

**INTERVIEW WITH**

**DR. MARIE ANTOINETTE GLASER  
DIRECTOR ETH WOHNFORUM - ETH CASE**

Dr. Glaser, we are studying different aspects of housing policy in Europe, and we have discovered a bit variation from country to country, therefore we would like to know your opinion on the following topics.

1. What is ETH Wohnforum?

ETH Wohnforum – ETH CASE (Centre for Research on Architecture, Society & the Built Environment) is an interdisciplinary research centre for social- and cultural-scientific analyses in the fields of housing, architecture and spatial and urban development.

We deal with socially relevant issues concerning developments and interactions in the field of the built environment, organising our research in alignment with current problem areas. Our research focal points are combined so as to cover both previously established and new approaches, as well as those that are future-orientated. This has earned ETH Wohnforum – ETH CASE a pioneering position in research into housing and urban development. Our work is currently concentrated on cultural practices and living environments, qualitative development, and socio-technical processes.“

We deal with socially relevant issues concerning developments and interactions in the field of the built environment, organising our research in alignment with current problem areas.

In order to better satisfy the requirements set by our research topics we work beyond disciplinary boundaries and develop instruments with which to more fully understand the interrelationships between historical, cultural, social and socio-economic as well as technological processes. In doing so we range between the priorities of basic, developmental and applied research.

Examples of our current research topics are housing for the elderly, multi-local housing, cooperative housing, home biographies, neighbourhood, repairs and maintenance, architectural competitions, zoning in urban planning and architectural training. The findings from our work are incorporated into the teaching and advanced studies at ETH Zurich's Department of Architecture. At the same time these results are made available to a professional audience of scholars, administrators and practitioners in the form of book publications and academic articles, at conferences and via the annual international conference by the ETH Wohnforum – ETH CASE. ETH Wohnforum was established in 1990.

## WPSReview International on Sustainable Housing and Urban Renewal (RI-SHUR)

### 2. Which would you tell are the main characteristics of the housing market in Switzerland?

"Switzerland is a country of tenants" – as the saying goes. It has the lowest rate of home ownership in Europe. Between 1990 and 2013, homeownership (single family homes as well as condominiums) increased somewhat from 31 to 37,5 per cent.

The vast majority of the population of Switzerland lives in highquality homes with an average per-capita living space of forty-four square metres. Over the past years, the rate of owner-occupancy increased chiefly due to a marked increase in condominium ownership. The last census revealed over one million first-home owners – a Swiss first! On the down side, low-income tenant households are burdened by high rents; individuals and groups with special needs have limited market access; and there is a lack of housing for people with specific needs and lifestyles. A high proportion of detached houses increases the rate of urban sprawl, and the new housing production is mainly intended for middle classes and the gilded few.

In urban cantons and particularly in cities home ownership is much lower. While, for example, it also increased in the canton of Zurich to 27.4 per cent, in the city of Zurich it amounts to only 8.1 per cent (Statistics Zurich, 2013).

Ownership also varies considerably with age. While only 26 per cent of households with members between 25 – 64 owned their house or apartment, the share of home ownership among older households with members over 65 was 47.6 per cent (Federal office of statistics, 2013)  
<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/09/03.html>

Of great relevance is therefore the structure of ownership of rental housing. Around 60 per cent is owned by private individuals who have inherited or acquired larger or smaller housing complexes for investment purposes or smaller companies which use such investments to help cover pension payments for their retired employees. Many of these investors rely on the cash return from rents. Around 20 per cent of the housing stock is owned by large institutional investors such as pension funds and life insurance companies as well as banks.

The remaining (rental) housing stock is owned by municipalities, foundations and not-for-profit housing cooperatives. The share of housing cooperatives amounts to only 5.1 per cent, in Switzerland overall. It is, however, much higher in cities, particularly in Zurich and Biel, where this type of housing stock makes up almost one fifth of all rental housing.

## WPSReview International on Sustainable Housing and Urban Renewal (RI-SHUR)

3. Which are – from your perspective the main problems and the main achievements which has been assured in the housing sector in the last 20 years.

The vast majority of the population of Switzerland lives in highquality homes with an average per-capita living space of forty-four square metres. Over the past ten years, the rate of owner-occupancy increased from thirty-one to thirty-five per cent, chiefly due to a marked increase in condominium ownership. The last census revealed over one million first-home owners – a Swiss first!

On the down side, low-income tenant households are burdened by high rents; individuals and groups with special needs have limited market access; and there is a lack of housing for people with specific needs and lifestyles. A high proportion of detached houses increases the rate of urban sprawl, and the new housing production is mainly intended for the gilded few. Swiss housing policy intends to provide for suitable legal structures to ensure functioning housing markets. However, any endeavours to alter obsolete provisions in the Tenant Act have so far been voted down. The main objective of the Swiss government's policy of housing promotion is to provide affordable housing for low-income households.

Also urgent is the issue refurbishing and /or rebuilding. Most of the homes in Switzerland are flats in old residential buildings, with some thirty per cent constructed prior to 1945, and a further thirty per cent over thirty years old.

4. Has the Crisis in the Building sector affect at some point the swiss housing sector?

In contrast to other, particularly Southern European countries, the last housing crisis in Switzerland dates back to the 1990ies. According to a report by the Swiss Federal Housing Office, during the time span before and after the financial crisis of 2008 crisis, demand for housing was high which in turn led to very low vacancy rates, particularly in cities. Housing supply adapted to housing demand with a significant time lag, so that only in 2014 a significant increase in available new housings has been noted. Between 2002 and 2013 the average number of new apartments built per year increased from 29'000 to 47'000 units, with growing numbers of smaller apartments with three rooms and less (BWO 2015). The demand for smaller apartments is related to changing household structures such as single person or couple households, which currently make up about two thirds of urban households.

Structural data on the housing situation and recent market trends show that the average quantity and quality of housing in Switzerland is adequate and that the market is largely capable of ensuring supply at a high level. Various alarming trends, however, require government intervention: high costs of housing particularly affect low-income

## WPSReview International on Sustainable Housing and Urban Renewal (RI-SHUR)

households, which must either renounce living in homes adequate for their needs, accepting instead cramped conditions and / or low-quality homes in substandard locations, or else spend so much of their usable income on adequate housing that the satisfaction of the remainder of their basic needs is jeopardised. On the other hand, better-off households and individuals can afford to live in exceedingly spacious and high-quality homes in excellent locations. Any society committed to social balance must make sure that such differences do not spin out of control, jeopardizing 'peaceful cohabitation'.

A current streaming of new buildings to wealthy clients seeking properties for their own use indicates that such differences are likely to worsen. Investments must be made in favour of less privileged households to help reverse this trend. Moreover, the largely uninhibited construction of detached houses accelerates urban sprawl.

New builds are primarily targeted at a gilded clientele and at people wishing to conform to the mainstream living 'normal' lives. There is a serious lack of housing for groups wishing to live 'differently' (i.e. community-oriented, car-free, receiving a range of services, etc.).

People and groups are often overlooked due to personal features such as skin colour, nationality, religion, etc. and tend to have severely restricted access to the housing market. All too frequently, they are passed over and forced to accept overly expensive housing in substandard locations.

The restricted market access also affects households with an adequate income but lacking the required capital, who want to become owners. While obsolete fixtures and fittings have become quite rare, the immediate or more distant vicinity is often unattractive, either lacking in services and facilities to satisfy everyday needs, or affected by undesirable immissions of (traffic) noise or smells. A lack of social neighbourhood networks can lead to isolation and affect an individual's participation in social life. In view of increasing numbers of single-person households and an ageing society, this aspect requires particular attention.

### 5. Why remodelling is that important now in Zurich?

The issue of refurbishing / remodeling is of high importance. Most of the homes in Switzerland are flats in old residential buildings, with some thirty per cent constructed prior to 1945, and a further thirty per cent over thirty years old. In urban cores, the proportion of old properties is considerably higher, most of them with one- and two-bedroom units, often with rather obsolete floor plans, facilities and furnishings.

There is also a considerable difference between construction periods for rental and owner-occupied flats, the majority of the latter having been built after 1970. Renovation work may be motivated by different utilisation needs, problematic resident structures,

## WPSReview International on Sustainable Housing and Urban Renewal (RI-SHUR)

lack of maintenance, vacancies due to obsolete facilities and furnishings, high energy consumption, etc. It is not customary in Switzerland to demolish houses, although the option of replacing old structures by new is increasingly being considered.

However, comprehensive renovation work facilitates the better use of sites with spare land for utilisation according to Swiss construction law, i.e. by adding extensions, a floor, or a separate building. Comprehensive renovations – be they new buildings after demolition, or total renovations – usually require giving notice to tenants, who often put up massive resistance.

6. It seems that the society is changing till which extent- do you think- cultural changes can impact the answer of public authorities?

Demographic Changes will have an impact – we all know about our aging populations in the developed countries in Europe. However, an ageing society is not only affected by increasing numbers of elderly people, but also, and most importantly, by a shift of balance between the various age groups. In the 1990s the age quotient, i.e. the proportion of over-sixty-four-year-olds to persons in their (prime) working age, increased by two per cent, from twenty-three to twenty-five per cent, which is a slight, yet significant increase.

Demographic ageing, however, should not be equated with the excessive ageing of society. When is someone 'old'? For a long time, people over sixty-five were considered 'old'. However, the situation of the elderly and old has changed radically in the recent past. Life expectancy has increased, health has improved, and people live longer feeling well. Many people remain active and productive far beyond retirement. Apart from a political discussion of (the financing of) retirement funds, this development has also created a demand for more and more varied housing for the elderly, focusing on small households with one or two persons, since in our society it is unusual for adult children to live with their parents or relatives.

7. How Switzerland is implementing the sustainability policies from the EU?. In which point are Zurich in Energy Efficiency?

In line with the Swiss federal system of far reaching autonomy at the cantonal and local, municipal level, major cities such as Zurich and Basel have adopted a variety of more specific political goals and policies toward creating sustainable communities. These visions can be summarised as developing the cities in a sustainable way in terms of decreasing the use of non-renewable resources (reducing energy use, supporting mobility through a variety of measures to limit the use of private cars and foster public transportation, etc.) while at the same time enhancing the manifold

## WPSReview International on Sustainable Housing and Urban Renewal (RI-SHUR)

qualities of urban life for the inhabitants. Both cities have anchored these goals in the context of a mandate by their residents. In Zurich, the voting population agreed to include in the city's constitution the goal of reaching a '2000 Watt Society' for Zurich by the year 2050.

The city of Zurich 2000 Watt commitment involves interventions in the following areas: energy efficiency and renewable energies; requirements for sustainable buildings; mobility for the future; increasing public awareness events and strategies. (see also <https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/energie/energiepolitik> *Energy Policies: Sources of Energy and Swiss Energy Strategy 2050*).

According to the 2014 worldwide ranking by the World Energy Council, Switzerland and Sweden were the only countries with AAA ranking, the highest in terms of the energy trilemma index. This energy sustainability index encompasses three dimensions:

- 1) Energy security (the effective management of primary energy supply from domestic and external sources, the reliability of energy infrastructure, and the ability of participating energy companies to meet current and future demand);
- 2) Energy equity (accessibility and affordability of energy supply across the population);
- 3) Environmental sustainability (the achievement of supply and demand-side energy efficiencies and the development of energy supply from renewable and other low-carbon sources).

The Swiss Federal Council began discussing the impact of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster on the Swiss Energy Policy just twelve days after the event. It resulted in the authorization of the respective federal agency (UVEK) to update the future scenarios in terms of energy policy. Later in 2011, the Swiss Parliament and Swiss Federal Council decided on a gradual exit policy in terms the use of nuclear energy.

In 2013, the Swiss Federal Council adopted the first package of measures for the Energy Strategy 2050, which was based on the following premises:

- Economical / efficient consumption of energy
  - Total consumption of energy to be covered to a significant proportion by hydro power renewable energy sources
  - Cost-by-cause principle
  - Construction and renovation of fossil fuel production facilities to be based on examination and proof of need procedures
  - Measures and prescriptions-related energy laws have to be technically and economically feasible
- (<https://www.news.admin.ch/message/index.html?lang=de&msg-id=50123>)

One of the central measures of the Energy Strategy 2050 concerns reinforcing the Building Programme, which focuses on the energy conserving renovation of residential

## WPSReview International on Sustainable Housing and Urban Renewal (RI-SHUR)

buildings. The objective of the related CO<sub>2</sub> Act is the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions resulting from the end of fossil fuels to 10 percent below 1990 levels, based on the average emissions of the years 2008 to 2012. The law includes a provision to charge a tax on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, amounting to 36 Swiss francs (CHF) per ton of CO<sub>2</sub>. A partial revision of the law in 2009 states one third of the CO<sub>2</sub> tax, approximately CHF 200 million, must be invested in the Building Programme. The Energy Strategy 2050 aims at a significant increase of the CO<sub>2</sub> emission taxes in a three-step-plan. These taxes should have increased in 2014 from CHF 37 to CHF 60. The long-term aim of the three-step-plan is a large increase of the taxes in the final phase of up to CHF 84 per ton of CO<sub>2</sub>.

One third of the revenue from the CO<sub>2</sub> taxes (approximately CHF 450 million) is to be paid out to the cantons in form of general contributions. According to the "Impact Analysis of cantonal development programmes" of 2013 CHF 107 million from the general contribution had been invested nationwide for direct measures in the building area or for the installation of renewable energy facilities. More than half of the investment contributions went into renewable energy facilities such as wood heating systems, solar panels, environmentally sound heating sources (2012: CHF 64 million). Only CHF 25 million had been devoted to the renovation of existing buildings in 2013.