

A live-work complex in Zurich, designed by Müller Sigrist Architekten, is a city in itself.

Machine for Living

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Photo Michael Egloff

In Switzerland, city councils sometimes invite private residents' associations to compete for permission to build on a site selected for future housing. After the associations submit proposals for the development of the site, the winner acts as both developer and client, thus eliminating the need for a professional property developer. Kalkbreite, a housing estate in Zurich, is a successful example of this type of urban development, which also goes on, for example, in the neighbouring country of Germany.

In 2006, a handful of people with an interest in Kalkbreite took part in a public workshop in Zurich. They wanted to determine what functions would be suitable for the parcel of land, which they knew had been earmarked for development. In addition to housing, they wanted the approximately 6,000-m² site to include business premises, offices and cultural functions. Although they had not yet set up the Kalkbreite Housing Cooperative or purchased the land, members of the group continued to work on ideas for the estate. In 2007 they submitted their development proposal.

The triangular piece of land in question was not without challenges: it is wedged between railway tracks on one side and a thoroughfare on the other. 'Noise pollution in this area actually made it officially unsuitable for housing,' says Thomas Sacchi, project manager of the cooperative. Another complicated issue was the integration of an existing tram depot into the building. The tracks could not be moved, and the municipality had decided that the depot had to be part of the new complex. Participation was the answer to all such complicated provisions and, along with a great deal of patience and perseverance, the basis for further communication.

In the workshops that followed, members of the association forged ahead with plans for an architecture competition. It soon became clear, however, that to realize the number of housing units they wanted, space inside each apartment would have to be limited to 35 m² per person instead of the 50 m² normally allotted in Swiss housing estates. Gearing their thinking to the principle of collectivity, they decided that outdoor spaces would have to be shared. That meant no individual claim on one section of the roof terraces, for instance. And besides conventional dwellings, they wanted to offer other forms of housing: flat-shares, cluster housing (consisting of multiple small independent units) and a communal home large enough for 50 people, featuring a centrally located dining-and-living space, complete with professional kitchen. →

→ Wedged between a thoroughfare and railway tracks, Kalkbreite is exposed to an excess of noise pollution.

Photo Christian Brunner

↓ A broad staircase connects the street to an inner courtyard that is open to the public. →





On the south side, the perimeter block is only one storey high in relation to the courtyard; as a result, the courtyard and bordering apartments receive an abundance of natural light.



← The largest of the housing units designed for groups is 'extended' on the second storey by means of a spacious communal hall.

→ The spacious hall provides a direct connection to the communal roof terraces.



'With its polygonal form, the building lends a sense of identity to the neighbourhood'

← Müller Sigrist Architekten designed one large perimeter block that incorporated everything on the wish list, and the members of the association liked what they saw. But how was it possible to restrict each person to such a small space without reducing their domestic comfort? 'We optimized the layouts, and we make sure that potential tenants agree to certain conditions before we rent them an apartment,' says Res Keller, secretary of the cooperative. A fair distribution of space means, for example, that a five-room unit has to be occupied by at least four people. The cooperative joined the architects in developing so-called 'joker rooms', which are rented out for a predetermined length of time for the purpose of improving the functional flexibility of the complex. A significant role was given to the building's first occupants, who helped determine the functions of the various spaces. One example: three tenants' groups decided to make their units into a family commune with a shared kitchen, a plan that relied on lightweight partition walls that can be moved from place to place.

'The integration of the tram depot posed some challenges,' says Pascal Müller of Müller Sigrist Architekten. The building frame and the entrance to the depot had to allow for the dimensions of the trams, the height of the overhead cables and the radius of curved track. Müller Sigrist's solution was a design that doesn't make the depot a separate solid plinth. When viewed from outside, the building reveals almost nothing of the depot's hall as such, as it is largely integrated into the building and its supporting frame. Only at the entrance to the depot does the façade of the compact building open to a height of two storeys. Throughout the remainder of the building, nearly every floor contains a mix of apartments, businesses, hospitality facilities, circulation routes and communal spaces. The disadvantage of this aspect of the design is that certain load-bearing columns had to be positioned in front of façade openings.

The roof of the depot, which is 9 m above street level, serves as a publicly accessible 2,500-m² plaza: a spacious inner courtyard. A peaceful green area open to everyone, the courtyard is a new neighbourhood meeting place. Volumes surrounding the large open area rise to various heights but have a uniform façade cladding, with French balconies, whereas the building's outermost walls are interrupted by loggias. On the south side, the perimeter block is only one storey high in relation to the courtyard; as a result, the courtyard and bordering apartments receive an abundance of natural light. Thanks to the polygonal form and the subdivision of the enormous building volume, the new project merges well with its urban context while also lending a sense of identity to the neighbourhood. →



- ↑ Standing at the kitchen unit, a resident has a view of passers-by on the stairwell.
- ← At certain spots between circulation routes and communal living spaces, the architects made openings that provide glimpses of the other side.
- ↓ Colour-coded accents on steel balustrades in the stairwells facilitate orientation through the building.

‘This building is an urban centre for communal living and working’



← In line with the project’s community spirit and as a complementary communal space, an interior corridor runs through two storeys of the building, connecting all volumes. Like a cascade, the circulation route moves from the foyer, along the cluster units, to the courtyard, where it meets a series of stepped roof terraces surrounding the courtyard. ‘Inside, the building is an urban structure whose short connections link the diverse functions and exploit their synergy,’ says Müller. Seven stairwells play a role in the situation he describes, not to mention a sculptural winding external stairway on the south side that connects the courtyard to roof terraces. As you make your way through the circuitous complex, frequent views of the courtyard facilitate orientation, yet you sometimes feel lost in a labyrinth. Colour-coded accents in the entrance hall and on steel balustrades in the stairwells are meant to help people get their bearings.

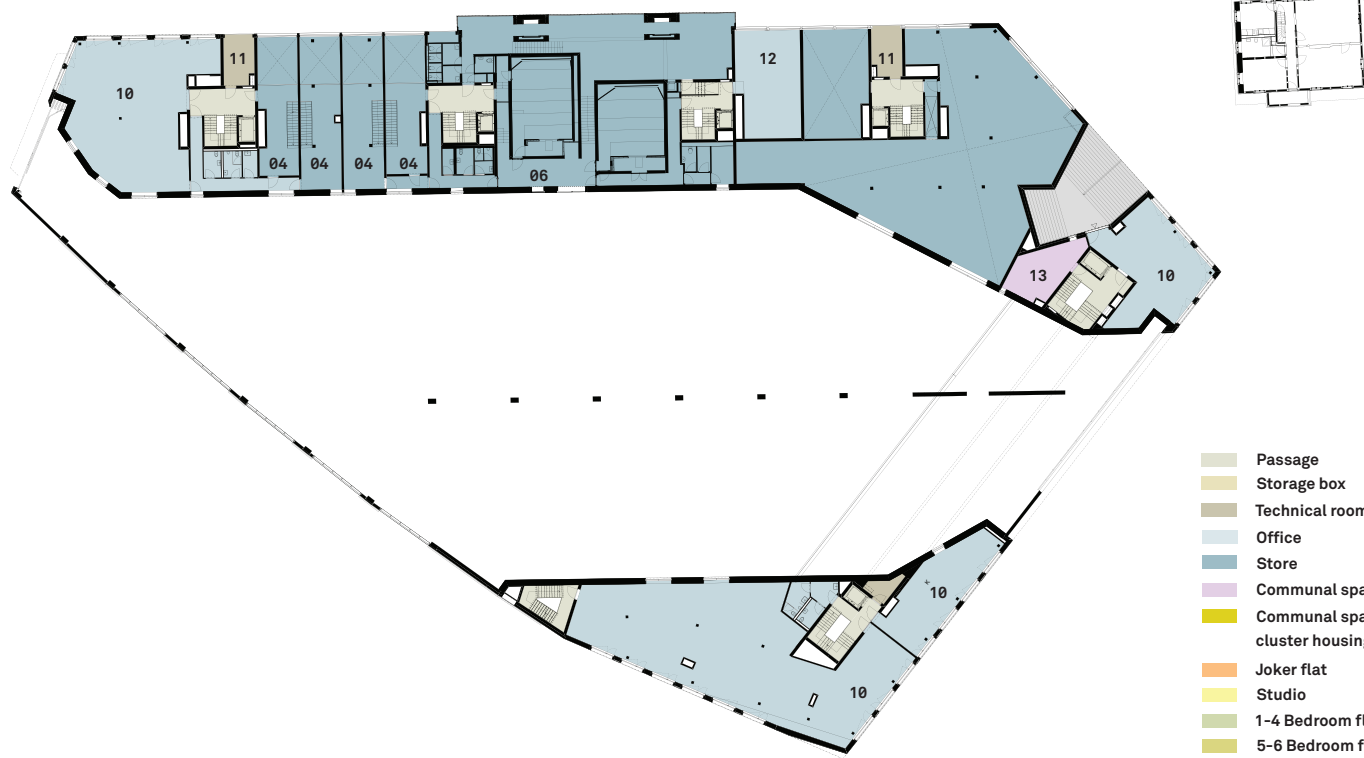
The building has 97 units with affordable rents and houses a total of 256 people. Rents are based on factors such as age and income. Owing to its collaboration with several foundations, the Kalkbreite Housing Cooperative is able to offer apartments to groups of people unable to find a place to live within the standard housing market.

The concept of community and cooperation supports residents even after they have moved into the building. The design of public areas fosters the opportunity for encounters and conversation: the complex features large entrance halls, a cafeteria, a laundry, workplaces, study and meeting rooms – even a bed and breakfast. In addition to a cinema that occupies three floors, the building accommodates cafés, eateries and shops – some stretching two storeys high – and, on a first-floor mezzanine level, offices and ateliers. The cooperative employs a caretaker, and a number of on-site services are provided to residents and others in the neighbourhood. Communal facilities compensate to some degree for the lack of private living space. Müller says that he and his team ‘took rooms and functions normally used for temporary occasions out of people’s homes and put them in rentable units elsewhere in the building’.

The cooperative not only paid close attention to social interests but also implemented energy-saving and ecological measures. Energy consumption is considerably lower than the targets set by the city of Zürich, and tenants are required to use economical resources. ‘The cooperative’s goal was the realization of an urban centre for communal living and working,’ says Müller, ‘with high ecological ambitions.’ ←

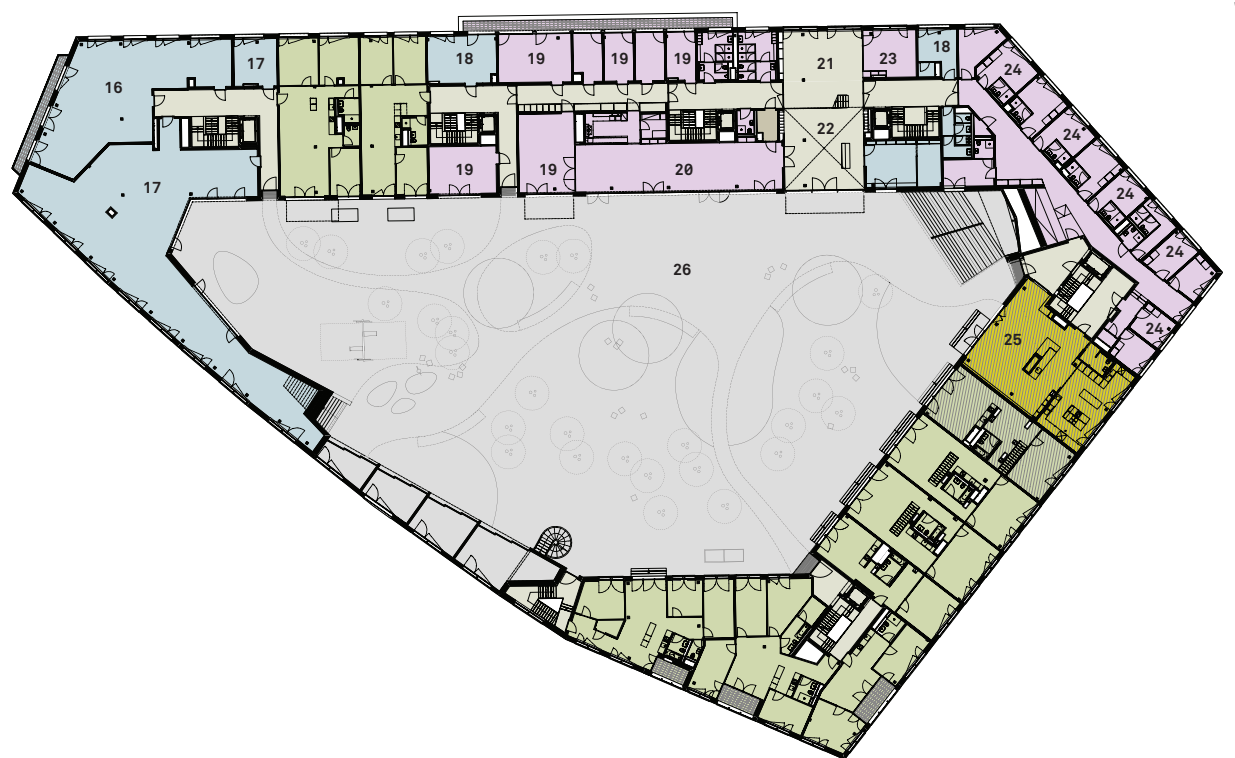
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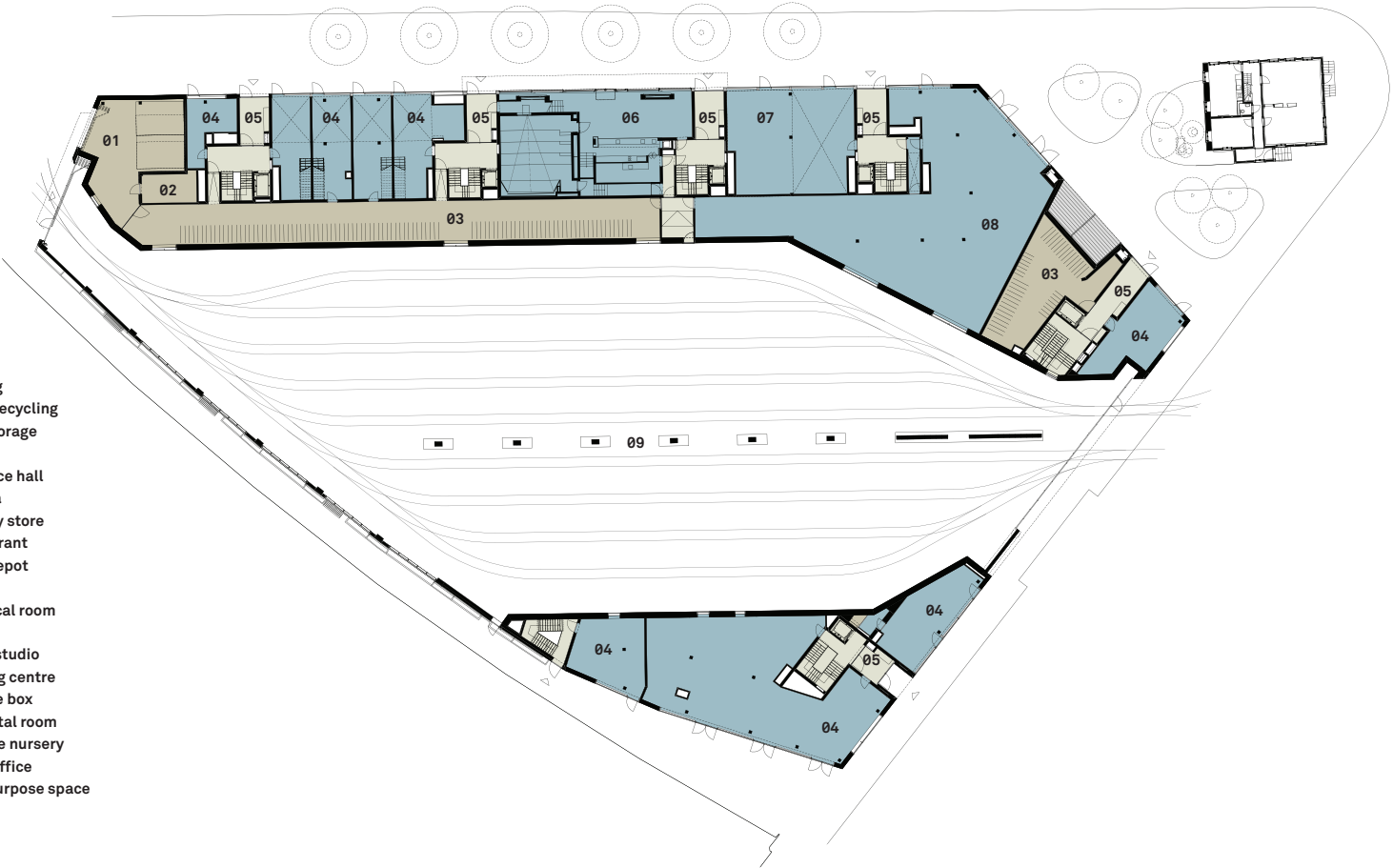


- Passage
- Storage box
- Technical room
- Office
- Store
- Communal space
- Communal space within cluster housing
- Joker flat
- Studio
- 1-4 Bedroom flat
- 5-6 Bedroom flat
- 7-8 Bedroom flat
- Cluster housing

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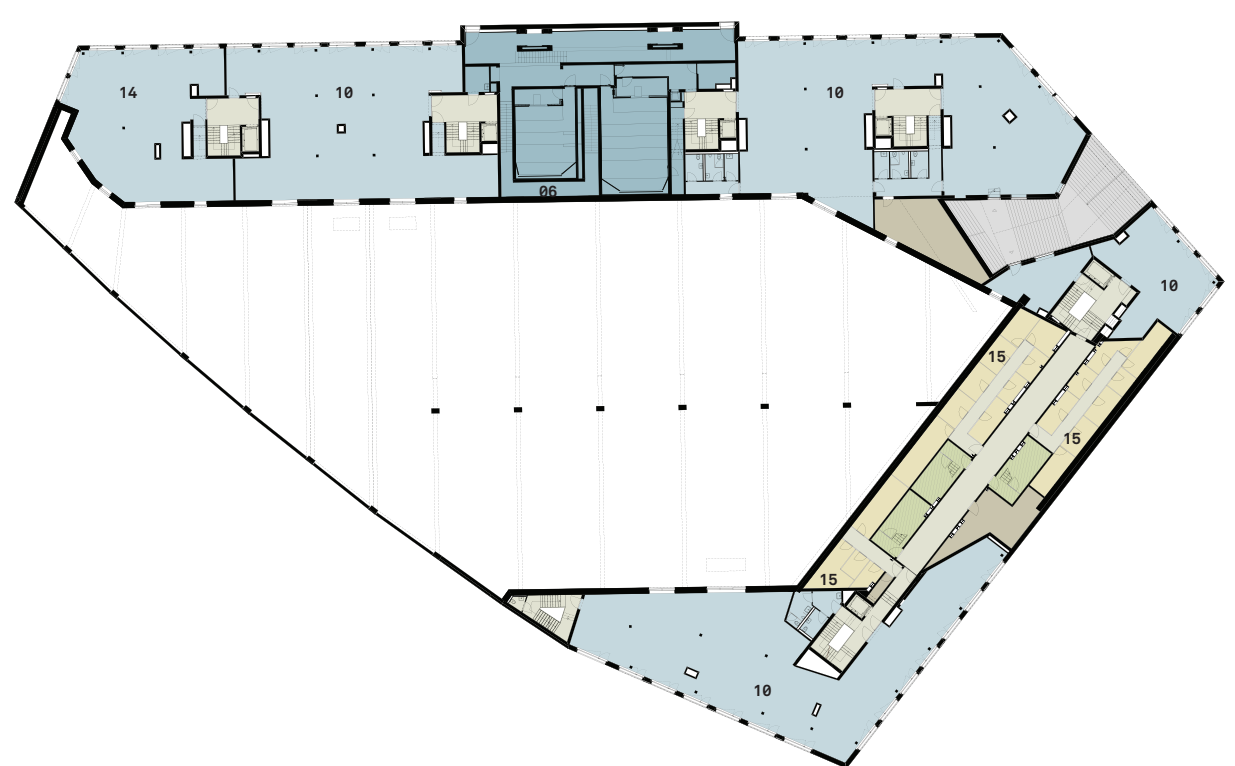


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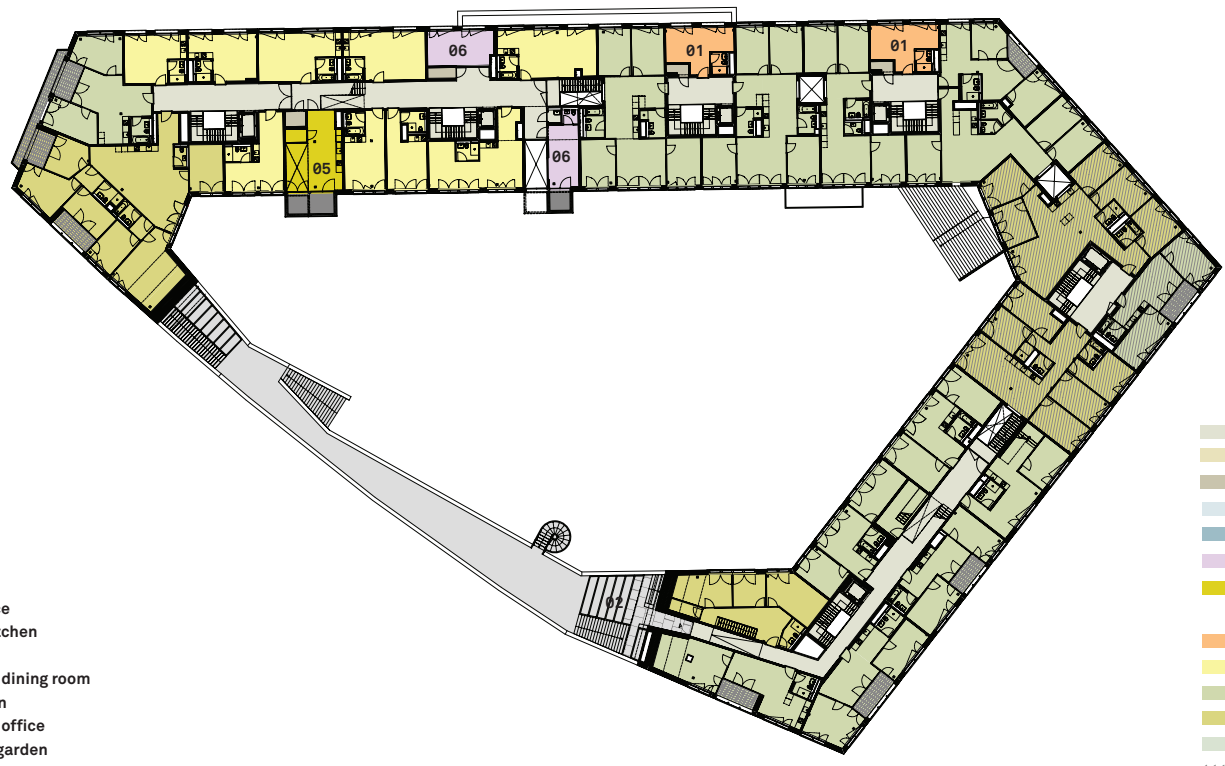


- 01 Parking
- 02 Paper recycling
- 03 Bike storage
- 04 Store
- 05 Entrance hall
- 06 Cinema
- 07 Grocery store
- 08 Restaurant
- 09 Tram depot
- 10 Office
- 11 Technical room
- 12 Atelier
- 13 Music studio
- 14 Birthing centre
- 15 Storage box
- 16 Postnatal room
- 17 Daycare nursery
- 18 Joker office
- 19 Multipurpose space
- 20 Café
- 21 Foyer
- 22 Hall
- 23 Laundry
- 24 Guest bedroom
- 25 Communal dining room and kitchen
- 26 Courtyard

+ 1



+ 4



- 01 Joker flat
- 02 Roof terrace
- 03 Rooftop kitchen
- 04 Sauna
- 05 Communal dining room and kitchen
- 06 Communal office
- 07 Vegetable garden

- Passage
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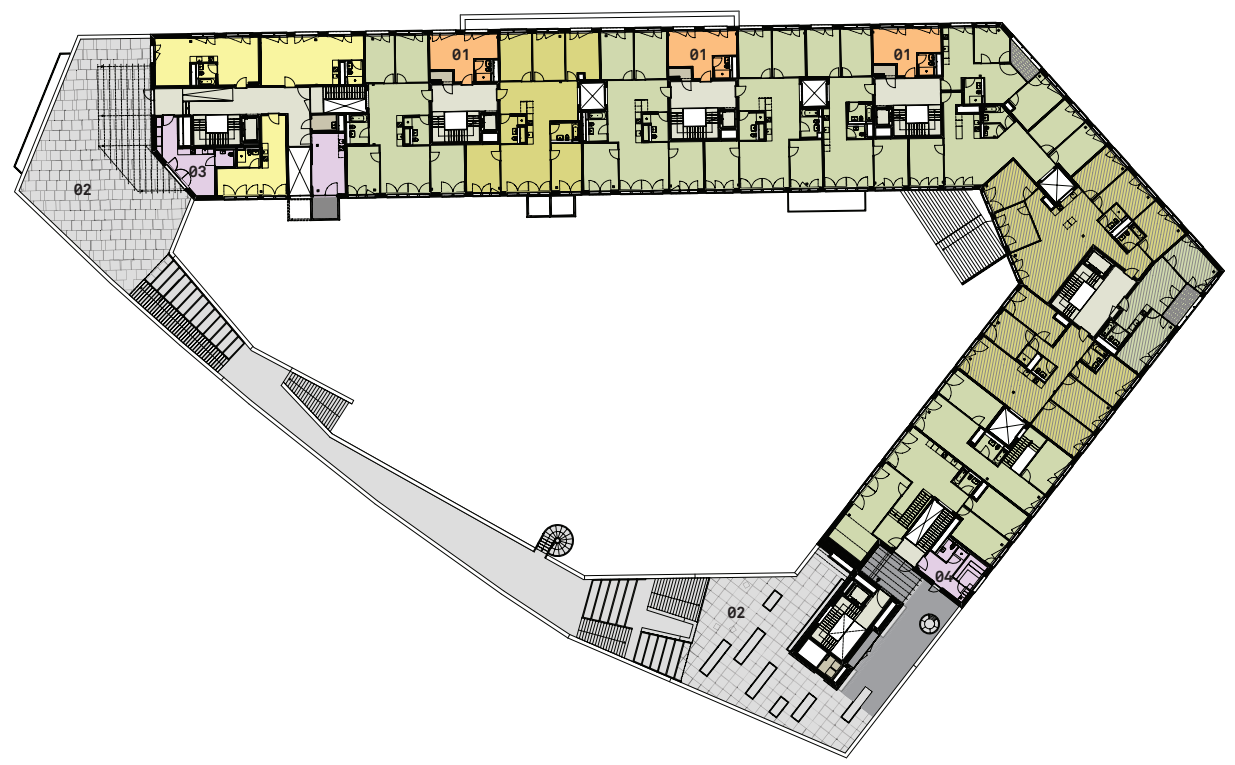
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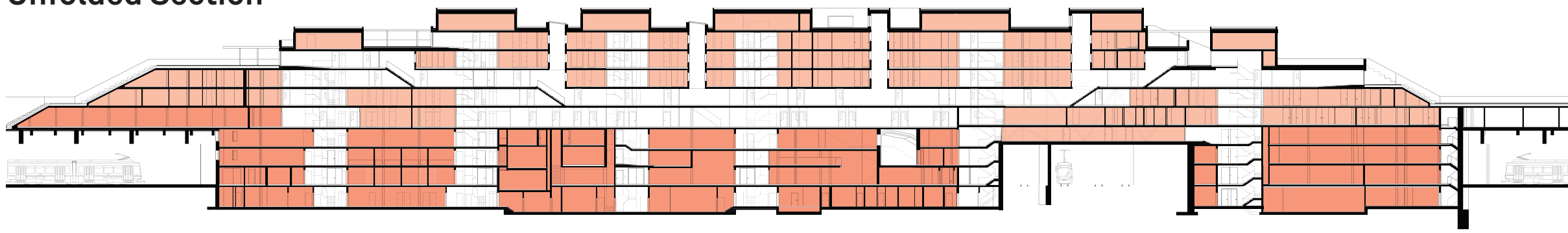
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Unfolded Section



Cross Section

