



1

(x) Rear of the Kirchenweg building, overlooking a public park (2) Michael Müller, CEO of Ledermann (3) Alfresco eating at one of Seefeld's many restaurants

B
PROPERTY/ZÜRICH
Office job

One of Switzerland's smartest property firms helped improve a once-unloved stretch of Zürich. Now Ledermann has tackled its most ambitious project – developers everywhere take note.

By *Matt Alagiah*
Photography *Noë Flum*

Anyone looking for a chic yet understated new address in Zürich would do well to start their search in Seefeld. The area – a narrow strip of the city running along the eastern bank of Lake Zürich – is close to the centre of town but feels a long way from the hubbub; it's well connected to public transport and has some of the city's best restaurants, bars and cafés. Most importantly, it has some of the smartest apartments to be found anywhere in Zürich.

As recently as 20 years ago Seefeld was a virtual no-go area, blighted by drug addicts, crime and poverty. While successive mayors battled to turn the district around, a portion of the credit for its transformation has to go to Urs Ledermann and the property firm he founded in 1979: Ledermann Immobilien. "Mr Ledermann saw the potential of this area as a residential quarter," says Michael Müller, the company's CEO, who looks after the day-to-day running of the business now that the founder has taken a step

back (though he remains company president). "He had the entrepreneurial courage to invest in the area but he didn't simply buy real estate here: he developed ideas, converted buildings and changed the properties."

The company now owns and rents out dozens of properties across Zürich, along with a few outside the city, but it has always focused its attentions on Seefeld. And it is here that Ledermann, Müller and the team have just completed their most ambitious project to date: converting a former company headquarters into 23 high-end apartments and an adjoining office building.

The property, located on Seefeld's Kirchenweg, was already of significant architectural interest. It was originally constructed in 1967 to a design by Haefeli Moser Steiger, one of the most important Swiss architectural practices of the 20th century, and until recently it was the Zürich base of industrial association Swissmem. Ledermann bought the property in 2010 but took



2



3

its time in deciding what to do with it. “It’s a very intelligent building,” says Müller, standing in front of the edifice and looking up at its uniform white-concrete skeleton. “It is incredibly flexible. During the concept phase we considered various uses and found it could have worked as a school, bank or hotel – or we could have kept it as offices.”

However, he adds, “from the outset we were convinced that this site had to be used for *living*”. The reason is obvious: the building is on a quiet backstreet and on one side overlooks a tranquil park dominated by rolling lawns and a beautiful copper beech tree. Such a prime location is a rare thing so close to Zürich’s city centre.

An early potential stumbling block was the fact that the building was under *Denkmalschutz*, or historical protection. To make sure the conversion was handled sensitively and convince city authorities that the company was serious about the architectural heritage, Ledermann commissioned



3

Zürich-based architect Tilla Theus. “Theus is a specialist in working with historic buildings,” says Müller. “And she’s an admirer of Haefeli Moser Steiger. This created a lot of trust.”

Theus approached the task with characteristic care and attention. “The process of transforming the building proved to be a unique challenge, both inside and out,” she says. “Before making any architectural decision I had to take a careful and detailed look at all the potential solutions.”



1

Unlike offices, flats don’t need much parking space so these areas were turned into gardens for ground-floor residents; apartment buildings also need fewer corridors so several of these were taken out and the newly gained space given back to the apartments. “Offices don’t need outdoor spaces but apartments really do,” says Theus. “So I made an effort, even in the competition phase, to get approval from the city for balconies overlooking the park.”

The result is 23 truly jaw-dropping apartments. The structural limitations that Theus had to work around have only added to their character. For example, 30-year-old Cedric has four supporting pillars running through his living room, which had to be left in place. They break up the space in an unusual way and act as a reminder that the building was originally made with rows of desks in mind. “I had to get used to it but now I like it,” says Cedric. “I don’t know anybody in Zürich who has an apartment like this. All the floorplans are a bit crazy.”

The Kirchenweg redevelopment has made waves across the city. It has demonstrated that new life can be breathed into an old building, that a beautiful structure can be protected and repurposed and that a successful adaptation is possible provided you have the right architect.

But the conversion, in a small way, also served to redress an imbalance that has affected the Zürich property market for years. The city has suffered from a glut of office properties



2



4



5

(1) View of Seefeld (2) School run on Seefeldstrasse (3) Zürich’s roofless property market (4) Kirchenweg apartment interior (5) Prime real estate (6) Original lifts at Kirchenweg (7) Ledermann’s Mainau 34 building (8) Kirchenweg apartment



6

How to characterise the Swiss buyer

Apartment dwellers in Swiss cities are different to your average buyers in other major European metropolises. Here, Michael Müller lays out some of the key considerations.

- 1. Access to public transport:** The Swiss buyer regularly takes the tram, train and bus, so wants to be close to public-transport links.
- 2. Access to the motorway:** He also values having a quick and direct route to the motorway, because every now and then he wants to get out of the city by car.
- 3. Outdoor space:** A spot for enjoying the fresh air is vital – either a terrace or a big balcony. The Swiss buyer likes cooking and eating outdoors and will often have a barbecue on the terrace or balcony. This relationship between indoor and outdoor is very important.
- 4. Low-level living:** Even though we’re seeing the number of tall residential buildings across Switzerland multiply, and even though they’re generally very successful, the Swiss buyer still likes to live near to the ground. He’s most comfortable in a building of no more than four or five storeys.
- 5. Traditional layout:** The majority of Swiss buyers are still a bit conventional and they think in terms of separate rooms. The kind of open-plan space you might get in a Manhattan loft is still uncommon here.

“Very few developers would dare to take on such a complicated and complex conversion”

and a dearth of apartments for sale, with sinking rents for the former and sky-high prices for the latter. Turning offices into flats makes sense and, although the Kirchenweg apartments are at the highest end of the market (the average price was CHF19,000 – or €17,500 – per square metre), they have helped the Zürich market achieve a more balanced split between commercial and residential space.

Here there is a lesson for city halls and developers far beyond Zürich. The trend towards flexible working and shared workspaces is well documented and could lead to an excess of office buildings in many cities; at the same time, urbanisation is creating a shortage of housing across the board. If more architects and developers were willing to approach such conversions, it could be a useful way to recalibrate our cities in the future. Sadly there are, as Theus puts it, “very few developers who would dare to take on such a complicated and complex conversion”.

Yet for Müller the experience has not proved to be so complicated that he would balk at doing it all again. “We would like to realise more projects like Kirchenweg,” he says. “But the biggest challenge is finding suitable properties in the area for a reasonable price.”

In the meantime, he and his team of 16 are going to be busy transforming the rest of Seefeld. The company has a few more large projects in the offing: an apartment building on Hammerstrasse will be ready this autumn; a conversion and redevelopment on Dufourstrasse will be completed in September 2018; and Müller expects to receive building permission later this year for a redevelopment on Geranienstrasse. All three are in and around Seefeld. “You can expect quite a lot more from Ledermann,” says Müller. — (M)



7



8