

THE SUPERMARKET BEFORE RENOVATION.



WINDOWS WITH VIEWS OF THE SUR-  
ROUNDINGS ASSUME RANDOM POSITIONS  
IN THE FAÇADE.

# A COHESIVE WHOLE

SWISS PROJECT DEVELOPER DN2M BOUGHT AN EMPTY SUPERMARKET IN WINTERTHUR, AND EM2N ARCHITECTS CONVERTED THE BUILDING INTO FIVE UNUSUAL APARTMENTS.

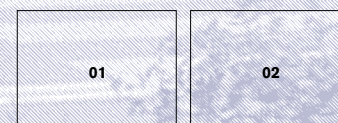
Text **Katharina Marchal** / Photos **Roger Frei**



Swiss architecture firm EM2N can be called 'masters of transformation': witness, for instance, the Viaduct Arches in Zurich (see Mark #28, p. 80) or the conversion of a former milk-processing factory in the same city, a project that is currently under way. In 2013 the building will be home to two universities and include 90 apartments, as well as cultural spaces. In EM2N's most recently completed project, a supermarket-turned-residential building, Mathias Müller and Daniel Niggli used simple materials and methods to make a structure that had fallen into disuse into an impressive work of architecture. 'The dialectic division between old and new doesn't interest us,' Müller wrote in *Both And*, a 2009 monograph on his work. 'Exciting is the question of how old and new become a cohesive whole. In the near future, we'll have to increasingly address issues with 1960s' and 1970s' construction that no longer fulfils today's functional and technical demands.' His message is clear: the original use or appearance of a building hardly plays any role; EM2N is far more interested in recognizing a building's fundamental structure and in using it to enrich the new function.

The firm applied this strategy to the conversion of a 1960s' supermarket located in the middle of Rosenberg, an affluent neighbourhood on the outskirts of Winterthur. For two years after the supermarket closed its doors, the premises were occupied by young squatters, making the building a bit of a local problem. DN2M, a project developer and subsidiary of EM2N, discovered the supermarket on [homegate.ch](http://homegate.ch), a Swiss real-estate site. DN2M bought the property, and EM2N transformed the building into an owner-occupied apartment complex.

One argument for retaining the original skeleton of the unimaginative building was the great potential in its 4-m-high ceilings. 'From an economic point of view, we wouldn't have opted for such dimensions in a new-build complex of this type,' says project developer Marc Holle. But the roomy interior was precisely what attracted them to the supermarket. 'In the new apartments, people get space, not materiality,' he says. To get the benefit of the spatial generosity of the former sales area – and to do it sensibly – EN2M split the existing



**01 ROOF VOLUMES PLAYFULLY RECEDE AND PROJECT, ENHANCING THE CHARACTER OF THE RECTANGULAR BUILDING.**

**02 THE EXTERIOR WALLS OF THE NEW UPPER STOREY HAVE BEEN PLASTERED IN A SLIGHTLY DARKER GREY THAN THOSE OF THE EXISTING BUILDING.**

one-storey building into two levels, but only in the bedrooms and other subsidiary rooms. The main living spaces have soaring ceilings. Portions of the basement ceiling were removed to guarantee proper room heights on all levels. 'The biggest challenge was deciding how we'd divide up the building,' says Holle. The completely distinctive designs of the four corner units and the central apartment – which range in area from 140 to 180 m<sup>2</sup> – are the result of varied alignments. But all interiors are based on the same principles: the entrance leads either directly or via a vestibule into a central area – which the architects call a 'hall' – that accommodates kitchen, dining room and living room. Bedrooms, bathrooms and remaining spaces are stacked in the spatial layer behind this core; these rooms are staggered from the entrance level and connected by a staircase. 'To give each house one or two additional rooms and a roof terrace, we added a recessed upper storey with a timber panel construction,' says Holle.

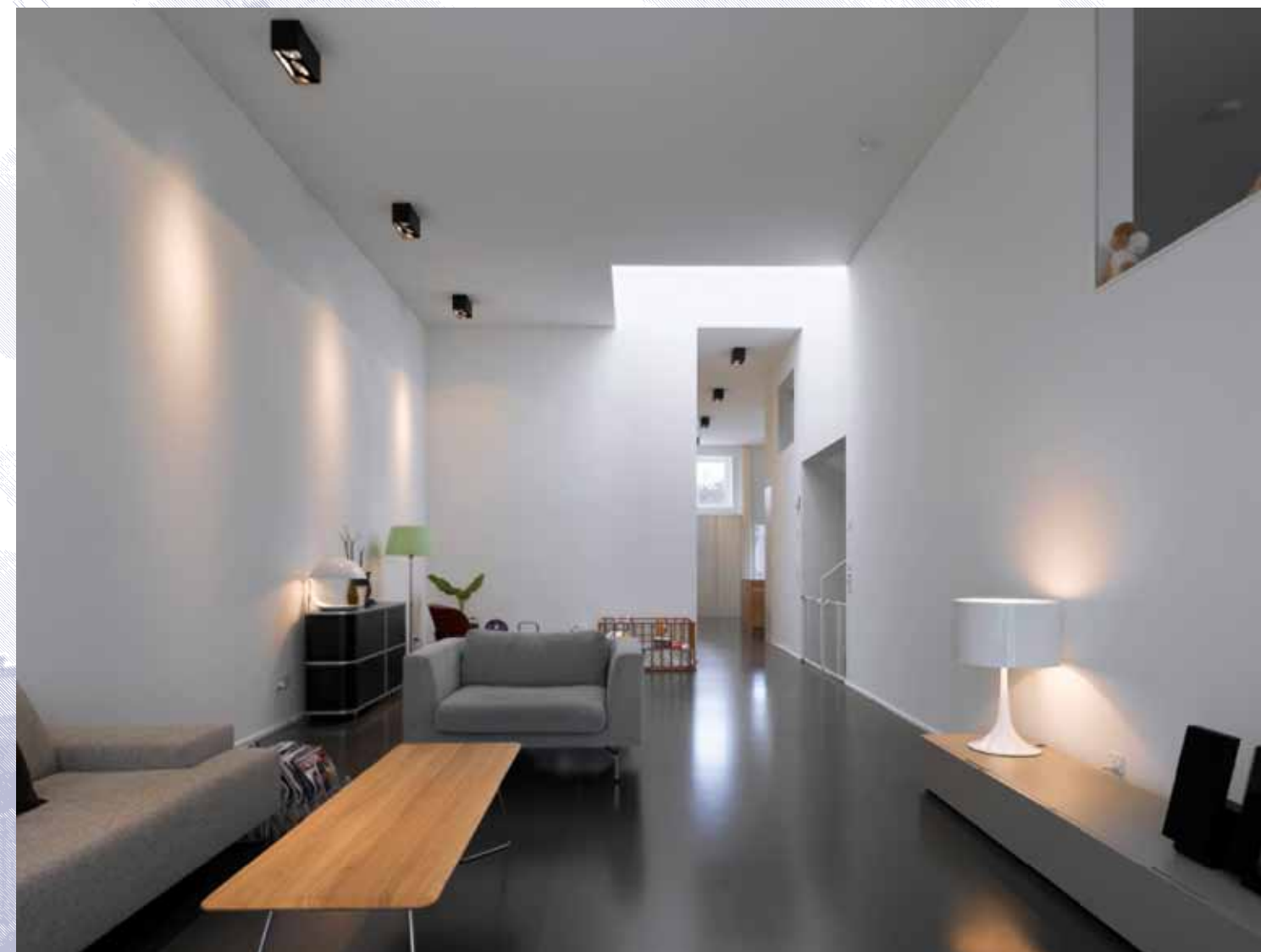
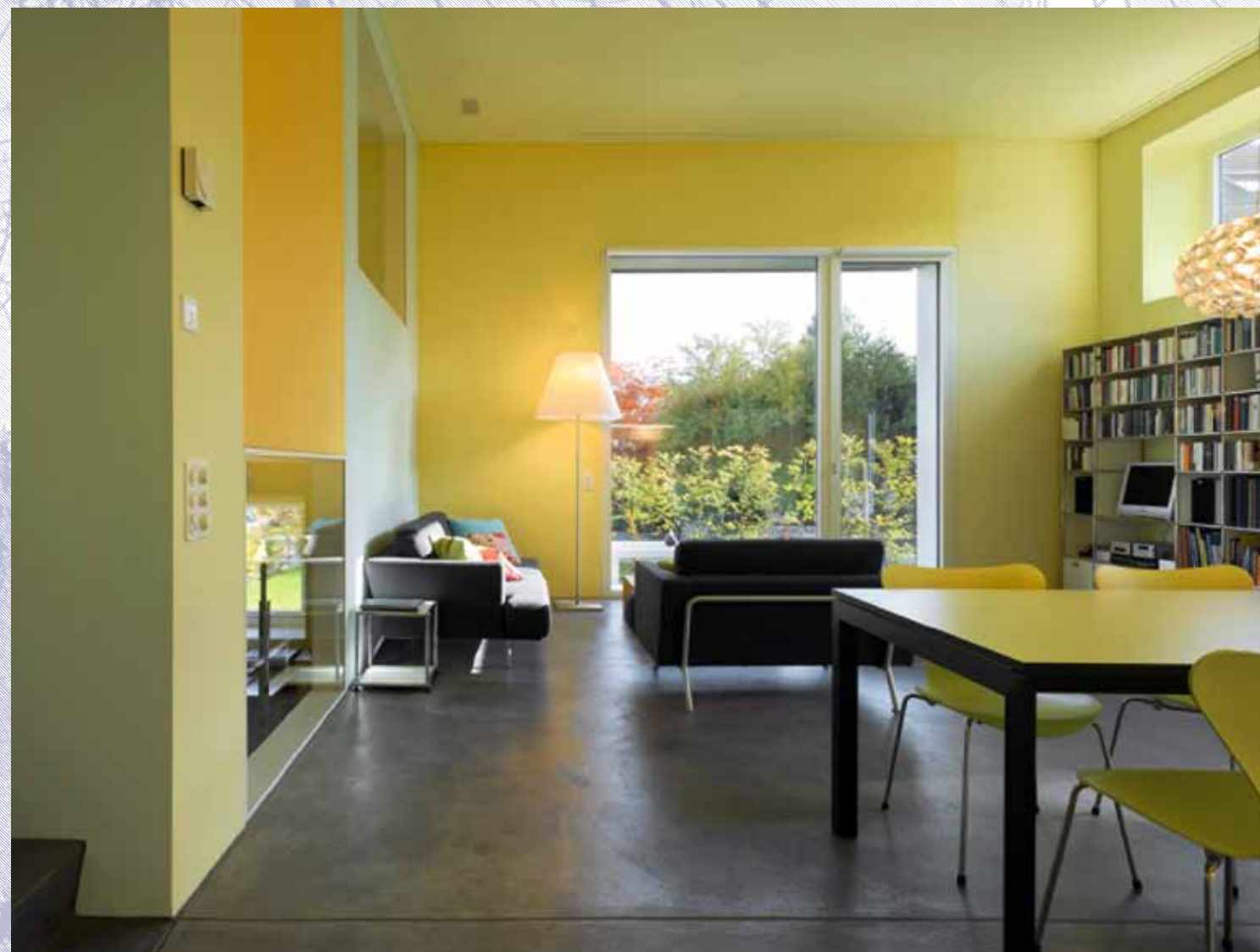
It is not only the height of the 'hall' that creates a sense of luxury in this landscape of

single-family apartments, which represents a typology that so often seems regimented. Like pictures, a staggered arrangement of interior windows marks the 4-m-high wall. Marc Holle calls this 'the inner façade'. As a result, the split levels of each apartment enter into a spatial relationship with the main living space, and vice versa. 'This allows me to see the children in their room or talk to my husband in the workroom when I'm in the kitchen,' says a resident. Windows or sliding elements divide certain rooms from the living area, providing acoustic control as well as added privacy. Natural light entering these spaces indirectly generates a constantly changing atmosphere throughout the day.

The principle of the inner façade continues on the outside of the building. 'Window sizes are mixed, as we didn't want a clear division between living-room and bedroom windows,' says Holle. You can't read the various interior functions of these apartments from the outside; only the panoramic windows of corner units act as stabilizing elements and create a clear relationship with the garden. Walls and ceilings

are punctuated by skylights and stairwells that draw light into the building, directly or indirectly. 'This simple intervention gives the tower-like living area an even more spacious feel,' says Holle.

Plaster on exterior walls is another of the architects' design devices. 'We wanted the building to have a texture that would emphasize its horizontality,' says Holle, explaining how a craftsman ran a household scrubber back and forth through the wet, coarse plaster. 'Lines in the plaster show his handiwork, which was later coated in a metallic glaze. Depending on how the light falls on it, the surface shines in various ways.' The raw material was crucial to the outcome. 'We wanted the plaster on the new upper storey to be coarser than that on the existing building's insulated brick walls.' The linear texture is more noticeable on the outer walls of the upper floor and, depending on light conditions, appears to be a darker colour. 'With this simple method, we added value to the building, whose exterior differentiates this apartment complex from many standard examples.'



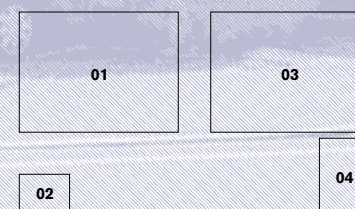
Although each 'hall house' is based on the same principles, the extent to which individual units differ from one another becomes obvious in two examples. The new residents of Unit Four liked the supermarket's ribbed concrete ceiling so much that they wanted to keep it even after the conversion. Today, the supporting structure has an industrial charm that seems almost nostalgic. 'The effort involved in leaving the ceiling exposed, however, was enormous,' says Holle. 'There was a lot of spackling and painting, and at the edge of the ceiling pieces of cork from the former insulation appeared, which had to be pried away with great care. For the skilled workers involved in the operation, it was like writing a dissertation.' For now, the ceiling in Unit Four remains a relic of the former supermarket. In the rest of the building, dropped ceilings conceal the original construction.

Another example is the nonstandard colour scheme chosen by the people living in Unit Two, who wanted something different for their interior walls. Having worked with artist and colour specialist Jörg Niederberger many times in previous projects, EM2N recommended him

to the owners, who teamed up with Niederberger to develop a unique palette for their home. 'The dialogue with the owners was an exciting experience,' says Niederberger, 'because couples often have different ideas about colour, and you have to establish a relationship based on trust before you can come up with a concept.' In addition to their personal preferences, which were identified at the artist's studio, the couple kept their existing furniture in mind while developing a colour concept for the apartment, choosing hues for the walls that reflect the yellow and light-green tones of the furniture. The artist saw EN2M's architecture as an important factor as well. 'Since wall openings between the central living space and the split-level area produce an atmosphere of light in the various rooms, my job was to create a colourful environment that would underscore this atmosphere.' Glazed openings in the walls were an advantage. 'Through them, colours move seamlessly from one space to another,' says Niederberger. To emphasize the height of the living area, he had planes of colour extend vertically over the walls. One can say with certainty that this build-

ing does not represent a historically valuable asset. 'We never would have built it new like this,' says Holle. The contour of the building, with its indentations and protuberances, does not do justice to what is an outstanding architectural achievement. 'But we tried to show the quality involved by applying a logic of recesses and additions to the new upper storey and roof terraces,' he says. Economic concerns were reason enough to preserve the main volume. 'If we'd torn it down, we would have redefined the boundaries of the property, leaving the new construction on a smaller site.' Today, the building's new function seems so self-evident that it's as if the former supermarket has always been a residential complex. Humans are creatures of habit, however, so it's not surprising that locals can often be heard asking new residents whether they are 'one of those people living in the old supermarket'.

[www.em2n.ch](http://www.em2n.ch)



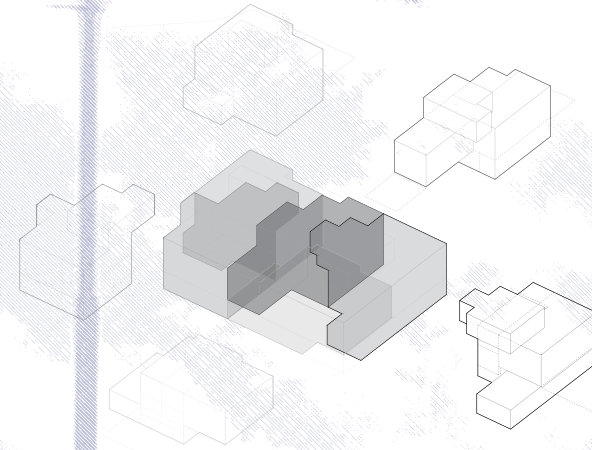
**01 THE COLOUR SCHEME USED IN UNIT TWO ACCENTUATES THE SPACIOUSNESS OF THE INTERIOR.**

**02 AN INTERIOR WINDOW CREATES A SIGHTLINE BETWEEN THE CHILDREN'S ROOM AND THE LIVING AREA.**

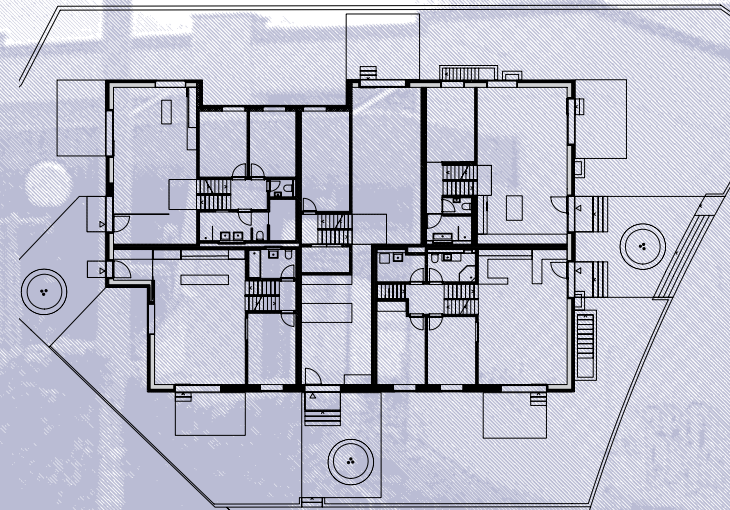
**03 UNIT THREE, SITUATED AT THE CENTRE OF THE OTHER FOUR APARTMENTS, IS THE ONLY DWELLING WITH EXTERIOR WALLS AT BOTH FRONT AND BACK.**

**04 A VOID WITH SKYLIGHT INTERRUPTS A LONG SIGHTLINE IN UNIT THREE.**

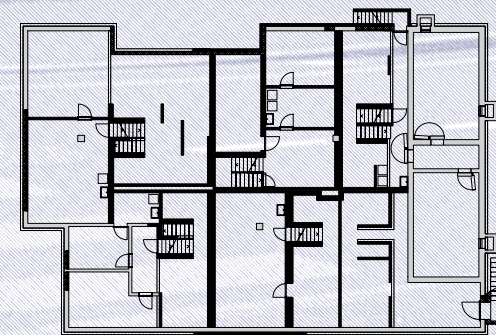




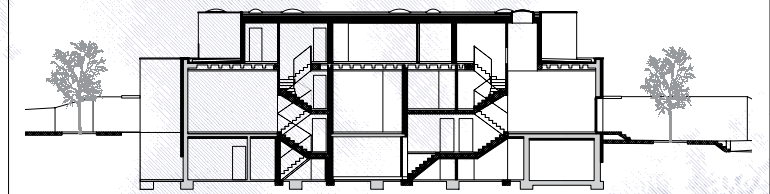
AXONOMETRIC.



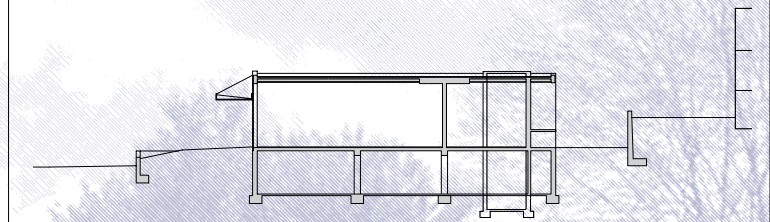
GROUND FLOOR.



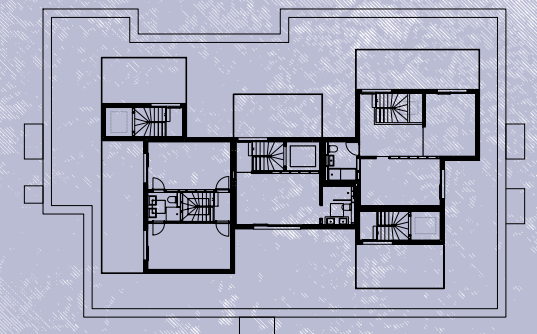
BASEMENT.



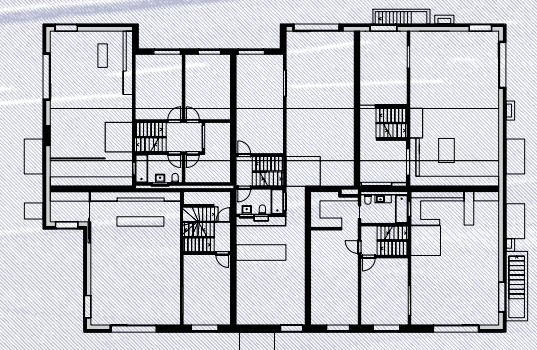
LONGITUDINAL SECTION.



CROSS SECTION OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING.



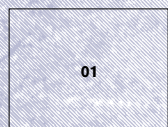
SECOND STOREY.



FIRST STOREY.

‘WE WOULDN'T HAVE OPTED FOR SUCH DIMENSIONS IN A NEW-BUILD COMPLEX OF THIS TYPE’

– Marc Holle –



01 THE OWNERS OF UNIT FOUR ARE THE ONLY RESIDENTS WHO CHOSE TO LEAVE THE ORIGINAL CEILING BEAMS EXPOSED.



02 A SHORT FLIGHT OF STRAIGHT STAIRS CONNECTS THE STAGGERED ROOMS OF EACH APARTMENT'S SPLIT-LEVEL AREA.

