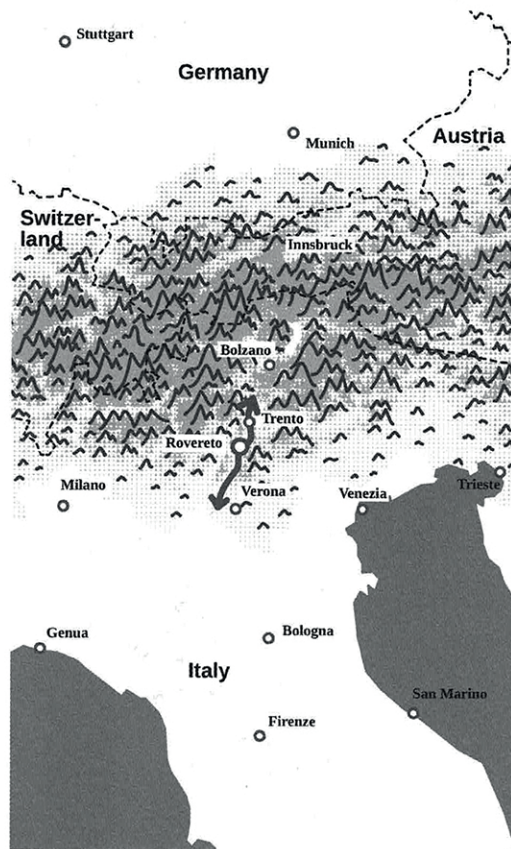


Post-Rural Futures in an Urbanising World? Re-Approaching Decentralised Urbanism in Alpine Regions through the Lens of Community Economies

By Bianca Elzenbaumer, Fabio Franz and Hannes Langguth

Today, the entire world has become urbanised. Accelerated processes of urbanisation are continuously extending ever more densely, if unevenly, across the world, provoking our widely internalised notions of the 'urban'. Although global urbanisation processes are elusive, they are causing fundamental economic, political and environmental changes across places, territories and scales alike, simultaneously producing manifold new dimensions of contemporary urban reality. Here, areas that are often still referred to as "rural" or the "countryside" are deeply affected. This includes the Alps, Europe's second largest biodiversity reservoir

whose regions are characterised by long-standing traditions of autonomy, and thus decentralised approaches of self-governance. But how precisely can we read, understand and conceptualise urban-regional transformation in alpine regions against the background of global urbanisation processes? What are socio-ecological challenges an urbanising world causes on-site, at the same time evolving new forms of local resistance? How can we imagine urban-regional prospects for post-rural alpine regions in the context of an urbanising world? In the case of the alpine region Vallagarina, located in the Northern Italian province of Trento, this article will take the



The region Vallagarina in Val d'Adige, Northern Italy
Graphic by Philip Schläger

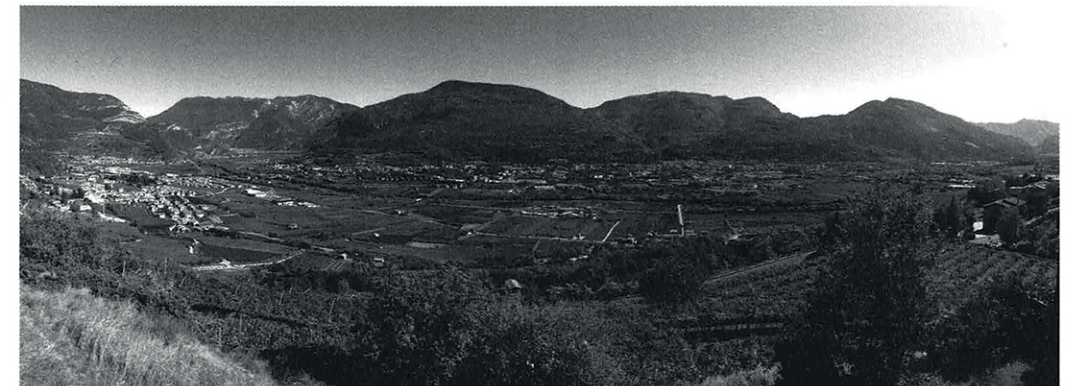
local wine industry to exemplify urban-regional transformation and its emerging challenges provoked by globalised urbanisation processes. Moreover, the article will introduce local initiatives inventing community-based design approaches in order to face local economic, social and ecological challenges, at the same time evolving new forms of decentralised design approaches towards eco-just modes of urban-regional coexistence. Against this backdrop, taking an increasingly urbanising world as prerequisite, the article will re-approach a future-oriented post-rural organisation of alpine regions based on a decentralised community-oriented urbanism.

From Regional Autonomy to Globalised Urbanisation in Vallagarina

Taking a look over the Vallagarina—the most southern part of Val d'Adige which stretches from the city of Trento along the Adige river to the border with Verona—its scenic landscape is rich in variety, but nevertheless dominated by countless parcels of cultivated wine. At first glance, wine is the precious treasure of the region. Held together by the Adige River, predominantly small-scale vineyards spreading almost aggressively across the valley or wriggle upwards the mountains. Again and again, they are interspersed with expanding settlement structures, intersected by supranational transport routes or high-energy lines, and permeated with large-scale industrial zones or tourism facilities. Looking at this landscape, it rapidly becomes apparent that alpine regions appear as socio-spatial sites of local-global contestation. Thus, in the context of globally connected high performance human activities, alpine regions are continuously reshaped, at the same time erasing one of the European archetypes of rural sites'.

Indeed, such transformation processes are by no means recent developments, but rather reach back to the initial colonisation of the valley approximately 500 BC. Even then, the Vallagarina was a contested border region in which modes of regional autonomy, and thus decentralised approaches of self-governance and administration, played a decisive role. Initially invented to trigger incentive components aiming to cultivate land that was only accessible with considerable difficulty, the autonomy of decentralised communities soon became an important tool for practicing collective and subsistence economies in order to face the harsh conditions in alpine regions. Here, especially more extensively used forests, meadows, and high mountain pastures were collectively managed. Nevertheless, its agricultural and livestock products solely belonged to the "vicini", the 'original' citizens passing on rights to access common land within their families through paternal inheritance². This shows that the autonomous system constituted not only the backbone of the economic and institutional, but also the cultural system on which the everyday life of local communities was based. Apart from regulating the rights and obligations related to the use of common resources, the internal community rights (called "Usi Civici") also defined the regulations for trade, thereby garnering additional income for the region. Here, especially timber became one of the first trade commodities of huge value traded principally by log driving to nearby Venice's Arsenal, where the wood was used for shipbuilding industry. These early stage forms of cultivation and trading can be traced as the beginning of rural urbanisation in Vallagarina, especially triggered by decentralised modes of self-governance.

While the cultivation of wine was already an



Panorama of the Vallagarina's main valley, autumn 2016
Photo by Hannes Langguth

with the lives of more-than-human others. Given the disconnection between various initiatives due to above-mentioned constraints, these convivial public evenings are also occasions for taking the time to envisage collaborations and plot communal initiatives.

An initiative that has emerged partly from encounters fostered by *Circolo del Suolo* is the community garden *comun'Orto*. This garden has been initiated by nine local associations whose activities reach from cultural events to solidarity buying clubs to international cooperation. *Comun'Orto* is based in the 'solidarity neighbourhood' of the Vallagarina's central town of Rovereto (40,000 inhabitants), where over the last ten years citizens have been organising activities to connect local residents. Despite the small size of the town, these initial actors found that they had too few personal connections in the neighbourhood, living side by side without knowing one another. Within *comun'Orto*, the gardeners are now following the slogan 'coltivare insieme le diversità'—cultivating diversities together—and the garden's communication plays with giving voice to the multiple human and more-than-human actors involved in its cultivation. This communication is inspired by the way feminist philosopher Donna Haraway challenges human exceptionalism. She poetically elaborates on the ways in which being human literally means multispecies entanglement; without the millions of bacteria breaking down food in our guts, we would simply not exist⁶. But this relationality also extends beyond our body, linking us with more-than-human others living in soil, water, and air. *Comun'Orto* explores key relations in the multispecies becoming of this particular environment. In the Vallagarina,

such a multispecies approach is still niche and somewhat outlandish to many people who, when thinking about how to create desirable futures, are still focused on humans and the economical as independent of everything else. But through the very present 'rural'—albeit in the form of industrial vineyards—this multispecies approach manages to open up new imaginaries and to entice one's imagination of how life could be otherwise, especially when it comes to envisaging socio-spatial developments within the region.

Re-Approaching Democratic Forms of Decentralised Urbanism in Alpine Regions

Taking the wide range of emerging inventive initiatives across the Vallagarina as an example, the decentralised socio-spatial logic these practices enact remains ignored by those driving official strategies for urban-regional development. What unites individual 'micro-utopias' across the Vallagarina is the common desire to evolve community economies by utilising explorative and experimental tools, thus promoting new approaches of local resilience. Although some would think they are just pragmatic, single-issue initiatives, most of them are different in one important fact: within their design approaches they explicitly combine cultural, economic and ecological dimensions towards the creation of eco-just modes of coexistence. Simultaneously, around the world we can observe an intensive shared innovation of services, infrastructures and platforms that enable many of us to share all kind of resources, such as energy, time, skills and knowledge, software, space and food. As a result, this powerful interplay of socio-spatial transformation on a local but also global scale could lead into a new paradigm of designing and planning at an urban-regional scale. But what

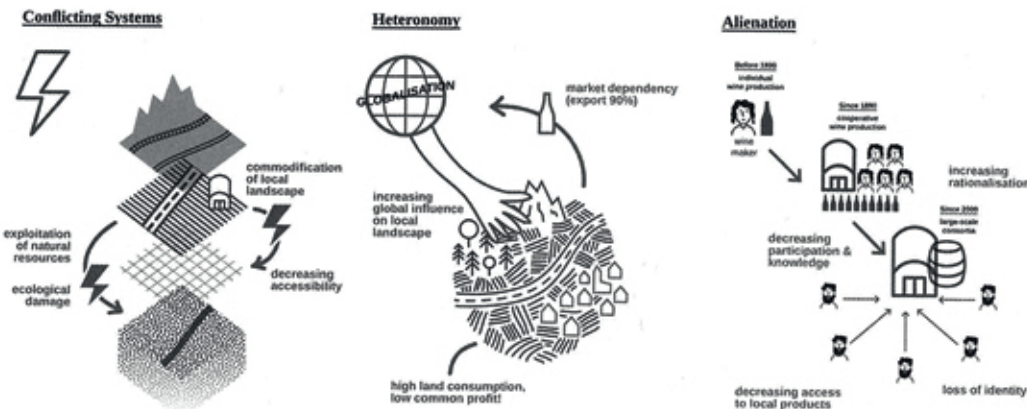
precisely could this mean for the Vallagarina in the context of an urbanising world?

As geographer Edward Soja has recently stated, in the context of globalised urbanisation processes "we are witnessing an unprecedented period in which the urban and the regional, formerly quite distinct from one another, are blending together to define something new and different, an evolving regional-urban synthesis that demands new modes of understanding"⁷. Beyond his inquiry of new ontologies gaining more justice to different modes of extended regional urbanisation, Soja calls for the improvement of urban-regional governance and planning through the lens of community-oriented design approaches in order to seek urban-regional democracy. Following this, the previously-described community economies in the Vallagarina and its decentralised socio-spatial dimensions should be understood as the frontline of an informal urbanism that could be placed at the centre of a future-oriented urban-regional development of the whole valley.

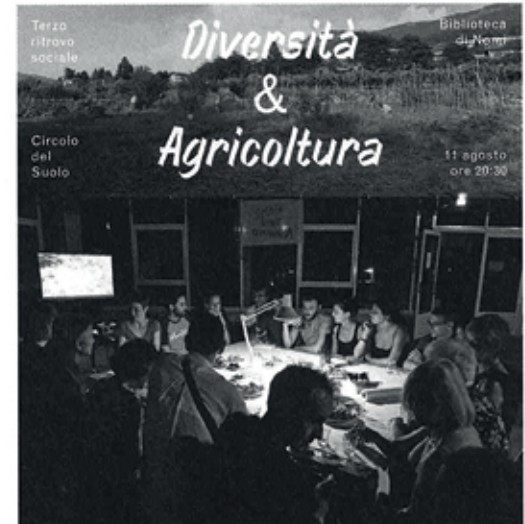
As it is already becoming routine for design approaches in the context of more dense urban city centres, it will be also increasingly crucial that urban-regional design approaches in Vallagarina will "(...) discover, improve and accelerate existing grassroots innovation, not necessarily to create it from scratch - but to add in additional design skills, technology platforms and resources, as and when they were needed"⁸. Resource efficiency on an urban-regional level will be a primarily social process in which the

identification of community economies will be key. Mapping local initiatives and their socio-spatial practices in order to connect and help them learning from each other's experiences is itself an essential innovation in its specific context and should be more progressively supported within urban-regional development. Thus, imagining post-rural prospects in an urbanising world would mean to strengthen restorative community economies on an urban-regional level and should be understood as the creation of post-rural value without destroying natural and human assets, while at the same time not falling back into an imagined rural idyll. Here, we need to be aware. It won't be the healing tool to simply promote and link various community economies across the valley and beyond. In an era of late capitalism, terms like 'flexibility', 'self-reliance' and 'entrepreneurialism' have become both normalised and generalised. So it is important to notice how quickly the 'pop up' can become the 'tear-down' and how necessary it is to evolve a framework that prevents—not destroys—such developments.

Deriving from the inventive practices of community economies, therefore, we should imagine more progressively the "regionalisation" of what Henri Lefebvre initially constituted in his 1968 published book *Le droit à la ville* as the right to the city and in which he sees the potential of an urban revolution empowering an increasingly urbanised society towards a movement inventing alternative modes of urban-regional coexistence. Here, a possible and concrete consequence could be the permanent support of self-invented



Challenges caused by increasing globalisation of wine industry in Vallagarina; Teaching-Research Project "Alpine Commons" WS 2016/ 2017 at Technical University Berlin Graphic by Leona Lynen, Lukas Pappert, Lucas Rauch, Philipp Schläger



Circolo del Suolo in the courtyard of a local library, August 2015 Photo/ Graphic: Brave New Alps

community economies through the creation of a network of independent regional institutions that are following a consulting purpose in order to unveil and debate future-oriented questions across the Vallagarina. Following the recent suggestions Claus Leggewie and Patrizia Nanz have made in political science, such decentralised institutions could be comprised of several representative members of the valley's community, each for a term of approximately two years and accompanied by professional moderators and experts from different disciplines⁹. With this approach, the members would be established from below. At the same time regional policy would set up a framework legitimating the institution's practices and commits oneself to integrate the community members in decision-making processes. Here it is important to note, that such new community institutions are intended to be less involved in subject-specific solutions, rather than progressively addressing—for instance through moments of collective learning—the central question of how we can imagine a future urban-regional development for the Vallagarina over a longer period of thirty to fifty years. Following this, such new community institutions would follow up on what organisations like *Circolo del Suolo* have already started on a smaller scale, at the same time empowering not only local community members, but also politicians to envision a more collaborative and eco-just future for the whole region. Here, the longstanding tradition and experience in self-governance can be seen as crucial tool to effectively implement and support such decentralised approaches, reinventing a strong backbone of more alternative economic, institutional, and cultural approaches on which urban-regional coexistence in the Vallagarina could be based in future.



Comun'Orto community garden in Rovereto, September 2016
Photo/Graphic: Brave New Alps

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Hannes Langguth is a researcher and doctoral candidate at the Habitat Unit, Department of International Urbanism and Design, TU Berlin (GER) working at the interface between urban-regional theory, planning and sociology. Through writing, exhibitions and participatory formats, the main objective of his work is to critically engage with post-rural transformation processes focussing on community-based design approaches in urban-regional development across Europe and China. Hannes is a member of the International PhD Research Network NYLON (NYU New York, Goldsmith's London, Humboldt University Berlin).

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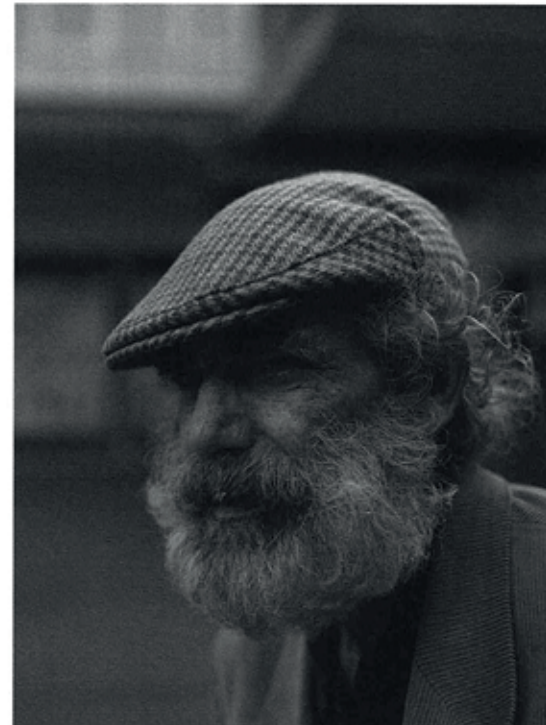
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The City of Six Towns

By Mark Power

The City of Six Towns refers to Stoke-on-Trent, a polycentric city of some 500,000 people in the heart of Staffordshire. Commonly known as *The Potteries*, it remains the centre of the ceramics industry in the UK although, these days, the largest private employer is Bet365, an on-line gambling organisation. Like many post-industrial cities in Britain, Stoke has transformed itself into a centre for service industries and distribution centres.

During the 15 days I spent there, constantly moving back and forth between Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton (the six towns that collectively constitute the city) it was clear that layers of history were evident everywhere. Behind every new build was a sign of the past, while in front of every ruin - ancient or modern - could be found evidence of potential change.



Above: George, Longton, 16.09.14
Below: Hanley, 15.09.14