

# “Icons of compensation”: The Swiss Alps as Intercultural Boundary

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*“Distance is as characteristic of Australia as the mountains are of Switzerland.” Geoffrey Blaney’s Tyranny of Distance set up the Swiss Alps as a default cultural datum against which the notion of distance may succinctly be grasped. As is often the case, Switzerland’s recurrent association with the Alps points to a more complex status quo. The mountains hold special significance in Swiss history and culture, as both the physical boundary and site of encounter between two archetypal Europes, Italian and Germanic. Like Switzerland’s strategic military réduit in the 1880s and during the Second World War, the Alps have forged a definitive topos in its social and cultural psyche, interpreted alternatively as an obstacle to political unity and as symbol of national resistance. The distance offered here for consideration is that of a substantial natural barrier, apparently overcome through undeniably daring feats of a modernising transport infrastructure, and built into a narrative of integration, one of Switzerland’s constitutive and perennial myths. This paper discusses the architectural implications of the Alps as “icons of compensation” (Marcel Meili), and reflects upon cultural boundaries, their crossings, and the necessity of distance.*

*Keywords: Popular culture; national identity; professional transfers; transport infrastructure; Switzerland; nineteenth century; twentieth century*

“Distance is as characteristic of Australia as the mountains are of Switzerland.”<sup>1</sup> The comparison with which Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey began his book *The Tyranny of Distance* sought to communicate the centrality of distance for Australian geography, history, and culture. As the more commonplace term of comparison, Switzerland’s relation to the Alps was the default cultural datum against which his notion of distance would be easier to grasp. This implication has a history of some hundred years, over which Switzerland’s national and international identity has inextricably—controversially—been linked to its mountainous topography. This firm connection in the popular imagination between Switzerland and the Alps has been driven by two overlapping functions, symbolic and pragmatic. As an instrument of political propaganda and touristic advertisement, the Alps alternate in the Swiss cultural psyche as natural obstacle to political unity, symbol of national resistance, and coda for personal and national traits of character.

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia’s History* (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1968), viii.

This paper reflects upon the cultural distance defined by the Swiss Alps as the geographic and spatial boundary between Italian and Germanic cultures, between a nominal North and South. Alpine crossings have regularly mediated cultural and professional exchanges between Italian, Italian-Swiss and German-Swiss architectural cultures. Starting from this premise, the paper is organised into a sequence of three historical chapters, each exploring different strategies for bridging this distance. The first examines the Alps’ political instrumentalization in the process of forging a mythical national identity that could support the fledgling Swiss Confederation. The second chapter zooms onto the Gotthard Pass, considering the impact of transit and defence infrastructures upon the alpine territory. Through the device of “crossings,” the third chapter traces a number of significant professional exchanges between Italian, Italian-Swiss and German-Swiss architectural cultures, as mediated in the 1960s and 1970s across the barrier of the Alps. In conclusion, by discussing the architectural implications of the Alps as what Marcel Meili has called “icons of compensation,” this paper asks how the cultural convention of mountains as archetypal wilderness confronts the actuality of their domestication.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Meili, “Is the Matterhorn City?” in Roger Diener, et al., *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), 921.

## The Alps as Symbolic Distance: 1800–1945

As a small country straddling four linguistic regions and three major European cultures, Switzerland’s political existence has historically hinged upon a fragile intellectual

construct. The creation of a national mythology was part of a fine balance between the imposition of federalist authority and the prerogative of political autonomy, maintained by each of Switzerland's 2300 communes as self-governing administrations.<sup>3</sup> Working against the supreme significance attached to the communes' territorial borders, federal unification demanded an act of supreme political will. The fine network of cultural and administrative borders had to be stitched over, with a federal counter-network of transit connections. The railways were harbingers of modernity: a united Switzerland had to be a modern Switzerland, one that could be crossed by traffics of people and goods, an efficient transit point at the heart of Europe. By this logic, Switzerland's constitutional survival was conditional upon its accession to modernity.

In this political, cultural and economic project, the physical barrier of the Alps played a crucial part. As the ultimate border between languages and cultures, the mountains had long dictated Switzerland's development. Their early modernisation took the form of a regionally scaled industrialisation, located close to the natural resources of hydraulic power and timber. It depended on a comprehensive rail network, whose dramatic suspension bridges and underground tunnels became at the same time a source of cultural and symbolic capital. Structures of the utmost rationalism were charged with romantic nationalist overtones, harnessed to a particular genre of representative

<sup>3</sup> Bundesamt für Statistik, "Die 2212 Gemeinden der Schweiz am 1.1.2019," <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/querschnittstemen/raeumliche-analysen/raeumliche-gliederungen/Institutionelle-gliederungen.assetdetail.7008563.html>

Figure 1. Gotthard Railway postcard, 1910. Reprinted image. © ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv.



infrastructures.<sup>4</sup> The symbolism of viaducts, signifying the mastery of man over nature, projected the image of a modern, dynamic and enterprising country, all the more against its alpine backgrounds. “It is currently remarked in Berne,” *The Times* quipped in 1907, “that Switzerland must have more mountains in order to make more railways.”<sup>5</sup>

The mountains’ progressive iconography co-existed with a regressive, yet no less dramatic, mythology of national independence. The imagery of the Alps was coupled with that of Swiss chalets and mountain villages as expressions of an authentic nature and culture. The obsession with the *chalet suisse* that gripped nineteenth-century Europe saw the architectural type as the emanation of an alpine culture as primitive and “authentic.”<sup>6</sup> The exhibit *Village Suisse*, at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris, featured vernacular houses and sheds, precariously poised on huge stage-prop mountains, shoring up Switzerland’s tourist industry.

Consequently, the Alps were put in the service of a mythologizing rhetoric during the so-called *Geistige Landesverteidigung* (spiritual self-defence)—the peculiar interlude of vivid nationalist propaganda issued, before and during the Second World War, in response to the Nazi threat. Writing in 1938, Christian-Democrat politician Philipp Etter seized upon the Gotthard massif as the entity “at the heart of the [Swiss] state,” representing no less than a “European, universal idea ... of a spiritual community of peoples and Western civilisations ... nothing other than the victory of the spirit over the flesh on the rugged terrain of the state.”<sup>7</sup> These soaring sentiments were given free rein during the 1939 national

4 Jürg Conzett, “Brückenbau,” in *Schweiz*, ed. Anna Meseure, et al. (Munich: Prestel, 1998), 73–77.

5 “Protection of Switzerland,” *The Times* (1907), quoted in Peter Röllin, “Mit etwas Bergdruck in die Moderne,” in *Schweiz*, ed. Meseure, et al., 15.

6 See for example Irene Cieraad, “Bringing Nostalgia Home: Switzerland and the Swiss Chalet,” in *Architecture and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2018), 265–88; Benedikt Loderer, “Der grosse Suchapparat oder nur Chalets sind bergatuglich,” in *Schweiz*, ed. Meseure, et al., 105–107.

7 Philipp Etter, “Message of the Federal Council concerning the organisation and duties of Swiss cultural protection and publicity” (1938), quoted in Jean-François Bergier, et al., *Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War. Final Report of the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War*, trans. Rosamund Bandi, Hillary Crowe, Ian Tickle and Susan Worthington (Zurich: Pendo Verlag, 2002), 85.



Figure 2. Hans Erni, detail from mural *Die Schweiz, das Ferienland der Völker*, 1938–39. (Photograph of original mural by Jean Gaberell. Reprinted image. © ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv)

exhibition in Zurich. They found graphic expression in artist Hans Erni's monumental mural *Die Schweiz, das Ferienland der Völker*, which combined modern and traditional, natural and technical elements in a manner influenced by photomontage techniques.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of the exhibition, the Alps were also subject to an overt programme of militarisation. The Gotthard's strategic location had, since 1885, caused the development of military defences, creating an alpine *réduit* of European significance.<sup>9</sup> As with the railways, the physical construction of bunkers and such was doubled up as cultural construct, the Swiss "myth of military fortifications" running in parallel to transport modernisation.<sup>10</sup> Continuing in the run up to and during World War Two, the construction of a subterranean network of camouflaged bunkers and observation posts was accompanied by colourful visual propaganda. The targeted popular appeal of the Swiss military postcard series "Irgendwo in der Schweiz" (Somewhere in Switzerland, 1939) is apparent—similar to Erni's mural—in the adoption of graphics recalling tourist advertisement at the time.

## The Gotthard Pass: Concealed transformations

Distance is validated by the manner in which it is overcome. The physical distance entailed by the Alps, Switzerland's symbolic crux, is activated by the possibilities of its bridging. Hence the cultural and technological significance historically attached to the Gotthard Pass. Having evolved from a network of centuries-old *mulattiere* (donkeys' paths) to a strategic trade channel by the thirteenth century, the pass became a major European route in the sixteenth century, following the construction of the so-called Devil's Bridge at the Schöllenen Gorge and Twärrenbrücke over Reuss River (henceforth a *topos* of Swiss painting). Carriages crossings were documented from the late eighteenth century, and a winding, fully surfaced five-metre-wide road was completed in the 1830s.<sup>11</sup> The installation of a regular post coach service acquired the peculiar juxtaposition of symbolic and pragmatic value so readily attached in Swiss cultural history to infrastructural modernising works, as captured by the dramatic dynamism of Rudolf Koller's painting *The Gotthard Post* (1873).

The heroic completion of the 15-kilometre-long Gotthard Tunnel (1882) at an altitude of 1,500 metres proved particularly prone to mythologizing. The entire Gotthard Bahn, laid out over the 200 kilometres between Immensee in the Schwyz canton and

8 Gottlieb Duttweiler and Schweizerische Landesausstellung, *Eines Volkes Sein und Schaffen: die Schweizerische Landesausstellung 1939* (Zurich: Duttweiler, 1940).

9 For the importance accorded to the Gotthard in Swiss military and defense strategy, see Roberto Moccetti, "L'importanza militare del San Gottardo nel centenario delle fortificazioni," *Rivista militare della Svizzera italiana* 60, no. 4 (1988).

10 Flavio Stroppini, "Il mito delle Fortezze militari sul massiccio del San Gottardo," in *Der Gotthard / Il Gottardo: Landscape – Myths – Technology*, ed. Marianne Burkhalter and Christian Sumi (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2016), 433–57.

11 Karl Iten, *Adieu - altes Uri: Aspekte des Wandels eines Kantons vom 19. ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1990).



Figure 3. Rudolf Koller, *The Gotthard Post* (1873). (Reprinted image. © ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv / Fotograf: Photographisches Institut der ETH Zürich / PI\_34-J-0107)

Chiasso at the border with Italy, was celebrated for the proximity it created between Switzerland and the nominal South. It was dug, pickaxed and dynamited mostly by Italian labourers, bringing with them, deeply into Switzerland, a poignant mix of ethnic and social class tensions. The intercultural connection created by the tunnel brought into being new conditions: the seeds of southern plants, lodged in the workers' pockets and trousers upturns and dropped on the northern side of the tracks, shaped a new and unique flora along the Gotthard railway. Moreover, the new accessibility of the South acquired its own representational genre, from postcards and posters to Carl Spitteler's tourist guide *Der Gotthard* (1897), documenting the role of the railway in the elimination of distance.<sup>12</sup>

### Architectural Crossings: The Alps as Transit Territory

Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* (1966) starts from a nineteenth-century engraving, representing the Ponte del Diavolo on the St. Gotthard pass as the site of confrontation between "nature and man's construction."<sup>13</sup> Somewhat

12 Carl Spitteler, *Der Gotthard* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1897), in Internet Archive, <http://archive.org/details/dergotthard00spituoft>. See also Kilian Elsasser, "St. Gotthard: The World's Most Picturesque Route," in *Der Geschichtsfreund: Mitteilungen Des Historischen Vereins Zentralschweiz* 163 (2010): 137–53.

13 Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 20. The print is Rudolph Dikenmann, *Pont du Diable. Route du St Gotthard*, ca. 1840–51.

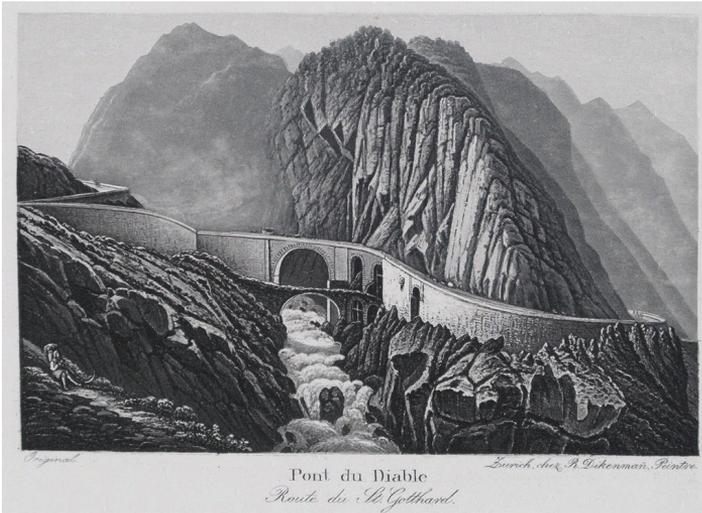


Figure 4. Rudolf Dikenmann, *Souvenir de la Suisse: Pont du Diable*, 1840. (Reproduced image from Wikimedia Commons.)

didactically, Rossi argued for an idea of the city as extending beyond its physical confines, and for a wider understanding of urbanity as the manifestation of civilization in the territory. To that effect, he examined “not only the visible image of the city and the sum of its different architectures, but architecture as construction,”<sup>14</sup> as urban artifacts set into specific relationships with their locality.<sup>15</sup> For Rossi, Dinkelmann’s engraving was therefore not an innocent rendition of a spectacular view, but depicted the natural and the man-made in a tense dialectical interplay.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, art historian Albert Kirchengast describes the Gotthard as a “dialectical landscape,” in which the (fictional) image of “pure” nature is permanently confronted with the actuality of human control.<sup>17</sup>

Rossi became familiar with Alpine crossings in the course of his commute between Milan and Zurich, during his now-legendary visiting professorship at ETH Zurich between 1972–74, often in the company of his teaching assistants, the Ticinese architects Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart.<sup>18</sup> The note in his diary, “anch’io come Gastarbeiter” (“me too as seasonal worker”) demonstrated a communist’s solidarity with the generations of Italians going to Switzerland before him for work.<sup>19</sup> In his 1978 lecture at ETH, entitled “An Analogical Architecture,” Rossi acknowledged that his personal experience of the infrastructural galleries on this route, internalized during years of regular crossings, had re-emerged in design and was reflected in the galleries of the Gallarate housing block:

*an aspect of this design ... made clear to me by Fabio Reinhart driving through the San Bernardino Pass, as we often did, in order to reach Zurich from the*

14 Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 21.

15 Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 23.

16 See Adrià Carbonell and Roi Salgueiro Barrio, “Notes on Aldo Rossi’s Geography and History; the Human Creation,” in *Cartha* 2, no. 18 (2016), 36–37.

17 Albert Kirchengast, “Der Gotthard als dialektische Landschaft,” in *Der Gotthard / Il Gottardo*, ed. Burkhalter and Sumi, 151–61.

18 Ákos Moravánszky and Judith Hofengärtner (eds.), *Aldo Rossi und die Schweiz: Architektonische Wechselwirkungen* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2011).

19 Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, ed. Francesco Dal Co (Milan: Electa; Los Angeles: Getty Foundation, 1999), notebook 11, February 28–June 6, 1972.

*Ticino Valley; Reinhart noticed the repetitive element in the system of open-sided tunnels, and therefore the inherent pattern. I understood ... how I must have been conscious of that particular structure – and not only of the forms – of the gallery, of covered passage, without necessarily intending to express it in a work of architecture.*<sup>20</sup>

The mountain crossings mediated a range of personal and cultural experiences that subconsciously took shape in one of Rossi's most iconic projects. The wider pattern emerging here is a ripple effect of professional exchanges between a nominal North and South, negotiated across the distance of the Alps. This was particularly the case within Italian-Swiss and German-Swiss architectural cultures, but it also involved the outreach of Italian architecture and theory. The impact of Rossi's fragmented Swiss experiences is apparent in his *Scientific Autobiography* (1981), in which he repeatedly brings up Zurich places and buildings, acquaintances and colleagues from ETH, lectures attended and given there, affinities with Germanic culture and even an early fascination with Swiss railway timetables.<sup>21</sup> In the course of his teaching, he oversaw the production of urban studies of architectural traces in the topography: the so-called "Rossi Plan" of Zurich's historical centre<sup>22</sup> was dwarfed by the lesser-known *La costruzione del territorio* (1979), an 800-page opus systematising vernacular settlements and house types across the Ticino.<sup>23</sup>

The Alps become a significant background in the collage *Città Analoga*, assembled by Rossi with Reinhart, Reichlin and their colleague Eraldo Consolascio for the 1976 Venice Biennale.<sup>24</sup> Dario Rodighiero's reconstruction of the original sources used in the collage assigns the cartographic representation of mountains on the bottom left to the first edition the Dufour Map (1845–65), Switzerland's first federal survey and itself a setting stone in the construction of the country's national identity.<sup>25</sup> The choice of this map, memorably described by Marc Angéil and Cary Siress as "saturated with ideology," points to the power relations inscribed within the seemingly objective record of territory.<sup>26</sup> The bendy road above it, a coda for mountain crossing similar to the Tremola Pass on the Gotthard, is collated from Rossi's own project, with Massimo Fortis and Massimo Scolari, for a Town Hall in Scandicci (1968).<sup>27</sup> Other superimpositions are the elevations and plans of Ticinese settlements later published in *La costruzione del territorio*. Rossi's own reluctance to clarify the sources and personal meanings attached to the collage indicate their nature as indicative, analogous and ultimately subjective

20 Aldo Rossi, "An Analogical Architecture," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 350.

21 Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981) include references to two of Karl Moser's public buildings in Zurich, the Lichthof in the University and the Kunsthau (8–9, ill. 14); Paul Hofer's lectures at ETH (43–44); a self-confessed "Germanophilia" and significant discussion with Heinrich Helfenstein (46); his own lectures and later teaching with Paul Hofer in 1977–78 (50–51); the Limmat river (69) and childhood fascination with a book of Swiss railways timetables (80).

22 Aldo Rossi, et al., *Rilievo 1:1000 del Piano Terreno entro il perimetro delle mura barocche: 1973* (Zurich: ETH, 1980).

23 Aldo Rossi, Eraldo Consolascio, and Max Bosshard, *La costruzione del territorio nel cantone Ticino* (Lugano: Fondazione Ticino Nostro, 1979).

24 The panel was shown as part of the exhibition *Europa-America: Centro storico-suburbio*. See Léa-Catherine Szacka, "Aldo Rossi, Bruno Reichlin, Fabio Reinhart, Eraldo Consolascio, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, 1976," *Radical Pedagogies*, Princeton University School of Architecture, n.d., <http://radical-pedagogies.com/search-cases/e08-eth-zurich/>

25 Dario Rodighiero, et al., *The Analogous City: The Map* (Lausanne: Editions Archizoom, 2015).

26 Marc Angéil and Cary Siress, "Operation Switzerland: How to Build a Clockwork Nation," in *Mirroring Effects: Tales of Territory* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2019), 707.

27 Rodighiero, et al., *The Analogous City*.

(“autobiographical”) references. For him, “the panel suggests in a fairly plastic way the image of the different meaning which distinct projects produce through a relatively arbitrary editing ... while trying to express a dimension of surroundings and of the memory.”<sup>28</sup> He admits that the Ticinese and Northern Italian references are specific: “Clearly, this panel shows a number of aspects of ... a memory circumscribed to a certain territory, or better, to a country—Northern Lombardy, Lake Maggiore and the Canton Ticino—with its signs and emblems.”<sup>29</sup> By giving cultural unity precedence over the administrative and geopolitical redistribution of territory, Rossi disregards the Swiss Italian frontier. The composition signals that the true border is the mountain, the geographical distance between different cultures that allows them to coexist without blending into each other.

For Reichlin and Reinhart, as for other Ticinese architects trained at ETH, the transalpine commute to Zurich during the Rossi years was a familiar routine, despite Ticino’s older historical and cultural connections to Italy. Since the Middle Ages, Ticinese architects and masons, Francesco Borromini included, had naturally gravitated towards the artistic centres of Italy. (Acknowledging this history, Rossi affectionately nicknamed his two assistants the “Borrominis of *Tendenza*.”)<sup>30</sup> The cultural connection spilled into the twentieth century as Italian Rationalism penetrated the Ticinese architecture circles. However, a complex mix of historical, political and administrative circumstances, exacerbated by the closure of the Italian border before and during World War Two, turned the Ticinese towards their colleagues to the north, creating the illusion of a Swiss cultural homogeneity.<sup>31</sup> As Reichlin and Reinhart’s colleagues and contemporaries, Paolo Fumagalli and Flora Ruchat-Roncati, would later contend:

*the history of Swiss architecture between the two wars is exaggerated ..., because the extremely unified picture it presents is due to the fact that, in that period, the hegemonic culture is the Swiss-German one, and it positively conditions the whole country. It is involved in the international debate, it is open towards the north, it is the active reflection of the ideas and culture of Central Europe. Its cultural superiority finds its institutional symbol in the Polytechnic of Zurich, the school in which all the Swiss who wanted to become architects or engineers had to study, whether they were German-speakers, French-speakers or Italian-speakers.*<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Aldo Rossi, “La Città Analoga: Tavola,” *Lotus* 13 (December 1976), 5–8.

<sup>29</sup> Aldo Rossi, “La Città Analoga,” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Marcel Meili, Bruno Reichlin, Fabio Reinhart, “Viele Mythen, ein Maestro: Kommentare zur Zürcher Lehrtätigkeit von Aldo Rossi, Teil II,” in *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 85, nos. 1-2 (1998), 39.

<sup>31</sup> Paolo Fumagalli, “Die Architektur der fünfziger und sechziger Jahre im Tessin zwischen Deutschschweiz und Norditalien,” in Meseure, et al., *Schweiz*, 93–97.

<sup>32</sup> Paolo Fumagalli and Flora Ruchat, “L’unità e la diversità,” *Architettura Svizzera*, special issue, *Parametro* 140, no. 7 (1985), 8.

The professional dialogue between the two Swiss regions would strengthen after the war, as their connection settled into custom. Critic Paolo Fumagalli, himself an ETH graduate, argued that the Ticinese architecture students (and professors) at ETH Zurich helped import to the South a professional culture based on lasting and good-quality construction, and a new orientation towards the works of Le Corbusier, Wright and Aalto.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, viewed from the South, the modernist culture of 1950s and early 1960s ETH was perceived as too technical and too dry for a well-rounded architectural education. Moreover, the language barrier remained palpable for many Ticinese students in the 1950s, who tended to cluster together close to the Italian Swiss professors, particularly Rino Tami, a strong modernist figure. In turn, the connections made in Zurich continued in practice back in the Ticino, where many of the ETH graduates, buoyed by their polytechnic formation, grouped together in social and professional networks, temporary collaborations and long-term partnerships.<sup>34</sup> This is clearly visible in the landmark exhibition *Tendenzen: Neuere Architektur in Tessin* (1975), curated by the German-Swiss architect and critic Martin Steinmann at ETH in Zurich. Steinmann theoretically packaged the heterogeneous production of mostly emerging Ticinese practices, effectively launching the international coverage of Ticino architecture that continued throughout the late 1970s and 80s.<sup>35</sup> Of the twenty-one Ticinese practitioners featured in this show, two thirds were ETH graduates.<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, the remarkable appeal of this new production for the German Swiss and international audience was down to its exacting synthesis of modernist references, inherited from ETH training, with theoretical principles and design methods formulated by the Italian *Tendenza*. This combination stood witness to a deep connection to Italian architecture culture. Early on, the Ticinese architects were essentially influenced by the “written architecture” of Ernesto Rogers, editor of *Casabella continuità*, Bruno Zevi’s *Storia dell’architettura moderna* (1950), as well as the writings of Rossi, Vittorio Gregotti and Manfredo Tafuri, prior to their translation into English, French or German.<sup>37</sup> Their design methodology had much in common with the Italian *Tendenza*, manifesting similar concerns with type, historical reference, urbanity, the relation to site and, essentially, the problem of form. What the Ticinese lacked, unlike their Italian counterparts, was the actual city as a coherent, material, socio-cultural proposition in which to root architecture. Their solution was to extend the physical realm of the city to the scale of urbanization processes, including an intensive critique of the

33 Fumagalli, “Die Architektur der fünfziger und sechziger Jahre im Tessin zwischen Deutschschweiz und Norditalien,” 93.

34 See the example of Flora Ruchat-Roncati in Irina Davidovici and Katrin Albrecht, “Konzept Convivium,” *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 12 (2017), *Flora Ruchat-Roncati: Architektur im Netzwerk*, 8–19.

35 Irina Davidovici, “Tendenzen: Inter-regional Theory Exchanges and Effects on Swiss Practice, 1975–1985,” paper presented at *Theory’s History: Challenges in the Historiography of Architectural Knowledge*, KU Leuven, Brussels, February 8–10, 2017.

36 Mario Botta studied at IUAV in Venice. Of the remaining six architects, trained through the apprenticeship route at the Lugano technical college, four were working in partnership with ETH graduates.

37 Fumagalli, “Die Architektur der fünfziger und sechziger Jahre im Tessin zwischen Deutschschweiz und Norditalien,” 97.

effects of speculative construction on the landscape. According to this strategy, not only Ticino, but the entirety of Switzerland, could be seen as a city.

## The Recovery of Distance

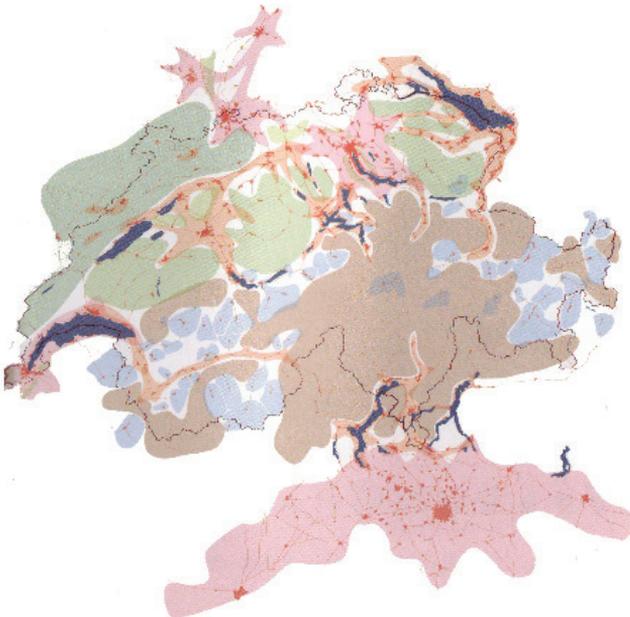
Separated by 240 years, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s description of “Switzerland in its entirety like a large city” and urbanist André Corboz’s comparison of Switzerland to a *Hyperstadt* (hyper-city) are essentially equivalent.<sup>38</sup> The Swiss have repeatedly described their territory as urban in character. In the early 2000s, the research conducted in ETH Studio Basel by Swiss architects Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Marcel Meili, together with sociologist Christian Schmid, constructed an “urban portrait” of Switzerland as a fully mapped out, controlled environment, its regions connected by an isotopic, non-hierarchical territorial ordering.<sup>39</sup> The alpine regions were incorporated into these investigations as a paradoxical instance of urbanisation by stealth. As Marcel Meili argued in his essay “Is the Matterhorn City?” the Alps’ gradual colonisation had led to an intrinsically urban situation, “in which the various uses of the mountains are today piled on top of and wedged into one another ... simultaneously in competition with and allied to one another.”<sup>40</sup> As the mountains have been flattened by the profusion of infrastructures and uses, they no longer represent

38 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “La Suisse entière est comme une grande ville divisée en treize quartiers, dont les uns sont sur les vallées, d’autres sur les coteaux, d’autres sur les montagnes,” in *Deux lettres sur le Val de Travers et ses habitants*, 1763 (Paris: Imprimeur-libraire Bellin, 1817), <http://www.histoirevalleedjeux.ch/documents/Rousseau,%20travers%20pour%20site%20.pdf>, 5. André Corboz, “Die Schweiz als Hyperstadt = La Suisse comme hyperville,” in *Anthos: Zeitschrift Für Landschaftsarchitektur = Une Revue Pour Le Paysage* 42, no. 2 (2003): 4–9.

39 Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron and Christian Schmid, *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006). For a more detailed discussion of the Studio Basel project see Irina Davidovici, “Switzerland as urban territory,” in *Forms of Practice: German-Swiss Architecture 1980–2000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Zurich: gta, 2018), 40–45.

40 Meili, “Is the Matterhorn City?” 921.

Figure 5. ETH Studio Basel, Typologies of Swiss Territories map, 1999–2006. (Drawing by Christian Schmid. Courtesy of ETH Studio Basel.)



untamed nature but just a different aspect of urban life, “icons of compensation” hiding a semantic void. In turn, this condition is brought about by a loss of distance. As “the Swiss Alps can be reached by car or train from large urban centres in considerably less than three hours ... this shortening of distances has not shifted the mountains on the map; it has essentially relocated them.”<sup>41</sup>

41 Meili, “Is the Matterhorn City?” 924.

ETH Studio Basel conceptualised the Alps as a “product.”<sup>42</sup> The geological formation doubled up as cultural artefact, the result of arduous colonisation processes, sustained by political imperatives to define a national construct, to unify and defend. In the context of alpine depopulation and demilitarization, the mountain’s mythologization looks fragile, an anachronism maintained with increasing effort by solitary farmers and substantial subsidies. Studio Basel proposed the alternative concentration of tourist infrastructures in the most circulated and economically viable alpine areas, with the rest being put aside as “fallow lands” for natural replenishment and future usage.<sup>43</sup> The proposal to restore the mountains to an archetypal natural state amounts to a recovery of sorts. It aims to reverse the blanket effects of urban spread and resist the artificial isotopy of Switzerland. Provocative and idealistic, pragmatic and politically unsustainable, this idea points to distance as a philosophical necessity.

42 Diener, et al., “The Alps,” in *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait*, vol. 3, 876–82.

43 Diener, et al., “The Alps,” 824.