

LIVING

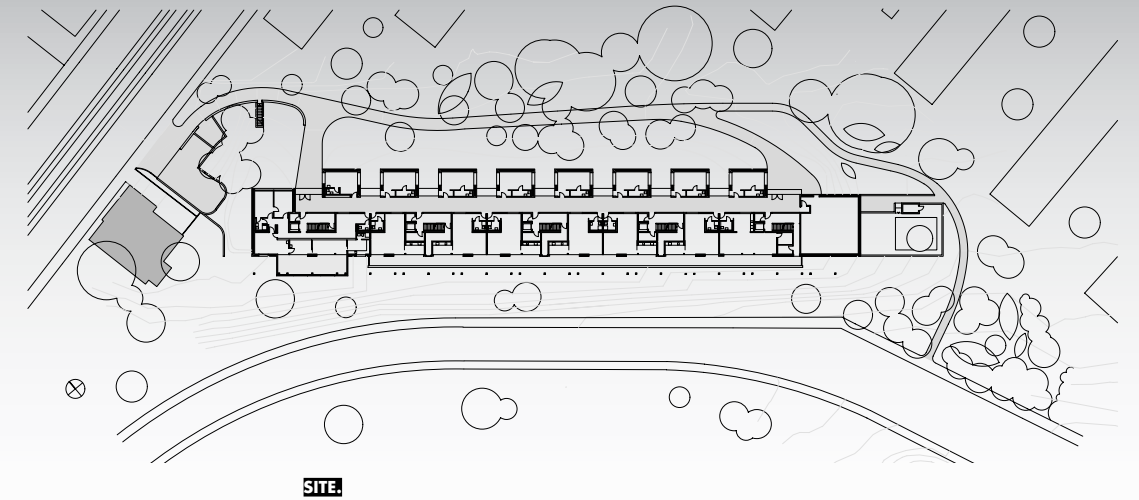
IN A CHEST OF DRAWERS

**GMÜR & STEIB ARCHITECTS TAKE
A CRACK AT OUTDOOR SPACES.**

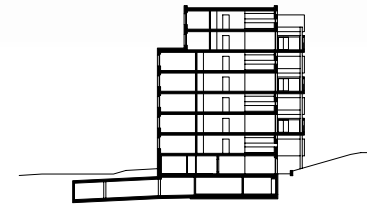
TEXT KATHARINA MARCHAL
PHOTOS ROGER FREI



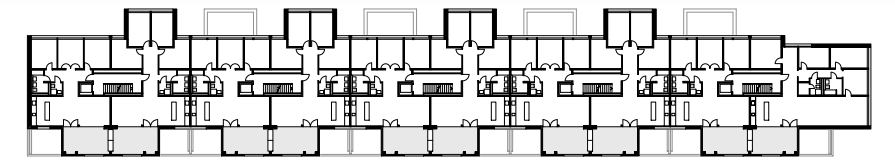
LEFT THE FAÇADE FEATURES LARGE AREAS OF GLASS.



SITE.



SECTION.



SECOND FLOOR.



THIS PAGE OVERSIZED BALCONIES GIVE THE APARTMENT COMPLEX A SCALE-FREE CHARACTER.



ABOVE THE REAR SIDE OF THE COMPLEX IS ARTICULATED BY PROJECTING VOLUMES THAT OFFER SPACE TO THE APARTMENTS BEHIND THEM.

ACCORDING TO PATRICK GMÜR, IT IS 'impossible to reinvent the ground plan of an apartment'. He says the only areas open to interpretation are outdoor spaces and access routes. Outside space is important: people generally snap up penthouse apartments with roof terraces and ground-floor flats with direct access to the garden. Gmür's ideas became the theme of the apartment block on Paul Clairmont-Strasse in Zürich. A few years ago, as part of the city's housing programme – 10,000 homes within ten years – Patrick Gmür and Jakob Steib, who have been running a company together since 2001, won a competition for the site, organized by a housing association.

The architects set out to discover the ideal size of a balcony by staking out the exact dimensions in a vacant car park. They arrived at a 25-m² area approximately 4 m wide, a measurement determined by the width of the dwelling, and no more than 5 m deep: dimensions that allowed for a well-lit, well-furnished space. Patrick Gmür wanted the balcony to be 'large enough for a child to circle it on a tricycle'. Once realized, the balconies made the southwest façade look like a large chest of drawers, with some of the drawers pulled out. These patio-like spaces, which are arranged in pairs, recede on each subsequent storey, thus maintaining a good quality of light for all interiors.

Gmür & Steib avoided the use of bright colours, because, as Gmür explains, 'light and shade are sufficient, as light brings out all the varied shades and nuances of grey'. The clarity of line, the modular principle and the restrained colours of materials and surfaces inevitably hark back to the

modernists and their architecture. One striking example from the early 1950s is Carrière Centrale, a project in Casablanca by Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods with an exterior constructed in an almost identical way. But the relationship between the two projects is no more than a formal connection, as the staggered patios on the Moroccan building can be attributed to the cultural context and the climate. In content, Gmür & Steib's design is closer to the ideas that led to Le Corbusier's design of Unité d'Habitation.

The same can be said of the ground-floor rue intérieure, a thoroughfare that is accessible to both sides of the building and that forms a highly urban public space. The impression of a corridor quickly fades as light floods in from the side and glass surfaces as large as display windows offer a view of the stairwells. Studios, ateliers, a dentist's surgery and a nursery line the rue intérieure like a row of autonomous spaces. Pictures of animals in illuminated showcases by Zürich artist Georg Aerni identify each stairwell. Gmür says the creatures help children to recognize the entrance to their particular stairwell: visitors should not be surprised to hear tiny tots saying that 'the vulture takes me to where I live' or asking a friend to 'ring the bell when you get to the crocodile'.

www.gmuersteib.ch