

DEMOGRAPHIA



ZURICH: SPILLING INTO THE MOUNTAINS

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	1,500,000	Milwaukee, Sendai, Liverpool, Perth
Urbanized Area* Population	1,220,000	
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	390	Memphis, Santiago, Adelaide
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	1,010	
Population per Square Mile	3,100	Detroit, Calgary, Adelaide
Population per Square Kilometer	1,010	
*Continuously built up area		

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One might expect Zurich, Switzerland's largest urban area, to be compact. At first glance, it certainly appears to be. The core is dotted with all the predictable high rise flats, nestled between two ranges of hills. But here is an urban area that goes "on and on," and in a hidden sort of way.

The central city itself sits at the northern tip of Lake Zurich and stretches in the valley on either side of a railway gash that may be unrivaled anywhere in the world. The core area is of the typically attractive European type.

To the south, on either side of the lake, are suburbs. Generally, they climb the hills, because there is little flat land except that on which the city itself sits. To the north, the land is more flat, and here will be found more suburbs and the international airport. To the west, over the range, is another set of suburbs, which will soon be served by a very expensive new ring road. Local officials are tunneling through the range and to build a new freeway that will ring the central city and more on the west side. The road is already completed along the north side and eventually links with the main autobahn from Basel to St. Gallen (after having crossed it once before).

But it is in the mountains to the east that is the big surprise. There will be found municipality after municipality, with low density suburban development that makes the Zurich urbanized area less dense than expected.

Of course the geomorphology of the Zurich area, with its hills, does not make prime territory for dense suburban development. But what is notable is that the Swiss, who have long been comparatively prosperous, chose not to live in the dense central city, but rather to suburbanize like virtually every other people given the chance.

This is obvious from the population trends. The city peaked at nearly 440,000 residents in the 1960s., having grown from 390,000 in 1950. Since the 1960s, the city has been declining. It is now down to 340,000. At the same time the population of suburban Zurich Canton rose more than 200,000 since 1950. More impressively, exurban Aargau Canton added more than 250,000 residents --- an 85 percent increase. All in all the suburbs have added nearly 475,000 residents since 1950 --- that's nearly 10 new residents for each one lost by the city of Zurich. This is a story one won't read about in the fawning urban planning text books written by professors whose curiosity is limited by their feet and local rails.

There are few more attractive physical settings than Zurich. Europe is home to many spectacular mountain lakes and one of the pleasing things about them is the development that invariably rises from their shores. There is the beauty of Lake Como, just south of the Swiss border in the northern reaches of metropolitan Milan. There is perhaps the ultimate, Slovenia's Lake Bled, with its villages along the shore and its church on the island. Some say Lake Bohinj not more than 10 miles west of Lake Bled, is even more spectacular. But Lake Zurich takes a backseat to none of them. The physical surroundings create a backdrop for the urbanization that is truly unique, with churches climbing the sides of hills, and their bells reverberating off of them.

But then there is the scar --- the wide swath of prime Zurich territory in the middle of the city consumed by the railroad. The widest freeways in the world would be lost in this gulf that is approximately one-quarter mile wide.

The urban area operates with the predictable Swiss efficiency --- and it is fragmented, not consolidated. Within the metropolitan area are in the neighborhood of 200 municipalities, providing further evidence that municipal consolidation is not a prerequisite to an effectively functioning urban area.

Both the romance and the myth of European urbanization is to be found in Zurich.









PICTURES

On the road from Basel to Zurich
House, Western Suburbs
Core
New Western Beltway
New Western Beltway Sign
Railway Gash: Central Zurich
Looking Toward East Shore & Zurich from South

By Wendell Cox

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