

Sharing space

In the Kalkbreite housing development, the interaction between public and private space works to everyone's benefit.



Text: Anna Roos

LIVING UTOPIA

Zurich has a number of different microcosms; one can be found in the Kalkbreite housing development.



The Swiss have a reputation for being private, reserved, and exclusive, but visitors to Switzerland might be interested in discovering another side to the country: its thriving, open, and inclusive alternative scene. This inclusiveness and openness are reflected in the cooperative housing schemes for which Zurich is renowned. Architecture students from all over the world travel to Switzerland to visit housing cooperatives and learn lessons to take back to their home countries. An excellent example of a thriving cooperative scheme is Kalkbreite in Zurich's district 4. Completed in 2014, Kalkbreite offers a green oasis in the city, a kind of urban village in the heart of Zurich.

Living together

Wedged on a triangular site between the railway line and busy Badenerstrasse, the architectural firm Müller Sigrist has created an urban landscape. The seven-story complex looms cliff-like above the street. Public zones, such as restaurants, a cinema, and shops, are scattered along this facade. You enter the cooperative via a broad staircase that slices through the building and links the street level to the rear, where an elevated courtyard can be found. Here one can encounter a children's playground, a place of interaction and relaxation open to both residents and the public alike. Lea Berger, the head architect of the Kalkbreite project, calls it "an oasis of quiet shielded from the noise of surrounding traffic."

"KALKBREITE IS AN OASIS OF QUIET SHIELDED FROM THE NOISE OF TRAFFIC."

By allowing the public to enter the communal courtyard, the architects have ensured the complex is embedded in its context rather than being cut off from it behind walls.

The heavy doors of the courtyard open out onto the lofty entryway, where Lea explains how they designed the space to foster a sense of community: "If you have a single entry point with a reception area where the mailboxes are, similar to a village square, then you increase the opportunities for contact." They also included a shared library, laundry, and cafeteria leading off from the reception area, as well as a "rue intérieure" that encircles the entire complex and links the apartment clusters to one another. Furnished with trendy leather sofas and floor-to-ceiling oak shelves filled with books belonging to the residents, the shared library creates a snug, homely atmosphere, while the cafeteria provides a communal place to enjoy a cup of coffee.

In order to give each cluster a personalized address as well as a sense of lightheartedness, the architects enlisted the help of graphic artist Jörg Niederberger, who decked out the areas using six vibrant colors, one for each stairwell.

Building community

The fact that the cooperative members spearheaded the project and were deeply involved in the scheme from conception through to realization meant that a community was formed even before the first foundations were laid. One of the residents is Pasquale



Playground for all: the inner courtyard is a place of interaction and relaxation.



Project architect: Lea Berger.



Meeting point: the shared library.

Talerico, who lives in a 380 m² cluster apartment with 15 others, including his 14-year-old daughter. He was involved in the project from the moment it was first conceived. His spacious, 17-room shared apartment consists of four units that have been joined together to create an enormous communal apartment with three kitchens. Sitting in his cozy kitchen sipping coffee, he explains how living in Kalkbreite has enormous social, emotional, and practical benefits. Fifty percent of Zurich households are single-person households; Kalkbreite too reflects this trend, but with a twist: its 32 single-room units are organized in a cluster around shared amenities. The advantage of sharing communal space is that loneliness and isolation are avoided and feelings of wellbeing are enhanced. Residents in Kalkbreite have a smaller space allocation per resident – 32 m² rather than the Swiss average of 45 m² – but to mitigate the “loss” of private space, residents have

“THE BENEFITS OF LIVING HERE ARE ENORMOUS, SOCIALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND PRACTICALLY.”

the added bonus of 330 m² of communal space. This shared living area includes sewing and yoga rooms, a cafeteria, a sauna and gym, a music room and workshop, and offices and a meeting room. One of the clusters also features a communal dining room where residents can enjoy chef-cooked evening meals.

Kalkbreite has a lively mix of inhabitants: patchwork families of diverse generations, single people, couples, the young and the old. But one thing they all

seem to have in common is their concern for social and ecological issues. As we wander through the building, Lea points out a magnetic board where residents advertise sports equipment, toys or anything else they’re willing to share. This spirit of generosity and trust chimes well with the current “sharing generation,” among whom couch surfing, car sharing, and pet sharing are ever more popular. The architects have built flexibility into the complex, allowing families to either expand or get smaller over time. One great idea in this spirit is the creation of “joker rooms,” which tenants can rent for their teenage children or visiting family members, while the public can book rooms in the on-site guesthouse.

Thinking green

Lea explains how this ethical awareness has also been translated into various features promoting sustainability, thus boosting Kalkbreite’s green credentials. The scheme was designed and runs according to the 2000-watt society approach to energy use, which is equivalent to one ton of CO₂ emissions annually per person. Other green aspects include the sourcing of heating and hot water from ground water and photovoltaic cells. While car ownership for residents is forbidden, there are indoor parking spaces for 350 bikes and the site is well connected to public transport. Because of all these green attributes, Kalkbreite was awarded the Swiss ecological certification Minergie P-Eco.

While 60% of the complex is dedicated to residential space, 40% is occupied by small enterprises. In keeping with the residents’ ethical awareness, businesses like Greenpeace, an alternative bank, and a birthing center were chosen as tenants.



Insights: Pasquale Talerico lives with 15 people in a cluster apartment.



Open space: businesses such as a cinema play an important role at the cooperative.

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Pili Rodriguez, manager of the organic shop Bachsermärt, which opens onto the hubbub of the street, says that working in Kalkbreite is the polar opposite of the anonymous and impersonal culture that has come to dominate modern life. She knows many of the residents by name and recounts how children sometimes come in their pajamas to buy fresh bread in the morning. Like the Houdini cinema and the sophisticated Bebek restaurant next door, Bachsermärt is a place where the public and Kalkbreite residents cross paths and intermingle. Like all employees at Kalkbreite, Pili benefits from the communal areas, too: she enjoys her coffee break in the cooperative cafeteria and, weather permitting, eats her lunch outside in the communal courtyard. She has witnessed firsthand how beneficial it can be to pool space and share resources. Her overall response to the scheme? "It's absolutely perfect."

"TO POOL SPACE AND SHARE RESOURCES – KALKBREITE IS ABSOLUTELY PERFECT."

Kalkbreite is concrete evidence of the advantages of sharing space, and illustrates how architecture can help to create thriving urban communities while at the same time reducing our carbon footprint. Hopefully the myriad of architects who visit Kalkbreite will be inspired to design similar high-density, affordable, eco-friendly housing schemes in cities around the world.

SHARING IS CARING

VISIT KALKBREITE

Go behind the scenes at the Kalkbreite complex on a guided tour, two times a year, or spend a night in one of the guesthouse's ten rooms, which feels just like staying at a friend's place.

» kalkbreite.net

» pension-kalkbreite.net

HOUDINI CINEMA

The Houdini cinema boasts five screens which show mainly independent films in their original language. You can also take a seat at the bar and watch the world go by from its large windows.

» kinohoudini.ch



CAFÉS & RESTAURANTS

There are six places to eat, including the cinema bar, and each has its own charm. You'll find tasty meze at Café Bebek, refreshing drinks at Felix Bar, seasonal soups at Simply Soup, Asian food at Kevon and great music at Wohnzimmerbar.

SHOPS

Whether you're looking for clothes, souvenirs, or regional delicacies, a shopping trip to Kalkbreite is definitely worth your time.

NIGHT WALK

While some are getting ready for bed, others are only just getting up – on May 25, 2019, a night walk will take you around Zurich's districts 4 and 5, offering a unique glimpse behind the scenes of Zurich's nightlife. Night owls can follow that up with a club crawl. Advance booking recommended!

» kalkbreite.net