

Case study ID

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KALKBREITE

CASE STUDY SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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KALKBREITE

Case Study at a Glance

Problems with the shortage of permanent housing affect many cities, but also tourist destinations. The city of Zurich is no exception; on the contrary, it is one of the cities with the greatest housing shortage in Switzerland.

Our case study shows the social, technical, and environmental aspects of the solution through a social movement for which the name "reclaim the city" is used. The Kalkbreite case shows the importance of a multidimensional approach, social networks, and the involvement of all relevant actors in the urban planning process to achieve success.

This report was prepared by the team of the Center for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS) at the University of Basel within the UPRUN project. The team of CEPS is responsible for the content and the accuracy of the statements presented in this report.

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Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☐ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☒ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☒ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☐ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☐ Metropolitan / city region
- ☐ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☒ Block scale
- ☒ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☒ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☐ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☐ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☒ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☒ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☒ Private sector
- ☐ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☒ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☐ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☒ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☐ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☐ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☒ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☒ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

Problems with the shortage of permanent housing affect many cities, but also tourist destinations. The city of Zurich is no exception; on the contrary, it is one of the cities with the greatest housing shortage in Switzerland. On the other hand, this city has one of the highest quality of life globally, which attracts more inhabitants to live there and, thus, increasing the demand for housing spaces in the city.

Our case study shows the social, technical, and environmental aspects of the solution through a social movement for which the name "reclaim the city" is used. The Kalkbreite case shows the importance of a multidimensional approach, social networks, and the involvement of all relevant actors in the urban planning process to achieve success.

As part of the case study, we conducted a total of three interviews:

- » **One interview with an architect** to discuss the historical development of the place and the movement staying behind this initiative from the architectural and urban planning perspective.
- » **One interview with a representative from the Urban Planning Department of the city Zürich**, who introduced the perspective of the public sector as an owner of the land. The public sector has been a crucial stakeholder in making this space a reality. It has also helped establish two other similar communities in different parts of the city.
- » **Representative from the Kalkbreite initiative**, one of the founding members involved in the development and management of the cooperative housing project provided us with information of internal rules of the community and participation processes in the planning of the development of the place.

Compendious summary

Introduction

In European cities, the imbalance between housing demand and housing affordability is widening. This can be seen especially in places with a high supply of jobs, but also in popular tourist resorts. We placed our case study to Zurich. It is a city with high demand for the labor force, and several universities. From this perspective, the housing shortage in this city continues to worsen. The proportion of empty apartments has fallen further, 0.61 to 0.53 percent during the last year in the whole Zurich canton, and it is even worse in the city itself (SRF, 2023). This means that the so-called vacancy rate is the lowest it has been since the turn of the millennium, according to a statement from the Zurich Office for Statistics. The vacancy rate in the canton of Zurich has almost halved since 2019 (Kanton Zürich, 2024). Nevertheless, at 0.56%, it is still a long way from the figure of 0.09% at the beginning of the 1990s.

Our case study relates to Kalkbreite, a housing project in Zurich in Switzerland. Since August 2014 it has provided housing for about 250 people, though the organizers had to overcome many obstacles. Kalkbreite started as an idea in 1978 when the municipal council decided that the tram depot would be transformed into a housing space with affordable rents as soon as it would not be used by the public transport company (Ess, 2015; Gmür, 2015). It enabled doubled-use of the place in the future – as housing and as a tram depot at the same time.

Kalkbreite is a cooperative housing project in Zurich that emerged from citizen-led urban development initiatives. The project was initiated in response to a city government decision to sell land to private investors, which a group of residents opposed.

There were several key milestones in Kalkbreite's development:

- Early resistance and a community organization appearance in the early 2000s. At that time, the city of Zurich planned to sell a prime urban plot to a private investor for commercial development. A group of residents, concerned about increasing housing shortages and a lack of affordable urban living spaces, organized opposition to this decision. A workshop was held, bringing together around 40-50 interested individuals to explore alternative uses for the site.
- After the workshop, a core group of about 10 individuals was formed. These people took the lead in advocating for an alternative project—a cooperative housing model. This group negotiated with the city government, arguing that the land should be used for public benefit rather than private investment.
- In Zurich, there already existed some cooperative housing models. Thus, with knowledge from these cooperatives, the group transformed into a cooperative model as negotiations progressed. They had the advantage of people who had previous experience from other housing cooperatives in Zurich, from Karthago and Dreieck (Ess, 2015, p. 30). The cooperative model was chosen to ensure long-term affordability, community governance, and social inclusivity. The project quickly gained popularity, with membership growing to over 2,000 individuals, all supporting the vision of community-based urban living.

- After securing approval from the city of Zurich, the cooperative began designing the project with a focus on (i) sustainability and use of eco-friendly building materials and energy-efficient designs, (ii) social inclusion ensuring a diverse mix of residents, including families, singles, and seniors, (iii) community spaces that would enable allocating shared areas for cultural activities, social interaction, and co-working spaces.

After an investment of 62.5 Mio CHF (Gratz, 2015, p. 69), in August 2014, Kalkbreite was open to use (Wolf & Wottreng, 2015). With its 2,500 square meters, trees and green courtyard, providing housing to 251 inhabitants, each of them with 32 square meters of living space, no parking for cars, but for 300 bicycles (Gratz, 2015, pp. 66-69), Kalkbreite brought a new concept to the city. The situation also develops. According to (Cotterlaz-Rannard & Méndez, 2024), 500 people live in the building, and between 200 and 400 people are working in the local shops. This approach enabled the efficient use of space in Kalkbreite in a participative manner. Over time, the initiative expanded, inspiring similar community-driven housing projects in Zurich and abroad.

Figure 1: Kalkbreite



Source: Oto Potluka

Neighborhood challenge

Similarly to other places, Zurich suffers from a lack of affordable housing. The Kalkbreite project came up with solutions that enabled efficient, effective, participatory, and functional solution in a place that would be only a tram depot.

Response to the challenge

The Kalkbreite place offers a multidimensional view of housing. It is not just about addressing the shortage of housing to live in, it is also a social concept that focuses on environmental issues, and social engagement and empowerment. There were several dimensions that constituted the core of the project.

Sustainability dimension

The core environmental aspect of this approach in Kalkbreite is the utilization of shared community infrastructure. The project prioritizes circularity and reducing consumption by promoting urban gardening, the sharing economy, and a collective wealth pool system. For instance, instead of each household owning a private washing machine, shared laundry facilities are encouraged (actually, it is quite a common habit in Switzerland). Similarly, communal spaces can be used for guest accommodations or workspaces. This initiative aims to minimize spatial and material demands, primarily targeting predefined size of living space per person. Kalkbreite is also a concept working with no use of cars (Gmür, 2015, p. 41). Moreover, the Kalkbreite is one of the first five sites in Switzerland to be certified as a 2,000-watt site since the beginning of 2017 (Sinning & Spars, 2019, p. 245).

Participation

A key objective of the Kalkbreite project is fostering deep cooperation between the municipality and its citizens. Acting as a facilitator, the project seeks to create equal opportunities for affordable and secure housing, empowering residents to shape their living environments and engage in self-driven initiatives that benefit the wider community. It was clear from the beginning that such a complex project is not possible to be done by a limited number of people. Themes needed to be discussed with those who had to use the space after finishing (Bertschinger, 2015) and experts in the field.

At its core, the decision-making process is highly participative in Kalkbreite. The community operates on cooperative principles, ensuring that every stakeholder has an equal vote. This inclusive governance model extends beyond the physical housing units, fostering a broader sense of participation and communal engagement.

On one hand, the project emphasizes resident agency, encouraging active participation, empowerment, and a sense of ownership. On the other hand, it also addresses the project's financial sustainability. While the initiative involves economic considerations, its primary focus remains societal rather than profit driven. The work in a participative manner enabled full exploitation of the space, diversity, and flexibility of use (Tack, 2015, p. 70).

Working on the image

The group was also working on the picture of Kalkbreite in media (Stahel, 2015, p. 35). Beyond the articles in newspapers, there are a lot of various studies about Kalkbreite (see the references at the end of the case study).

Potential drawbacks in dissemination

Many of the project's principles—such as strong community ties, shared housing, and communal facilities—are well-established in Western Europe, particularly in places like Zurich or Basel, Switzerland. However, in central and eastern Europe, the model may face skepticism due to past negative experiences with collectivization, particularly in housing and the discreditation of cooperatives under the communism period. Nonetheless, if the project effectively communicates its objectives and

demonstrates its benefits to stakeholders, it can mitigate these concerns and build trust within the community.

Mechanisms of civic engagement

A central aspect of Kalkbreite is its strong emphasis on participatory decision-making. The project operates on a cooperative governance model, where residents play an active role in shaping policies, managing communal spaces, and addressing neighborhood concerns.

There are several aspects enabling participation:

- **Open membership and decision-making:** The cooperative Kalkbreite is open to both residents and non-residents. While there are only 90 apartments available, over 2,000 cooperative members support the project financially and with ideas (or only as an idea). Decisions are made collectively, ensuring that both residents and broader cooperative members have a voice in key matters. Attendance varies depending on the topics discussed—ranging from 20 to 70 participants per meeting. On the other hand, it sometimes means that the decision made is limited to the opinion of a group of a few participants who attend a meeting.
- **Community council (Gemeinrat):** A community council was established to facilitate decision-making. The council meets monthly, allowing residents and cooperative members to bring forward concerns, suggest improvements, and vote on issues.
- **Working groups and shared responsibilities:** Working together even during the planning and construction of the house enabled the inclusion of various relevant ideas into the concept. Thus, the final scope of the building met the requirements of its future inhabitants (Wolf & Wottreng, 2015, p. 8). It also influenced approaches to urban planning in Zurich, although the concept of cooperatives in housing was already known there (Wolf & Wottreng, 2015, p. 9). The multiple working groups exist to manage different aspects of Kalkbreite's operation, such as: maintenance of shared spaces, community events and cultural activities, or environmental sustainability initiatives. Each communal space (e.g., café, meeting rooms, outdoor areas) has a designated responsible person or group to oversee its use and upkeep. Nevertheless, the working groups are wider and cover various themes to enable people to engage (Wittlin, 2013).

Kalkbreite follows a deliberate social inclusion strategy, ensuring that housing is accessible to diverse groups while maintaining a sense of community engagement. The housing model follows the following criteria: (i) fair selection process - due to high demand (2,000+ cooperative members for only 90 apartments), a transparent selection process was established. Applicants are chosen based on social diversity criteria, ensuring a mix of different income levels, ages, and family structures. (ii) Affordability and sustainability are ensured by rents below market rates, thanks to the non-profit cooperative model. The project prioritizes energy efficiency, reducing long-term living costs. (iii) Communal living concept with shared facilities encouraging interaction among residents and spaces designed for collaboration, cultural events, and social activities.

Case study findings and lessons learned

The concept of resilience was a significant topic in the discussion, particularly in how Kalkbreite adapts to crises and maintains community support structures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kalkbreite demonstrated strong community resilience, with residents taking proactive measures to support one another. Examples include face masks production and distribution when supply shortages occurred; support to older residents within a system established for volunteers to shop for groceries and medicines on behalf of older and at-risk individuals; and community communication. The cooperative maintained regular online meetings to ensure everyone stayed informed and connected.

These efforts highlight the benefits of participatory communities in responding to unexpected challenges. Unlike traditional housing models, Kalkbreite's cooperative structure allows for rapid collective action during crises.

The result of the participative effort of various people was a place that offered not only housing, but also workplaces, and places for leisure time (Gmür, 2015, p. 43). It would be difficult to realize such a concept of cooperative housing on private property. Thus, the best opportunity to implement such a concept is on public property – in this case, on the property of the municipality (Stahel, 2015, p. 34). During the planning, the participative processes needed to be organized in a way that the moderators were a few steps ahead of the construction (Bertschinger, 2015, p. 80). Thus, the discussions' results always came at the correct time for the construction project and approved their relevancy. The decision on the use of Kalkbreite to build cooperative housing was a political one (Ess, 2015; Stahel, 2015, p. 36).

This type of project contributes to a sense of belonging (where the individuals belong to the group), highlighting the diversity and involvement of local communities. It is highlighted in the case of Kalkbreite by the membership of more than 2,000 people although only a part of them lives in Kalkbreite.

Conclusion

Kalkbreite has served as a model for other cooperative housing initiatives, demonstrating the success of community-led urban development. The follow-up was realized in Zollhaus in Zurich. The key aspects for a success were identified as (i) long-term engagement because the success of Kalkbreite stems from continuous community involvement, from initial planning to ongoing governance. It required endurance and patience as the processes might take long-time effort (Wolf & Wottreng, 2015, p. 8). (ii) Participation strengthens resilience - a strong network of engaged residents enables the community to adapt to crises and challenges effectively. (iii) The success enabled replication as similar initiatives can be developed in other cities by following a cooperative, participatory approach, although the Kalkbreite is unique and simply copying the same approaches might not work at other places.

Attachments

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