

Degelo Architekten, Basel

Where artists are happy to work and live

Most of the 36 residents of the live-in studio house on Basel's Erlenmatt-Ost site are artists. For them a dream has come true in the shape of this sustainable new-build: to be able to work and live in one place. And the architect Heinrich Degelo wants to take this affordable project even further.

Creativity is not something that can just be switched on with the push of a button. The boundaries between everyday life and the daily work routine of artists often are quite blurred. A studio that can combine working and living is therefore the sought-after ideal solution. But buildings in which this way of life can be realised are hard to come by and affordable live-in studios are scarce.

That is the reason why a group of artists decided to take fate into their own hands and led them to found their own cooperative society - the Coopérative d'ateliers. Together with the architect Heinrich Degelo they discovered their ideal plot of land on the Erlenmatt-Ost site, just north of the Badischer Bahnhof train station in the Swiss city of Basel. All prerequisites for affordable residential and living areas were already provided. The Habitat Foundation gives out leaseholds for plots of land under the guiding principle of promoting social, ecological and sustainable projects.

It is rare to find a building that is so energy efficient and at the same time so environmentally friendly. Not only are the fittings kept to a bare minimum, it also does completely without heating or cooling systems. The studios are presented to the users as blank spaces with high ceilings and unrendered walls; the furnishing is left to the occupant. Each of the spaces up for rent is fitted with a sanitation unit, comprised from kitchen and bathroom elements that can be placed wherever desired. The balustrade on the courtyard facing balcony, made from finely split logs that look like firewood, was designed by the Basel-based artist Andres Bally and is the building's architectural statement element.

An energy concept was drawn up with a simplicity in mind that could at the same time provide the greatest possible effect. Waste thermal energy generated by all available heat sources leads to a comfortable ambient temperature of between 20 and 22 degrees Centigrade in winter. These sources range from the inhabitants themselves, who give off heat, to artificial sources such as lighting and computers as well as the natural daylight which floods in through the windows. In summer the soffits and south-west oriented balconies provide ideal protection against overheating. These elements, along with the well-insulated outer shell which is made from large-scale porous bricks, contribute to a stable ambient temperature within the building.

Soundproofed, manually and electronically controlled ventilation hatches reduce the problem of the adjacent noisy Signalstrasse and motorway. And when CO₂-levels reach critical levels or temperatures get too high the courtyard-side windows and balcony doors are opened by controlled ventilation hatches. Of course, windows can also be opened manually. In all, these cut-back measures contribute to lowering construction costs, lower energy overheads, a more natural climate and therefore a heightened state of well-being.

All of these ideas and advantages are also meant as a source of inspiration. For this reason Degelo Architekten and the Genossenschaft Homebase cooperative have developed the concept even further. In a planned future residential project the variable floor plans of approximately 60 sq m (645 sq ft) each are suitable for single households, couples or even families; the simple and functional fittings allow them to be adapted according to what is needed. This provides more freedom and possibilities for residential living - and all at rents of just CHF10.- (€8.85) per square metre per month and without additional heating bills. The search is currently ongoing for sites where this concept can be realised.

Degelo Architekten was founded in 2005 by Heinrich Degelo. Among his most famous works are the National Art Gallery in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, and the Messeturm (Trade Fair Tower) in Basel, Switzerland, which he designed together with his former partner Meinrad Morger. In 2010 Degelo Architekten modernised and extended the congress centre in Davos, Switzerland, together with the current partner Florian Walter. In the German town of Freiburg they remodelled the university library between 2011 and 2015 and in 2018 they completed the renovation of the St Jakobshalle sports arena in Basel. All of these projects deal with already existent brutalist concrete structures and how to handle them. www.degelo.net (in German)

Homebase is a cooperative for self-defined living and working; it is aimed at people whose residential and working space has to adapt to evolving life situations. Those who follow their own life plan are not looking for predefined solutions when it comes to where they want to live. Freedom provided by the design is more important than standardised comfort. Reduction to the essentials minimises the fixed costs and makes for more financial freedom. www.homebase.swiss (in German)

Stiftung Habitat: on the eastern side of Basel's Erlenmatt urban quarter the Stiftung Habitat foundation is developing a sustainable site along the guidelines of the 2000 Watt-Society. The Stiftung Habitat provides more than half of the site to interested parties as leasehold plots. The individual clients choose their own architects. A set of common overhead guidelines provide for a socially and energetically future-oriented site. Not only will a colourful range of non-commercial residential projects be developed, but also a hostel, kindergarten, restaurants, bicycle repair shop and much more. The leasehold contracts also state that at least one tenth of the residential units erected have to be provided as social housing. www.stiftung-habitat.ch (in German)