (around 15´000 inhabitants)  - urban municipalities  - political orientation (right-wing) | City of Veyrier (GE)  *-* Low municipal autonomy | City of Monthey (VS)  *-* High municipal autonomy |

## Results

Before discussing the case studies, we present the results of the interviews with the cantonal public officials. Their perception of the ongoing redefinition of the role of the local government in the field of land-use planning converged on two points. The first point of agreement is the recognition of a paradigm shift in the field of land-use planning driven by the 2014 revision of the federal law. The second shared outlook, is that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative aspects of land-use planning is the potential determining factor for the redefinition of the respective roles of the municipal and cantonal governments. The following quotes are reported form the answers provided by respondents of different cantonal-level administrations (translated from French by the author)::

*“The old paradigm fell apart”[[4]](#footnote-5)*

*“The rules are now clearer, even if the municipalities do not like them”[[5]](#footnote-6)*

*“There was a lot of dissatisfaction [among municipalities], because this is a real paradigm shift”[[6]](#footnote-7)*

*“The dominant paradigm of unlimited growth is also questioned, growth targets are now being set”[[7]](#footnote-8)*

The revision of the Swiss federal Planning Law which entered into force in 2014 led to a “paradigm shift”. This term, often mentioned by the respondents, was used to represent a change in the way of managing the designated building zones. Currently, though municipalities remain officially in charge of the local land-use plans, the cantonal masterplans now play a heightened role and serves to limit municipal autonomy. The size and distribution of the designated building zones must now be more precisely defined at the cantonal level, ensuring accordance with the 2014 federal guidelines. These guidelines were elaborated by a task force including federal, cantonal and municipal representatives and are now referred to in the federal law. This relative centralization of powers is intended to foster a more coordinated implementation of anti-sprawl measures, (e.g., the limitation on the extension of urban areas).

Increased cantonal control over land-use is observed in all cantons, though relative variations in the degree of municipal autonomy across cantons can still be observed. Several cantonal public officials referred to reduced municipal autonomy as proportionate to building zone reductions, and stressed the highly quantitative nature of their current task:

*“The implementation of the revised federal law involves turning into a kind of accountant of the hectares of building zones”[[8]](#footnote-9)*

However, the role of the municipalities remains relevant, and may even be more crucial in managing the quality of the urban areas developed within designated building zones. This is because, as we pointed out in the Theoretical framework section, in a context of urban densification, the formal, the functional, and the environmental qualities of urban areas demand even further attention. We stress the fact that, according to the perception of the respondents, an active role played by the municipalities in the qualitative aspects of land-use planning would be beneficial to responding to urban sprawl. Therefore, the choice of the municipal case studies aims to evaluate this conjecture. The results of the municipal-level case studies are presented below. The cantonal legal and strategic framework is also introduced before going into further detail in the municipal-level case studies.

### The case of Veyrier - Canton of Geneva

Even before the 2014 revision of the federal law, the canton of Geneva already possessed more extended powers over land-use planning than other Swiss cantons. Although under the supervision of the cantonal authorities, the municipalities in other cantons are officially in charge of land-use plans. These plans define land-use zoning, and are legally binding for landowners. Geneva is the only case where the cantonal legislature is directly responsible for the adoption of the local land-use plans.[[9]](#footnote-10) This arrangement severely limits the autonomy of the Geneva municipalities with regard to land-use planning. The size and the distribution of the designated building zones, as well as their density, are directly managed by the cantonal authorities. The formal, functional, and environmental qualities of urban areas are also under greater cantonal control.

Despite their limitations, municipalities do play a role in the land-use planning process: they are consulted during the procedures of adoption and modification of the local land-use plans. During the consultation phase, the municipalities can request and influence changes in the planning strategy, (for example, a municipality may deem a plan overly constraining on their own development). Still, the final decision remains in the hands of the cantonal authority. In this system, good negotiation and argumentation skills can help municipalities gain some leverage. The case of Veyrier is a notable example of the tensions that can emerge between the two levels of government during the implementation of a densification strategy.

Veyrier is located in the Geneva urban agglomeration. Veyrier surveyed 11,535 inhabitants in 2016 and is considered an urban municipality with a residential character (OFS 2012). In 2017, nearly 80% (238 out of 298 hectares) of the designated building zones were low-density residential zones. The consulted actors in the municipality of Veyrier recognized that the cantonal respondents in land-use planning matters are open to solutions negotiated with the municipalities. However, the current implementation of the more stringent federal provisions sometimes leaves the cantonal authority with no choice but to impose certain measures in the name of more efficient land-use, even if opposed by the affected municipality. Conscious of the changing framework, and of the *de facto* obligation for urban and suburban municipalities to densify their low-density urban areas, Veyrier decided to assume a proactive role. The municipal government chose to develop a “densification masterplan” (City of Veyrier 2012) for the low-density, suburban areas surrounding the historic center.

*“The Masterplan is an instrument paid by the municipality in order to go in the direction of the densification but at our conditions and in a bottom-up way - Le Masterplan est un instrument payé par la commune pour aller dans le sens de la densification, mais à nos conditions et de manière bottom-up”*

The densification masterplan was finalized in 2012, conceived as a strategic instrument meant to enhance the coordination of the concerned public and private actors. The process of elaboration for the masterplan was intended to be as inclusive as possible, and included private landowners. A survey was conducted among the landowners to gather their opinion and to map out their future plans in terms of property development in order to identify areas for potential development. Three meetings were organized with the landowners in a two-year span (2010-2011), in order to maximize the conformity of the masterplan to landowner needs. The “urban quality” of the project was also a concern, and was discussed in its formal, functional, and environmental implications. Beginning in 2010, this concerted effort was led by a Christian-democratic member of the municipal executive, (an architect by profession), who was in charge of the municipal land-use planning. The cantonal authorities were informed of the ongoing process and endorsed the idea of a concerted urban densification masterplan. The municipality intended the final document as a fulfillment of federal requirements (qualitative urban densification) following a bottom-up approach and a pluralist process. The masterplan, finalized in 2012, though not a legally binding planning act,[[10]](#footnote-11) was intended to serve as a strategic guide for the densification of the suburban area of Veyrier.

However, the effective implementation of the densification masterplan gradually slowed in subsequent years due to the combination of two factors. The first is the development of a canton-owned property in the municipality of Veyrier. This development, known as the “Grands Esserts” project, is independent from the municipal densification masterplan. The Grands Esserts project represents 1200 new dwellings in an area of 12 hectares.[[11]](#footnote-12) The site of this project is adjacent to an existing low-density residential area. When the first neighborhood plan linked to this urban project was presented by the canton in 2016, concerns about the impacts on formal and environmental quality were raised by the municipal council. The architectural integration of the new, bigger buildings into the adjacent residential area was judged not satisfying by the municipal actors (City of Veyrier 2016). Concerns were also raised regarding the potential impacts in terms of the increased in car traffic, as well as in the decrease in green spaces, and of the overall quality of the landscape (id.). Moreover, the municipal council perceived this project as imposed by upper-level government.

*”We thought we would be able to get rid of part of the canton's pressure for densification. This was not really the case as the Grands-Essert project moved quickly in a top-down way - On pensait se libérer en partie de la pression du canton pour la densification. Cela n’a pas été vraiment le cas vu que le projet des Grands-Essert a avancé rapidement de manière top-down”*

Critical in the slowdown of the implementation of the municipal densification masterplan, were also the changes in the configuration of the municipal government in 2015. The member of the municipal executive branch who had initiated the densification masterplan left the government, and the task of local land-use planning shifted to another member of the executive branch. This member of the executive branch is affiliated to a different local political party, more conservatively orientated on social matters, and more liberally oriented on economic matters.

The result of the combination of the two factors presented above was that the densification of the suburban area of Veyrier was put on hold by the municipality. This was done in reaction to the top-down cantonal urban project which was viewed as an imposition by a significant part of the local population and political actors. From the standpoint of the municipality, placing the densification masterplan on hold was a legitimate reaction meant to defend the rights of the landowners of the suburban area of Veyrier. This local rationale was coupled with the argument that the preservation of the formal and environmental quality was already endangered by the “Grands Esserts” project.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, while not appearing in the official documents of the council meeting, throughout the course of our field investigations, socio-political reasons were also mentioned as possible sources of local resistance to the “Grands Esserts” project. The average inhabitant of the suburban residential area of Veyrier being an affluent, politically right-wing landowner, it seems possible that the potential arrival of a new population segment, less wealthy, more heterogeneous and intercultural, could have generated a “fear of the unknown” response among a part of the inhabitants of the suburban area.

### The case of Monthey – Canton of Valais

Valais is a highly fragmented canton, characterized by the presence of many small municipalities, which features a notably high degree of autonomy in the field of land-use planning (Mahaim 2014). In the Canton of Valais, unlike in Geneva, the municipalities are officially in charge of the land-use plans. The role of the canton is to ensure the conformity of the municipal land-use plans with the cantonal strategy. The Canton of Valais was the only canton where the revision of the federal law was rejected in the 2013 popular vote. This vote could be interpreted as an attempt by the population of Valais to preserve this autonomy. However, as the federal law was accepted by a Swiss majority, universal implementation was mandatory. Hence, the Canton of Valais and the municipalities have to find a way to reduce the mostly oversized designated building zones and to promote qualitative densification.

In Valais, the cantonal spatial-planning strategy was recently revised in order to adhere to the new federal legal framework. Though federal approval is still pending, analysis of the content of this revised cantonal strategy is a valid indicator of the intentions of the cantonal authority. One component of the cantonal strategy addresses the topic of “the quality of the designated building zones” (Canton of Valais 2018). Recommendations are made for the municipalities concerning the “formal quality” of urban areas, and partially their “environmental quality” (namely the norms to respect in order to protect the inhabitants from noise pollution).

Monthey is the main center of the “Chablais” intercantonal agglomeration, which includes municipalities of the cantons of Valais and Vaud. As of 2016, the City of Monthey counted 17,573 inhabitants, and is considered an urban municipality with an industrial character. Historically, the City of Monthey kept its urban development quite compact in part due to the topographic situation constraining development (the Rhône River is on the east and the foothills are on the West). Despite an already relatively compact development, the City of Monthey presented a densification masterplan (City of Monthey 2012) to the local population in 2012. The densification masterplan of Monthey is based on the idea of “concentric densification,” and the intensity of the densification varies depending on two main criteria: the centrality of the area, and accessibility to the public transportation system. Furthermore, the territory of Monthey is divided into two main areas: the plain area and the mountain area. Densification concerns only the plain area, an area which includes low-density residential areas. This aspect makes the case of Monthey relevant for the comparison with Veyrier.

The process of formulation of the densification masterplan was led by the municipal administrative service responsible for urban planning. The municipal political actors welcomed this proactive approach and the fact of adopting a clear strategy for the future municipal development. Similar to the initial bottom-up approach taken by the City of Veyrier, the goal was to act quickly in order to avoid potential subsequent top-down impositions by the upper-level of government, limiting the autonomy of the municipality. As was the case in Veyrier, the cantonal administration was informed of the ongoing local process, and were supportive of the project aims.

Another relevant point in common is that the 2012 densification masterplan of the City of Monthey is, like in the Veyrier case, a strategic document which has not direct legal implications. This document is intended as a reference for future modifications of the official local land-use plan. As such, the densification masterplan has an impact on urban development only as long as the political authorities wish to implement it. One potential risk is that a change in the political personnel involved at the municipal level could lead to a change of strategy, (as was the case in Veyrier). In contrast, the consulted actors point out that the positive aspect of the non-legally binding status of the masterplan is that it can evolve according to the changes of the context. According to the municipal administration, when disclosed to the local population, the densification masterplan was generally well received. While some landowners opposed the municipal strategy, many of them also welcomed the potential advantages stemming from the increased building potential. Moreover, similar to the position of the local politicians, they were reassured by the presence of a clear strategy, and transparent communication from the political authorities in charge of the land-use planning.

It is also worth mentioning that the densification masterplan explicitly mentions urban quality standards. It states that “in order for the densification process to be a healthy process, it must be coupled with new quality standards” (City of Monthey 2012: 19; translated by the author). When areas that are concerned by the densification masterplan are not municipal property, the masterplan mentions the possibility of using specific quality criteria (which are outlined in the masterplan) as conditions for the allocation of potential development rights to the private landowners. This is meant to foster urban quality by requiring the new development to adhere to the quality standards defined by the municipality.

Parallel to the elaboration of the masterplan, the consulted actors of the local administration in charge of urban planning highlighted the importance of internal coordination with other administrative services. For example, a survey of the general population was carried out by a different administrative service (not the one responsible for urban planning) concerning the preferences of the inhabitants in terms of cultural events and community development actions in the public space. The results of the survey were useful for the administrative service in charge of urban planning in order to improve the “functional quality” of the central areas of Monthey.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the consulted actors in the local administration generally feel that the cantonal administration provides useful information and recommendations in terms of best practices for the formal dimension of urban quality. However, the perception is that there is less support for the functional dimension of urban quality.

## Discussion

In Veyrier, the municipal densification masterplan was realized through a concerted, bottom-up process, and was perceived by the local actors as more quality-oriented than the cantonal urban project. The cantonal urban project was perceived as a massive, top-down intervention accompanied by undesirable impacts on both the formal and the environmental dimensions of urban quality. The intent of this paper is not to evaluate the actual quality of the two densification strategies from a practitioner’s perspective. The intent is to highlight the way in which the main substantial elements of the two strategies, as well as their respective implementation processes affected the perception of the municipal actors. In conclusion, questions of legitimacy aside the implementation of a local densification strategy was slowed by a top-down intervention perceived as too invasive by the municipal actors.

The case of Monthey the municipality had the possibility to work in a more harmonious political climate and with more autonomy. In this case, the municipality exceeded the existing cantonal provisions and recommendations in terms of urban quality. Thanks to an approach based on inter-services coordination and the consultation of the users of the public space, it was possible to work effectively on the functional and environmental dimensions of urban quality.

In Table 4, the criteria for the selection of the cases (already presented in Table 3) are once again listed but this time along with the new empirical data presented in the Result section. These new empirical data are italicized.

*Table 4: Differences and similarities between the two cases after the empirical analysis*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Outcome: qualitative urban densification** | | |
| **Different outcome:** | ***Negative outcome*** | ***Positive outcome*** |
| **Most similar design:**  - anticipated demographic growth  - size  - urban municipality  - political orientation  - *presence of low-density residential areas concerned by the densification strategy*  - *strategic, non-legally binding densification masterplan*  *- concertation with the cantonal administration*  *- bottom-up approach* | City of Veyrier (GE)  - Low municipal autonomy  *- Project led by a member of the municipal executive branch*  *- Low municipal landownership*  *- Overall more residential character of the municipality according to OFS (2012) typology* | City of Monthey (VS)  - High municipal autonomy  *- Project led by a municipal administrative service*  *- High municipal landownership*  *- Overall more industrial character of the municipality according to OFS (2012) typology* |

New similarities between the two cases were identified: in both cases the initial densification strategy was developed as a non–legally binding masterplan, stemming from a bottom-up approach, and in concert with the cantonal administration. Two more differences, besides the degree of autonomy, were also identified. The first is the higher degree of control on land-use enjoyed by the City of Monthey, due to its higher landownership. This landownership potentially fosters the realization of qualitative densification projects led by the municipality, which has the possibility to lead by example by showing how to implement its own urban quality standards. High landownership can be seen as a “necessary but not sufficient” condition favoring qualitative densification: if the municipal actors have the will to implement a qualitative densification strategy, high landownership can facilitate this goal. However, the importance of this element as a reason for the positive outcome should not be overstated: in fact the municipal landownership does not play a significant role in the densification of the low-density residential area of Monthey, which is characterized by a fragmented pattern of private-owned lots. Similarly, the overall territorial character (more residential for Veyrier and more industrial for Monthey), it is not necessarily representative, since both municipalities possess residential areas concerned by the respective densification masterplan.

Low municipal autonomy, (such as in Veyrier), implies a greater perceived distance between political decision-making and local communities. When dealing with a complex issue like urban densification, which directly affects the goods of private landowners, such distance generates a perception of intrusion. In Veyrier, the reaction of the local actors was to “counterattack” the cantonal project by pointing out its undesired impacts on the environmental and formal quality of urban areas. In contrast, the case of Monthey shows that a clear and transparent strategy led by the municipal actors has a reassuring effect on the local community. The local actors feel that they remain “in control” of their own development, even if a segment of the local landowners disagree with the municipal strategy. These findings corroborate Goldsmith’s (1995) hypothesis about local autonomy being a crucial element for the effective representation of local interests.

## Conclusion

The two cases that we presented and compared (following an MSDO approach) show that the successful implementation of a qualitative densification strategy necessitates a combination of several factors. These factors are: the presence of a certain degree of municipal level government autonomy, the transparent communication of a clear strategy with citizens, and some degree of municipal landownership.

The local actors are aware that qualitative urban densification is now an explicit goal of the Swiss federal Land-use planning policy. The cantons must adapt their land-use planning strategies accordingly, and as a consequence, the municipalities with in urban agglomerations must follow suit. Currently, following the paradigm shift in land-use planning policy, it is less about what to do than how to do it. A proactive role, and a sense of control over their own development is crucial for local communities, and fosters the qualitative densification of urban areas at the local level. With this proactive approach, municipal autonomy does not necessarily stand in the way of the “appropriate and economic use of land” (cf. Introduction).

The respective roles of the Swiss regional and local levels of government in the land-use planning policy are currently being redefined. The results of our study show that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative aspects of land-use planning is the key to this redefinition of roles. While the task of managing the building zones (namely their size and spatial distribution) is currently being centralized (moving from the municipal to the cantonal level in order to cope with urban sprawl), the promotion of urban quality should be recognized as a crucial municipal function. Urban quality in a precise context needs to be co-constructed by the different local actors (political, economic, professional, as well as the inhabitants) through a coordinated effort. The three dimensions of urban quality (formal, functional and environmental) should be addressed by the authorities seeking to implement an urban densification strategy.

The idea that land can be seen as a finite, common good is already present in the existing literature and emphasizes the quantitative aspects of land-use (Haber 2007). In light of the results presented in this paper, we argue that urban quality should be seen as a common good, too. The implementation of concerted strategies should help avoid the depletion of urban quality in the context of urban densification.

The limitation of this paper is the small sample size. This is due to the nature of the study which is focused on the in-depth analysis of the processes of elaboration and implementation of urban densification strategies by the local governments in charge of land-use planning. More evidence from the field can be collected from municipalities of other cantons. The cantons analyzed in this paper represent cases of high (Valais) and low (Geneva) municipal autonomy in the field of land-use planning. Further cases from intermediate types of cantons, such as Bern and Basel-Landschaft, could be analyzed in order to verify if an intermediate degree of autonomy is linked to an intermediate outcome, and if new conditions influencing the outcome are identified.

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1. 14 out of 26 revised cantonal masterplans have been approved by the Federal Council as of 17.10.2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19995395/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Translated from the French term “Qualité urbaine” in Da Cunha and Guinand (2014), who explore the factors that influence the perceived quality of urban areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. « L’ancien paradigme est tombé. » [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. « Les règles du jeu sont maintenant plus claires, même si les communes ne les aiment pas. » [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. « Il y a eu beaucoup de mécontentement car il s’agit là d’un vrai changement de paradigme. » [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. « Le paradigme dominant de la croissance illimitée est remis également en question, des objectifs de croissance sont maintenant fixés. » [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. « La mise en œuvre de la révision implique de se transformer en une sorte de comptable des hectares des zones à bâtir. » [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See Section III of the Spatial Planning Law of the Canton of Geneva (LaLAT). Available online at: <https://www.ge.ch/legislation/rsg/f/s/rsg_l1_30.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. We reiterate that the adoption of such kind of documents is a competence of the cantonal authorities in Geneva. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. <https://www.ge.ch/dossier/nouveaux-quartiers/grands-esserts> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)