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Open Gallery

Reinterpreting the "granny flat"

Extend, add a new level, or split up differently: most houses have hidden potential for new ways to use them - perhaps as a multigenerational home.

July 22, 2013, Jürg Zulliger (text), Marcus Gaab / Trunk Archive (photo)

The Arn family's property extends over 2,300 square meters and is situated in the central region between Bern and Solothurn. The wind rustles through the treetops, and birds chirp merrily. It seems as if time has stood still here. Traditional "grandparent" homes are common in these parts. But there are contemporary interpretations of the "granny flat principle" here too. Erika Arn found the upkeep of the house and garden too arduous. After her children moved out it became too big for her alone. Her two sons resisted selling the lovely property, however, preferring to keep it in the family.

From a single-family house to a multigenerational home

A small architectural competition produced a clever solution. The single-family home designed by the architect Peter Bühlmann of Solothurn in 1968 would be renovated with energy improvements, but otherwise remain as it was. After all, it reflects the region's architectural culture, with steel, glass and concrete reminiscent of modern architecture in the style of Mies van der Rohe. The plot provides ample reserves of land, so the Arn family had a new wooden pavilion built. The addition is unobstructed and designed as a flat-roofed single-storey building made of wood, with glass panes all around. It looks friendly, light and transparent.

A comfortable distance

This is now Erika Arn's new retirement home, and one of her sons has moved into the main house. He lives there with her daughter-in-law and two small children. It is just the right amount of closeness and distance: "I don't have to slip into providing daycare," says Erika Arn. "Nor do I expect the young ones to provide me with home care."

"In Switzerland there are more than 800,000 single-family homes," says Mariette Beyeler, an architect from Lausanne and author of the highly acclaimed book "Weiterbauen" (Keep Building). Most homes are designed for families with parents between 35 and 50 years of age, but in fact they are used over a much longer time period. As most Swiss homes are getting on in years they are often occupied by just one or two people. Almost every third person between 65 and 80 years old, and one in five over 80, lives in a single-family home. That may be nice, says Mariette Beyeler, but "very often the basic structure of these houses could be far better utilized with just a few interventions. The needs of older people can be taken into account and space created for the younger generation." Most houses have countless options for putting another building on the property, attaching annexes, or adding extra floors.

What do you need to consider if you want to make a multigenerational home out of a single-family house? "It's important to plan pragmatically. Don't assume everyone wants to live in very close quarters," says Mariette Beyeler. Even if parents and children share a house, the architect designs a

two-family concept exactly as if she were designing units for external rental. This requires, for example, two separate entrances concealed from view if possible. It is equally important to have your own private outdoor space, either on a terrace or in the garden.

Flexible condominiums

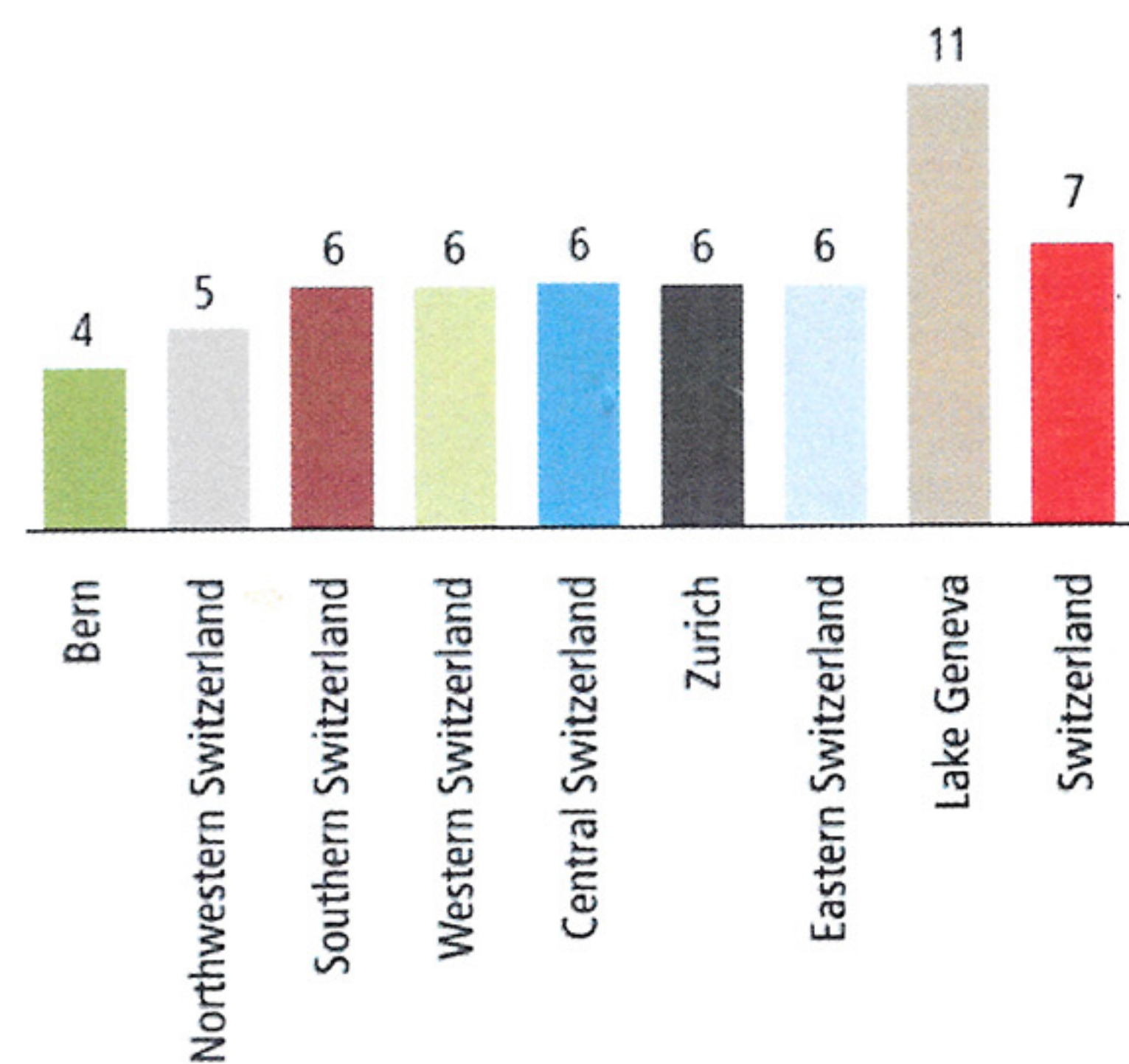
Condominium units in a multiple family dwelling are another situation, if extensions cannot be added below or on the sides. It might seem more difficult to reorganize these buildings to accommodate different life stages, but Mariette Beyeler sees a way to tackle this issue: flexible condominiums. Such buildings have just one apartment on each floor instead of several. And the staircase should be mounted outside so that each floor can be accessed from two separate entrances. If, in addition, the interior walls are not all supporting walls, flexible adjustments can be made later for subletting or conversion into a multigenerational home. This kind of architectural concept could soon prove a true "house of the future".

The market

Prices are likely to rise further

The real (inflation-adjusted) transaction prices of condominiums rose sharply again in all regions of Switzerland in 2012. The average national real growth rate was over 7 percent, driven primarily by the transaction price increase of 11.6 percent around Lake Geneva. At 6.7 percent Zurich and Central Switzerland demonstrated average growth, while even the laggards in North-western Switzerland and Bern posted roughly 4.5 percent. We expect significantly lower growth rates for the year 2013, despite the favorable financing conditions and continuing high demand for real estate. A normalization of interest rates will be needed for any price corrections, however.

Growth 2012 (in percent)



Source: Wüest & Partner; UBS WMR

Converting existing buildings is also financially interesting when compared with a new construction in a similar location. The UBS "renovation" mortgage offers special financing conditions. In addition, UBS rewards energy-efficient renovations before December 31, 2013, with a cash bonus of 2,500 to 8,500 francs.

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