



According to Mathis Güller, an urban area must correspond to the dreams of society, and not to the urban planner's ideas.

# “Lively is desirable”

**The Swiss architect and urban planner Mathis Güller is the creative mind behind the conception of the future district “Kuebebiërg” on the Kirchberg. In the present interview he talks about the “powerful identity” of the city of Luxembourg and the necessary claims of the public sector towards the market.**

Interview by Anna-Lena Würz

**In the annual report of the Kirchberg Fund one can read the following quote from you “Whoever builds a piece of the city, to a certain extent also shapes society“. What exactly do you mean by that?**

As an urban planner you expand, add to, complete a living environment that already exists. In other words, urban space is a space of opportunities in which people settle and live together in a certain way. This naturally results in an expansion of urban society as a whole. This is a very demanding and beautiful task, but also a challenge that requires a certain degree of modesty. After all, it is not a matter of giving one's own ideas an abstract form, but rather to create a scope for design that corresponds to the dreams of society, of the society concerned.

**What is the identity of the city of Luxembourg and how should this be taken into account in urban planning?**

Luxembourg has a very particular and also very strong, powerful identity. What I particularly like is how city has developed from and within the topography: with the plateaus and the valley landscapes of the “Grund”. This setting is characterized by a relatively small scale and a high walkability, which correspond very well with the human being. Orientation is very easy and one can quickly get from the lively urban spaces to the more quiet recreational areas. At the same time, the interconnection with nature is also very strong. These properties make the

city uniquely human and exciting in terms of quality of life and ease of use.

**The capital city, to use the words of Mayor Lydie Polfer, is experiencing a “solid growth.” In terms of urban planning, how can one cope with the resulting pressure to build more densely?**

This growth should not threaten the original quality and form of the city. I think that Luxembourg has started some sort of urban experiment on the Kirchberg plateau some 30 to 40 years ago with this motorway-like access road. Since then, it has become clear that there is a risk of uprooting inherent to this approach. If you're not careful, new urban structures can become detached from the existing urban fabric. Growing does not simply mean to build more, and more densely, on the same limited area of land, but it may also mean that we have to think about how the overall structure of the city can expand and be improved. Other medium-sized European cities are increasingly polycentric in structure, which means that they have, in addition to the existing city centre, a number of more recent subcentres, which are very closely connected to each other by public transport. Thus, the core city does not have to bear the entire pressure of growth alone.

**To which extent should the public sector intervene in the creation of more housing and to which extent should that be left to market forces?**

On the one hand, of course, this is a question of social mixity: we must



On the “Kuebeberg” (in the picture the future “Porte Frieden”), urban places with a village-like character are to be created, inviting people to linger.

succeed in creating housing for all social groups at the same time. This certainly requires a certain intervention by the public sector - for example, through quota and social housing. On the other hand, the public sector must also create framework conditions to ensure the quality of the housing offer. The market needs the development opportunities that the public sector makes available to it, but it also needs room to manoeuvre. Today, we are confronted with great challenges as climate change. I believe that the public sector can and must demand a great deal in particular with respect to these challenges, and especially in terms of the quality of the living spaces created. It should not be too reluctant in its demands.

**The Kirchberg area has changed immensely in the last 60 years and should soon become a lively and popular neighbourhood by means of the construction of residential buildings. How can such a mix of working and living succeed in your opinion?**

I believe it has a lot to do with whether you feel comfortable and can move around with ease in the place where

you live and work. It's a question of short distances, walkability, comfort and quality in outdoor space. The fact of being able to walk from where you live to where you work is absolutely critical for mixed use urban developments. It is not enough to plan residential buildings next to office buildings, if in the end everyone takes the elevator to the basement, gets into their car there and drives somewhere else where they work or live. In the end, it's all about creating places. And a place is popular and desirable when it is busy and lively.

**You and your team are currently designing the future neighbourhood of Kuebeberg in the north of the Kirchberg Plateau. What challenges do you face there?**

With this project, we are developing a very large agricultural area, with a focus on inward development rather than outward development. The Kuebeberg has been intensively farmed as a productive agricultural space and is therefore not particularly biodiverse. The first major challenge is to put in place an urban development model in which this agricultural space is not ever more sealed, but rather where the

quality and biodiversity are increased - nota bene in direct harmony with the nature reserve which exists all around. The second challenge lies in the ambition of creating a bustling urban district: Is it possible to create places that have a certain quality of life and the role and character of a centrality at the same time? Restaurants, stores and cultural facilities could create urban places of village-like character, where people will like to live and hang out.

**How can you integrate nature into the city instead of ousting it? One can feel that the topic of sustainability is in the core of your thinking ...**

Indeed, it is! Usually, one would assume that nature disappears when city is created and vice versa. I believe the space in our urban areas has become too scarce to hold on to this dichotomy. Today, cities are a lot about planting more trees, making better use of surface water and generating more space for pedestrians and cyclists. All these aspects, which are obviously linked to the needs of the inhabitants, can be easily linked to the re-introduction of nature in the urban

space. That is why we intend to, for example, let the fingerlike extensions of the forest from the Gréngewald and the Mäertesgronn reach deep into the urban space. It is precisely these fingers that provide a major part of the answer to those needs. I believe that one of the important levers in this whole story is the question of the mobility strategy.

**In which way?**

The street design as practiced in the last few decades has clearly stood in the way of integrating nature. Until now, the street space defines the pattern of the city. The very much sealed urban surface is the result of a mobility strategy that is very car-based. I think it will be indispensable to come up with a different approach where the car is tolerated in the urban space, but does not dominate it. I am particularly concerned that the small-scale nature of Luxembourg City be preserved, because in order to overcome our dependence on the car, distances must remain short and public transport must be highly efficient in interweaving the central

urban areas. Fortunately, Luxembourg is doing a great job in this respect.

**Your office Güller Güller architecture urbanism is based in Zurich and in Rotterdam. Which of the two cities do you like better in terms of urban planning?**

I would not want to put it like that. The cities correspond to two opposite concepts that are very exciting in their complementarity. In Zurich, the aim is to consolidate the urban space. In Rotterdam, after the bombing 80 years ago, the focus is on building up and further developing the urban space. The confrontation of the two central dimensions of urban development is incredibly inspiring for us. To return to the question of housing density: How dense can a city be and still remain livable? The answers in Rotterdam and Zurich are different. In this respect, it is also important for Luxembourg to find the right answer for itself.

**Lecture and debate**

In 2019, the Kirchberg Fund commissioned the internationally renowned Danish urban planning firm Gehl to develop a concept to revitalize the public spaces of the Kirchberg Plateau and make the district as a whole more accessible and sustainable with alternatives to the car-based mobility. Architect and urban planner Mathis Güller of Güller Güller architecture urbanism is currently working on the urbanization of the Kuebeberg neighborhood in the north of the Kirchberg Plateau. On July 4 at 6:30 p.m., Güller will discuss his visions of the new district with architect and urban planner Solveig Reigstad von Gehl. This will be followed by a debate moderated by Dr. Florian Hertweck, professor of Architecture at the University of Luxembourg. The language of the event, entitled “Tools for better public spaces in higher density districts”, organized by the Kirchberg Fund with the support of the “luca - Luxembourg Center for Architecture”, is English. Registration by e-mail to [info@fondskirchberg.lu](mailto:info@fondskirchberg.lu).



“We want to let the fingers of the forest from the Gréngewald and the Mäertesgronn reach into the urban space”, Mathis Güller explains with regard to the plans for the “Kuebeberg”.