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In Geneva, Counterculture Pushes Back

By [MATTHEW SALTMARSH](#)

GENEVA — Geneva's counterculture may not be dead, but it is looking distinctly bruised.

The city, known internationally for diplomacy, private banking, watches and highbrow culture, was for much of the last decade a hub for squatters, anarchists, electronic music and impromptu theater.

But recent years have not been kind to the alternative-culture scene.

"Geneva is moping," Le Temps newspaper wrote in an article late last year. "It's a town closed in on itself, it's stopped dreaming."

The malaise has its roots in an official clampdown on numerous squatter spaces in 2007 and '08 that was led by Daniel Zappelli, the city's chief prosecutor, or district attorney, from the center-right Liberal Party. For public health and similar reasons, other spots have closed since. Added to the city's high rents, strict zoning laws for former industrial sites and the success of recently opened upscale private bars and clubs, the closures have severely curtailed choices for those on a limited budget.

Now, an increasingly vocal group of young people are seeking to reclaim a bit of the nightscape, and they are using tools like social networks, the media and direct action to convey their message.

"What happened with the closure of the squats was akin to a cultural brain drain," said Albane Schlechten, who represents [U.E.C.A.](#), a union of independent cultural associations formed in 2007 in response to the what they saw as cultural "sterilization" by the authorities.

The alternative spots — notably La Tour and Rhino — nurtured workshops, bars, theaters and clubs, giving rise to groups like Cave 12, whose electronic sound attracted visitors from as far afield as Japan, and hip hangouts like l'escobar. Artamis, a sprawling, informal cultural center housed the Théâtre du Galpon, a cinema and an art gallery, as well as bars and spaces for concerts; upscale apartments are among plans for the site. All of the venues are now closed.

The changes have put increasing pressure on Geneva's last grunge-style culture center, [L'Usine](#), on a former industrial site on the banks of the Rhone.

L'Usine has been around for 20 years and is supported by the city. Its two main halls are host to gigs and DJ sets ranging from ska to electro, indie, reggae and rock. It also has a record shop, a restaurant, bars, a cinema and a theater. Weekends are packed, with 2,000 people passing through on an average night. Its cover price is affordable for students — typically 15 to 25 Swiss francs, about \$16 to \$26. And drinks are cheap.

But the club's capacity reached a tipping point in October after local authorities temporarily closed two electronic-music spots, Weetamix and the MOA, for zoning and health law violations.

Frustrated by the long entry lines, some would-be clubbers tried to scale L'Usine and enter from upper levels; violent incidents were reported and complaints multiplied from neighbors.

Fearful of the security situation, those running L'Usine decided to temporarily close it down — or to go on strike, as they put it — moving outside on Oct. 30 with an unlicensed street party that was attended by several thousand people on the Place de Neuve — normally host to classical music and traditional theater.

“We were saying, ‘We can't go on like this, there's going to be a riot sooner or later,’” Ms. Schlechten, who is based at L'Usine, said of the decision.

Patrice Mugny, head of the city's culture department and a former city mayor, acknowledged that there is a problem. “We're working on it,” he said, “It's not a case of bad intention.”

The number of bars and clubs in the city has expanded since the 1990s, he said, but he agreed that there are not enough places that draw young people.

He blamed the paucity on the conservative political shift in the canton that includes Geneva, and the steady rise in real-estate values over the last decade that left fewer empty spaces for squatters to occupy.

Confirming the trend, a report last year on Geneva's nightlife, commissioned by the city, found that 94 percent of 500 young people surveyed thought that there were not enough places to go out, and that L'Usine was the most popular — and for many, the only — notable spot.

The authorities announced what is being called an “États généraux” of the night, based on a centuries-old French concept by which lawmakers meet with and gather views from concerned entities. It will take place March 1 through 5 and include discussions with noted foreign sociologists. In November, the Paris mayor organized a similar event amid complaints that nightlife there was being strangled by noise restrictions.

In contrast to Geneva, nightlife in Lausanne, about 60 kilometers or 35 miles to the north, appears to be flourishing. Geneva youths regularly make the round trip on weekends to the town's Flon district; years earlier, Lausanne youths were coming in the opposite direction. Lausanne local authorities, business interests and cultural players came together five or so years ago to revive the district, which now accommodates bars, clubs and restaurants of varying prices, albeit with a commercial slant.

“In Geneva, there's nothing between L'Usine and the large commercial clubs,” said Marie-Avril Berthet, a dance music D.J. and sociologist. “Small clubs or bars with dancing have completely disappeared. And we're asking: Do we want a corporate city or do we want a creative city? We think we can have both.”

The U.E.C.A. and Socialists on the city's assembly petitioned the authorities last year for new spots, the first step in an involved but official political process. They want an underground space at the former

Artamis center to be converted into a music site and the official home of the Association for Contemporary Dance, currently without fixed abode.

“Four months ago, no one was thinking about us and now we’re at the center of a debate,” said Ms. Berthet, who was one of the lead authors of the 2010 report. “It’s important that nightlife is becoming political.”

Mr. Mugny said that the city planned to open two new youth music centers this year and another in 2014, although not at Artamis.

In one sense, the campaigners risk biting the hand that feeds them. L’Usine is almost entirely supported by public financing. The city estimates that it provides at least 1 million Swiss francs a year in support, and L’Usine continues to occupy its space rent free. L’Usine says that estimate is high.

Yet the money given to L’Usine is miniscule compared to some 230 million Swiss francs set aside each year for culture in Geneva, one of the most generous cities for such activities in Europe. Of the total culture budget, about 40 million francs go to the Grand Théâtre de Genève, where ballet, opera and recitals are performed, and which employs 300 people. The city also supports 36 museums, arts centers, concert halls and ad hoc theater and dance events.

Mr. Mugny’s tenure has been criticized by leading figures in the arts, including Philippe Chappuis, the animator better known as Zep and the creator of the cartoon character Titeuf, and Pierre Keller, director of the University of Art and Design Lausanne, who accused Mr. Mugny of holding back creativity by financial “sprinkling.”

William Riceputi, 36, a teacher who helps to organize arts shows, screenings and gigs for new bands, said: “Many people have been priced out of culture. Young people are getting bored. There’s more frustration.”

His organization, [La Comète](#), recently hosted the Geneva grunge rockers Disagony and the Berne indie group Loose Connection in municipal buildings in the seedy area of Paquis.

“This is not a dead town,” Mr. Riceputi said. “And we won’t let it die.

We’ve had setbacks, but there’s plenty of energy. I’m optimistic. We’ll find a way.”