Everything stays different. How we live in a socially sustainable city

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Talking about housing today – what does that actually mean? The current societal, political and economic context completely differs from the one prevailing 20, 30 or 50 years ago. Housing forms respond to changes in the way of life, work, mobility and communication. Which developments need to be considered and which impetus has to be given if we want to pursue a new building culture that is forward-looking and sustainable? What we plan today will determine the living environment of our grandchildren. Therefore, their concerns should already be integrated in our plans today.

Our society changes more dynamically and faster than built objects that, once they have been constructed, have a life of 50, 60 or even 100 years. Housing is an element of inertia in the urban fabric. Most people live in pre-existing buildings — many date from the 1960s and 1970s or later. This also means that most of us live in built conceptions of life and standardised housing designs developed 50 years ago.

Even then, those conceptions were an idea of the norm and not the only valid and practiced model of living together. Meanwhile, this model has long ceased to correspond to real-life practices and housing needs. Problems frequently arise because designers, planners and developers have not fully up-to-date ideas about what people want to do in a home, an estate, a neighbourhood. They build in line with their own ideas and, thus, remain within the bounds of their conceptual worlds and conventions. They, the decision-makers, ask much too seldom for whom they actually build and which housing needs result from living realities and how they change.

The question is: What can the future of housing look like under the given conditions? What could be *New Social Housing*, a flat, a house, an estate beyond the forms we know?

Housing in a socially sustainable city means living at a reasonable cost in a pleasant, safe and healthy environment in good-neighbourly relations with other people. It also means having access to public transport, being able to take part in cultural activities, using public spaces in diverse ways — for all citizens alike. Hardly anybody will argue about that. Likewise, hardly anybody will deny that it is a complex task, which is not always easy, to further build this social sustainability of the city step by step. The democratic principle of a "city for people" (cf. Gehl 2010) that equally takes account of all needs means responding to the diversity of the residents, knowing their housing needs and practices and leaving or creating sufficient room for their change and development. We see everywhere that, of course, there is a difference between reality and these ideal conditions and that conflicts of interests arise between the players who shape, and live in, the city: private owners who wish to achieve returns; big institutional investors such as insurance companies and banks which plan over a longer term

and have to generate returns; and cities and towns as well as limited-profit housing developers which act over a longer term, are oriented to the common welfare and forego profits when renting out dwellings. The smart, future-oriented planning of housing has to succeed in establishing a long-term land policy and an active housing policy as well as in negotiating or decreeing a reconciliation of these different interests, i.e. (maximum) returns on the one hand and added value for the common welfare and affordable housing on the other hand. Cities with a very tight housing market that have proactively bought land and engaged in active housing policies for years in order to make room for all people show that this is possible. Appropriate strategies include the further development of expedient planning, legal and economic instruments aiming at saving space as well as their practical implementation. Examples are the right of first refusal for municipalities, the definition of a minimum percentage of inexpensive or limited-profit flats, the establishment of zones for affordable housing (with provisions on the maximum annual rent per square metre), a value increment tax upon new zoning or re-zoning, the organisation of architecture competitions and construction tenders or the establishment of a city-owned company dedicated to housing construction.

An urgent topical issue is the affordability of housing for large sections of the population in urban areas. Currently, supply is decreasing on the housing market of big cities, refurbishments and replacement buildings are implemented, which results in a continuing, gradual decline in inexpensive homes. Finding a good, reasonably priced flat in the city becomes more and more difficult. Social groups with average to low incomes are particularly hit by the housing shortage. Low-income groups, such as senior citizens with low pensions, single parents, students and large families as well as disadvantaged groups of foreigners, are hardly able to afford housing in the city anymore. The soaring real-estate prices and rents observed in many growing cities, such as Munich, Zurich and Hamburg, — set to further rise in future — exacerbate social inequality and segregation between urban quarters. They threaten social networks in neighbourhoods or residential communities that, in part, have developed over many years. Cities are looking for solutions that are in line with their context and the applicable legal and economic framework conditions. The City of Zurich, for example, is making efforts (in accordance with the decision of Zurich's voters on a provision on housing policy principles to be included in the city's constitution) to raise the share of affordable homes to one third in the city by 2050 and, in particular, to preserve family flats and flats for the elderly and to provide ecologically exemplary flats also in the inexpensive segment.[1] Thanks to additional homes built by co-operatives and the municipality itself in

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the past few years, living in Zurich has again become more attractive for families and other lower-income groups. This is also reflected by a decline in one-person households since the start of the new millennium. In Zurich, 45% of homes are occupied by single persons and this percentage is decreasing further. However, this does not mean that a sustainable solution to the housing shortage problem is already on the table — questions related to the economical use of land, the distribution of housing, occupation guidelines and floorspace consumption as well as the necessary sustainable internal development and densification still have to be clarified with the involvement of all the stakeholders of the housing market.

The changes on the housing market reflect major and dynamic changes of society. Their characteristics are: globalisation, migration, demographic change, individualisation and pluralisation of lifestyles, development of new information and communication technologies as well as new transport technologies, increasing mobility requirements and needs, changed gender relations as well as massive changes in the world of work. Increased flexibility, differentiation and pluralisation of society broaden the options along with the needs for action. These changes are also mirrored in housing: Our housing and household forms become more differentiated and lead to new and diverse housing expectations and needs. The meaning of "home" changes from a private retreat to a mixed place of work and life for manifold uses, such as leisure (also in periods of unemployment), learning, work and, still, social exchange and recreation.

One thing holds true for all of us: Our personal life and housing circumstances change much faster and more frequently today than just 40 years ago. While the traditional nuclear family still is the prevailing model among multi-person households with children, numerous new constellations have evolved by now, and the share of single parents and patchwork families is rising. Overall, the percentages of the three biggest groups of households have converged: one-person households, multi-person households with children (families, single parents and patchwork families) and multi-person households without children (mostly couples).[2] Although the increase in the number of one-person

households has apparently stopped, up to half the residents live alone in their flats, depending on the city. Thus, demographic developments, declining marriage and birth rates and rising divorce rates[3] — as a consequence of higher education and employment rates of women as well as changed societal standards — remain key social challenges with a strong impact on housing.

Increasingly dynamic biographies with ruptures and re-orientations as well as pronounced diversity also characterise the group of elderly residents. Providing appropriate housing for elderly people is one of the most urgent tasks of our society. This is underlined by demographic change: Rapid and twofold demographic ageing of the population is underway as the number of the elderly is rising, while the number of younger people is going down (cf. Höpflinger 2008). Increasingly, generations enter old age whose backgrounds and lifestyles significantly differ from those of previous generations, such as the baby boomers born in the 1950s and 1960s. This generation, which is better versed than its predecessors with regard to different ways of housing and life, is also increasingly seeking new models of autonomous and individual housing in a setting that is homogeneous or heterogeneous in terms of age. The housing styles of the "young elderly" are characterised by more diversity as they live on their own or in a deliberately chosen community and neighbourhood. There is demand for multigenerational housing and mixed-age accessible housing (with services), but also for old-age and nursing homes that take account of the personal needs and abilities of the residents.

Household types are frequently tied to phases in life and can change quickly, for example when a relationship ends, a couple separates, lives at multiple locations or merges into a patchwork family. Moreover, household compositions do not only change more dynamically over life but also cyclically. This means that a home is used by four persons for some time, than only by two persons, for instance when children alternately live with one parent or stay with the parents temporarily during their education phases or when a grandparent occasionally comes to stay. A good housing estate offers a variety of different flat types and sizes and permits residents to move to another flat within the estate when circumstances change so that all the relations with neighbours and the quarter need not get lost.

In many new community housing projects, the social element plays an important role. A part of the residents deliberately opts for life in a neighbourhood marked by solidarity that includes children and elderly people as well as migrants and vulnerable persons. Another motive is a deliberate choice to consume less housing space. Although the concept of neighbourhood is currently experiencing an upswing, idealised ideas of a homogeneous social fabric tied to one specific place should be critically reflected on. Rather, neighbourhood is to be understood as a multi-layered association of different players across locations that has to be established anew again and again.

Against this backdrop, we need spaces today and for the future where we take care: with regard to land use, society and social cohesion, environment and climate. Cities and towns are needed which use their land economically and plan quarters with the participation of the stakeholders. For the future of affordable, high-quality housing, we also need bottom-up initiatives and diverse forms of participation in order to meet the social, economic and environmental requirements of the future. What is needed is affordable housing especially in cities — above all for the low-income group.

What is needed are diverse quarters — with a diversity of use types and offerings, different neighbourhoods — in order to make mutual assistance and exchanges possible; with services close to the homes and accessible services in the quarter well-connected to public transport.

We need spaces that are functionally open: temporary, additionally rentable spaces — studios, guest rooms, storage rooms. And it is necessary to have welcoming, generous common rooms — as places of encounter with greater atmospheric quality that motivates people to linger.

Against this backdrop, projects are needed that are planned with a mixed structure of residents and a diverse mix of uses, above all also on the ground floors, and that offer usage-neutral rooms and a variety of flat types, e.g. rooms for flexible use and temporary needs that can be rented in addition to the flat. They can provide more than living space if they are oriented to the community in the estate and quarter, to the shared indoor and

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2 Since 1970, the number of one-person households has tripled and the number of multi-person households without children has doubled, while the number of multi-person households with children has remained unchanged since 1970. Over the same period, the number of single-parent households has doubled (cf. Bundesamt für Statistik 2016). (https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung/familien/formen-familienleben.html).

3 In Switzerland, more and more marriages end in divorce (divorce rate of 41%). The rising number of divorces results in an increasing number of patchwork families and single-parent households (cf. Bundesamt für Statistik 2016).

outdoor spaces. A good flat and residential environment are characterised by meeting the requirements of changed household types (cf. Glaser/Hilti 2015). Thereby, they create the basic prerequisites of "vibrancy". It is regrettable that this existing knowledge of good housing (cf. Glaser 2013) and the experiences made in successful housing projects, which are available and accessible, are rarely in the foreground or are even in contradiction with the way in which current large-scale projects and developments are implemented.

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After all, the key challenge of housing construction is that social developments and, as a result, living arrangements are always more dynamic than changes in the built environment and the housing stock. Therefore, we need structures that allow for the unforeseeable (cf. Gysi 2009). What we would like to see in *New Social Housing*: more architecture for informal togetherness that sensibly balances privacy and community, is open to unforeseeable and unusual usage and offers room for changes (cf. Glaser/Hagn, 2018). Examples do indeed exist.

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