

Ethnographies in Times of Corona Virus

Simon Balmer
Imploded City



Imploded City

A visual fieldstudy at "Seebahnkolonie"

Soziology - Urban research

Simon Balmer - ETH Zürich FS20



Introduction

Motivation and first thoughts

Background

At the beginning of March this year, things changed abruptly. Due to the Corona virus, almost the entire economy was paralysed worldwide within a very short time, borders were closed and the public life of a large part of the population was massively restricted. Still until now, people were asked to stay at home if possible and keep social interactions to a minimum in order to slow down the spread of the virus. This has resulted in drastic changes in public life in the city.

In this paper I try to analyse and portray the noticeable changes in my direct environment through photographs and photo-elicitation interviews.

Situation

I live in Zürich on Seebahnstrasse in a settlement of the Jugendwohnetz (Juwo), called Seebahnkolonie. More than 300 young people live there in apartments with 2-3 beds, mainly students. Many are usually at work or at university all day. Since the apartments are relatively small, many residents usually spend their free time outside the settlement. The settlement is located in the pulsating district 4 of the city and there are many leisure activities in the immediate surrounding. This means that the settlement itself is relatively quiet. One could almost say that it is a sleeping settlement. The inner courtyard is hardly used, and one rarely sees anyone lingering on it. The large, communally used roof terrace is a little more frequented, but nobody has been spending energy to design it and make it more comfortable. One would only find some old and sometimes broken tables and chairs.

Change

This has now considerably changed due to the corona situation. Suddenly more than 300 young people are stuck in a confined space all day long and cannot move around the city as usual. Slowly but surely, I have noticed that an ever-increasing proportion of urban functions are developing within the settlement. I realized that young people quickly became creative and found ways to adapt. The settlement offers a lot of potentials and space for design, which is now slowly being recognised and used. On different levels, the inhabitants are appropriating the available space and shaping it to their benefit. The settlement is transforming from sleepy homes to a lively community.

Method

The photos of the rooftop and the home offices are all taken from the same perspective to be able to compare them with each other. The photographs are free from individuals. This decision has several reasons. On the one hand, I want to protect the privacy of the residents. On the other hand, I find it interesting to draw attention to the development and appropriation of the space through the traces left behind. It shows physical changes that last for a longer period of time. This is also one observation I made, for instance that interventions are conceived in a much longer-term perspective than in the past.

Question

How does a settlement adapt to the changes of the Corona virus?

Home Office

Working from the Bedroom

Although nobody can go to the office or to the university, work continues diligently. Many tasks can be done comfortably from home. Everything is conducted online and digital. Lectures are streamed, meetings are held via zoom, tasks are distributed via e-mail. Since the apartments have only a limited number of rooms and in most cases all of them are occupied, everyone works from their bedroom. Work is done in jogging trousers. Coffee breaks take place with the roommate on the small balcony. All you need is a table, a laptop and an internet connection.

Home Office

Selection of individual “offices”



6.5.20 - 14:36 Appartement A



6.5.20 - 14:43 Appartement A



6.5.20 - 15:13 Appartement B



6.5.20 - 15:25 Appartement C



6.5.20 - 15:37 Appartement C



6.5.20 - 15:43 Appartement C

Communal Areas

The Rooftop

The roof terrace forms the common core of the settlement. It extends over the entire length of the building and is directed towards the inner courtyard. The architecture alone creates a sense of community, as everyone shares the same view. It is accessible from every staircase and every resident has access to it. For some apartments it is a substitute for a balcony (ground floor), for others it is an extension if the own balcony does not offer enough space. Everybody has the same rights on the roof terrace, and nobody has personal claim to a certain section. Nevertheless, different zones are created and maintained by individual parties, but ultimately everything can be used collectively.

The inner courtyard

The inner courtyard is densely overgrown. An approximately 4 meters wide path leads to the house entrances and frames the green zone in the centre. There are old, tall trees, some of which have already grown beyond the height of the settlement. With their leaf canopy they provide a lot of shade, which has an influence on the soil quality. In many places it reminds more of a moist forest soil than a well-tended meadow. The arrangement of the trees and shrubs creates several zones and places. In these you can retreat and are relatively unobserved.



19.4.20 - 11:02

Cozy corner



19.4.20 - 10:57

Hammock



19.4.20 - 10:55

Tabletennis



19.4.20 - 10:54

Wall-art



19.4.20 - 10:51

Room for development



19.4.20 - 10:49

Table for five



19.4.20 - 10:47

Outdoor living room



19.4.20 - 10:45

Table for two



19.4.20 - 10:44

Garden lounge



19.4.20 - 10:42

Fitness studio



19.4.20 - 10:41

School bank



19.4.20 - 10:39

Beach chair in the green



19.4.20 - 10:38

Slide



19.4.20 - 10:37

Corner bench



21.4.20 - 21:29

Cinema



19.4.20 - 10:30

Staircase clothes exchange



19.4.20 - 11:47

Barbeque



21.4.20 19:27

Flea market

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19.4.20 - 12:04

Park



19.4.20 - 12:04

Balance training



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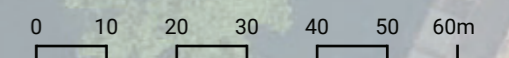
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Seebahnkolonie

In these days public life is very restricted. Most of the time people don't leave their homes and settlements except for shopping or a short walk. As a result, the city and the functions used by the public are shrinking to a very small area. Settlements become mini cities and take over part of the functions of

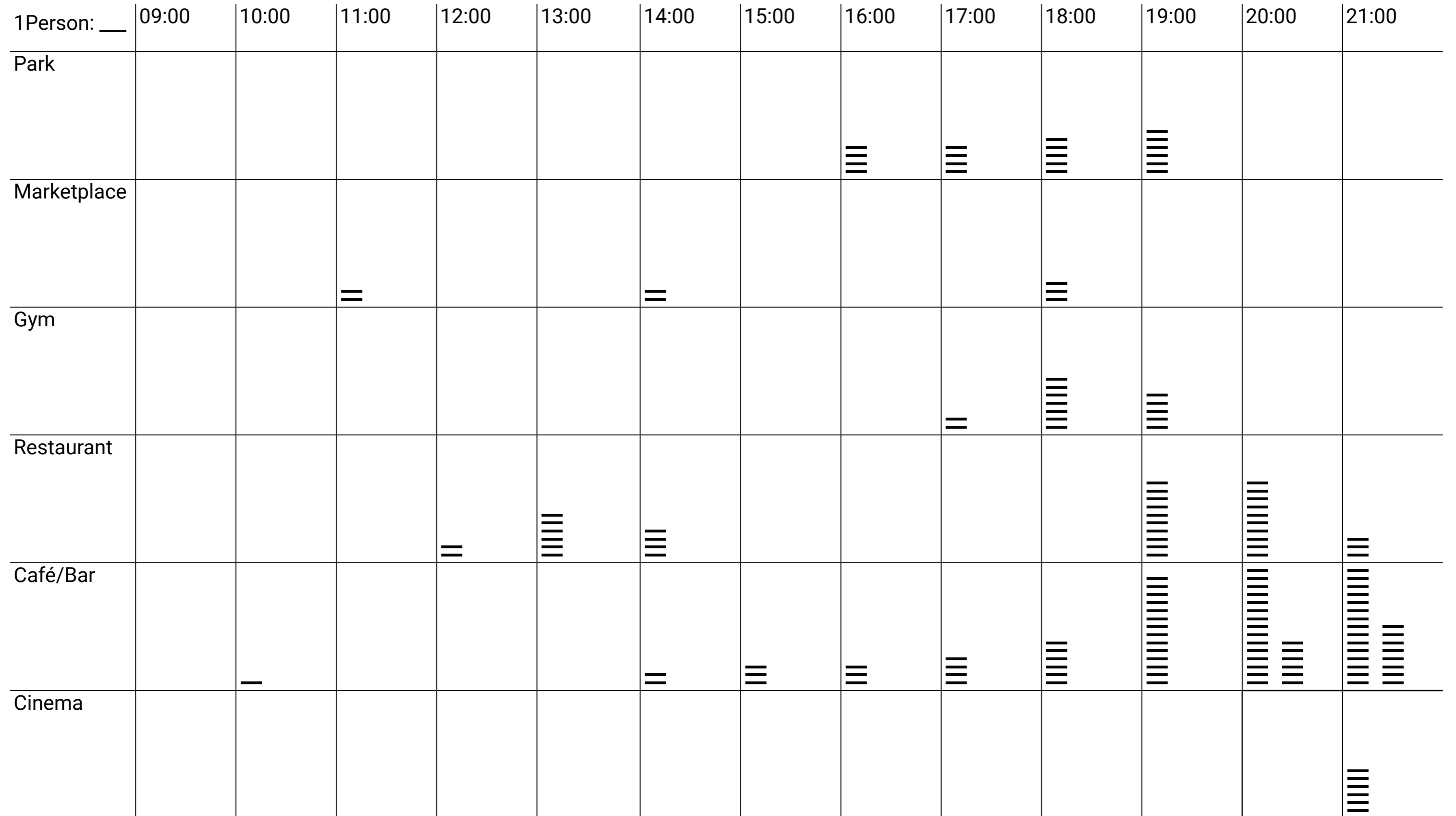


-  Inside
-  Outside



One day observation

Thursday, 07.05.20, 09:00-21:00 - Weather: Sunny, 22°C



Interviews

Photo-elicitation

In my work I want to show how life has changed within the settlement where I live in times of corona virus. Because a large part of the town is closed and we should stay at home if possible, I asked myself the question: Can a settlement function as an independent small town? Which functions of the city can be replaced and which not?

Therefore, I made a series of photos of the communally used rooms to portray them in their current state.

Since I unfortunately have no photos of the state before Corona, I am dependent on my memories.

To get an objective view I asked 3 inhabitants of the settlement about their experiences and memories. I have chosen these people because they have lived in the settlement for different periods of time and therefore may have a different view on the development during the last weeks. One's my roommate, the other two are friends of mine who live next door.

I selected a couple of images, where you can see most transformations as alternative functions of the city. First, I gave them a short introduction about my work and a little time to look at the pictures, then I asked them some questions.



Cozy corner



Fitness studio



Beach chair in the green



Cinema



Flea market



Park

Interview 1

Name: MS
Gender: Male
Age: 25
Occupation: Student, Environmental Engineer
Resident since: December 2017
Date: Thursday, 14.05.20
Place: in his kitchen

SB: What do you think about these pictures?

MS: A lot has changed. It's taken on more form and it looks like you're more concerned about how to settle in. The gym equipment is new, which probably comes from the fact that you can't go to the gym anymore because of Corona and people have adapted. Exactly the same thing you see with the cinema.

SB: Because I don't have any photos from the time before, I depend on memories and that's why I want to ask you: How did you perceive it before?

MS: Before, and also for several years, the set up was much more temporary. You might have organised an evening with a few friends and furnished a little, but because you knew you wouldn't be up here every day, you always dropped that a little bit.

SB: How has life in the settlement changed?

MS: Apart from the physical things that have been added like cinema, gym, etc., what I noticed most is that there has been a lot more social interactions. As a small group, we also got to know new people with whom we don't normally have such contact and now we also meet a lot more. It seems to me like in a small village, where you can have quite a lot. There is the roof terrace, the inner courtyard, you have different sports facilities, accordingly there is a lot of space where you can exchange ideas and experiences and therefore the settlement lives much more. In the past, you hardly ever saw anyone in the courtyard and if you did, it was rather an exception. Before it was really more of a place to live and spend your free time somewhere else and now through this situation you learn to appreciate what you have and actually realize the potential that the

settlement has to offer. I understand other people who would like to get out again, but we have almost everything with our courtyard and roof terrace to spend a nice summer. That means we are no longer so dependent on other parks or places in the area.

SB: Why wasn't this potential recognized earlier?

MS: I think because you had a lot more possibilities before, maybe you chose a nicer lawn or a meadow where you have more space. The roof terrace is a bit of a mystery to me, why it is still not furnished in the way one could imagine. But just because the possibilities are limited, one perceives more what one already has in the immediate vicinity.

SB: What do you miss most that the settlement can't offer?

MS: (thinks for a long time) Hmm, so we can actually do a lot inside the settlement. I can't think of anything concrete that I would miss the most. Maybe what I miss a little bit is that you can spend an evening in larger groups without having to pay attention to the distance between each other. If you consider that it gets hotter and hotter in summer, I could imagine that I would like to have a swim in a pool.

Interview 2

Name: SH
Gender: Male
Age: 25
Occupation: Civil Service, myclimate
Resident since: December 2019
Date: Thursday, 14.05.20
Place: In his living room

SB: What do you think about these pictures?

SH: Well, the first thing that comes to mind is the gym. It's completely new, we've never seen anything like it here before and it was put together in direct connection with corona. I see the same thing with the cinema, which is also due to the fact that the cinemas are currently closed. You can see that people are slowly looking for alternatives for certain activities that they can't do because of corona, and by improvising they convert the given spaces.

SB: How did you previously perceive the rooms shown here?

SH: Hmm, much emptier. I can't say directly how much of this was affected by the virus, because our corner, for example, was a project that we had wanted to do for a long time, but we probably didn't have the time to do it, which we now have much more because of corona. I could imagine that people had such ideas for a long time, but they just didn't have the time to do it, which they now have and can realize their projects.

SB: How has life in the settlement changed?

SH: Well for me it's also a bit of a special situation because it's my first year in the settlement. That's why I can't say what life was like here a year ago. But because of the fact that the people are much more on the roof terrace, it comes to much more interactions. Maybe otherwise you wouldn't have seen these people so often, because they would be somewhere else in the city. But because people have to stay at home, you see them much more often and therefore automatically have more social interactions, even if it's often just a "hello - bye".

SB: What do you miss most that the settlement can't offer?

SH: Yes, so what I miss most is to go out for parties. Even parties with several friends and colleagues are not possible at the moment. Sure, you can do it on a small scale, but it's also something that you don't have a good alternative to in the current situation. And even when I see the picture of the cinema, I also notice that I miss going to a real cinema, I always liked going to the cinema. Even if we have found a good solution here, it is not the same.

SB: How long could you last in this constellation or when would it get too cramped for you here?

SH: It's still difficult to say after these two months. Logically, I'd like to be able to meet more people. But I could hold out and be satisfied here for another 3-4 months. You still have everything you need here.

SB: Do you think our settlement is special or can you imagine that it is similar in other settlements?

SH: I know of several examples and in the end, it simply depends on whether you have space available like a roof terrace or an inner courtyard where you can realize things like a small cinema or something similar. But if you don't have a balcony or a roof terrace you have no possibility to change this. But I can imagine that comparable settlements look similar to ours.

Interview 3

Name: JO
Gender: Female
Age: 24
Occupation: Social worker
Resident since: March 2020
Date: Thursday, 14.05.20
Place: In her kitchen

SB: What do you think about these pictures?

JO: That it's creatively designed, in the places available, and that they've taken advantage of the space with the things you need that you can't get right now.

SB: You only moved in here a few weeks before the lockdown, so you can't compare it that well with before, but can you say if you perceived a process in the time you were there?

JO: The way I experienced it before, it was just nice to have a place in front of the apartment and the terrace that you used from time to time. Now in quarantine it is just used much more intensively, and many have time and motivation to invest in it and do something nice in it.

SB: How do you perceive the social interaction in the settlement?

JO: I think there is little interaction. The few you see are greeted in a friendly way, but there's also not much coming from my side either to change that. In general, you try to avoid other groups as much as possible. That's probably why one is probably even more inhibited at the moment. You notice that you help each other out if you need something, but in the end, everybody is a little bit busy with his own life and does his own thing.

SB: What do you miss the most that the settlement can't offer?

JO: Definitely a football field. You could play a little bit in the courtyard but in the end, you just don't have the space, the goals and the players.

SB: What do you appreciate the most that can be done in the settlement?

JO: I think the coolest is the cinema. That is a very big added value. With a few friends and outside with loudspeakers, on a bigger screen it is even more emotional than at home on the TV. I think it's almost a little bit nicer than real cinema, because you're a little bit more private and you can talk as much as you want and you also have a view. That's why I think it has clearly replaced the cinema. Through the plight and improvisation something very beautiful has been created, which under normal circumstances might not have been possible. You can certainly continue to use this after the quarantine.

SB: How closely is this development related to Corona? Would it perhaps have looked like that under normal circumstances?

JO: I think 90% of the changes are because of the lockdown. I think otherwise it would have gone on much longer and I think that a lot of ideas come up when you spend a lot of time together and you start talking and fantasizing. The plight supports creativity and because we have a lot of time now, a lot of new things come up.

Interview conclusion

What I found interesting, is that all interviewees had a different focus. Even though they are all in the same group and in the same situation, they experienced the situation slightly differently. For example, one thinks that social interactions are rarer these days while someone else experiences quite the opposite. What they all have in common is, that they all think that the space in the settlement has changed a lot. In that case it supports my observations and analysis in this special time. This helped me to strengthen my point. On the other hand, would I have interviewed more people, also from different social groups, the result could have been more diverse than it is now. But what this tells me is, that even if you are restricted to a relatively small space to share together, everybody has its own experiences.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to try to give an answer to the question of how the settlement has adapted during this time. With time I became more and more aware that the answer will be very personal, because every person perceives the situation differently. Through the interviews I have conducted, I have seen different perspectives, which has helped to formulate a more objective answer.

In general, it can be said that each person has felt a great change in the common life within the settlement. The fact that the radius in which one moves has become much smaller for everyone, means that they live much closer together and there is a more intensive use of the spaces that are still available. What I find nice is that many people are so positive in this time of crisis and carry this energy to the outside world. Because you are limited in your everyday life, you become much more aware of what you have and see the hidden potential. An important reason why so much energy is flowing into the design of these rooms is probably due to the fact that everyone now has more time than before.

All residents enjoy life in a vibrant city. Especially in our neighbourhood there is a lot going on and we take advantage of all the possibilities that are offered to us. If these possibilities are gone, we still have the need to be part of the city. That's why I think many people have become active and creative to look for alternatives within the possible framework. Fortunately, we have so much space that we can appropriate and shape to our needs.

Another factor for the strong change was certainly the nice weather. On many days it was extremely warm and sunny, which is why many people stayed outside and spent a lot of time on the roof terrace and the inner courtyard. I doubt that it would look the same if it wouldn't have been such nice weather.

This work was done as part of an elective course at ETH Zurich. Offered by the Chair of Sociology of Prof. Dr. Christian Schmid, supervised by Sandra Guinand.