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A Funi for the Future


The editor reports on how a new funicular is part of a revitalised housing area.



In the late 60s/early 70s Switzerland was experiencing a housing crisis and at the time a development company run by architect Ernst Göhner was promoting the use of System-Built apartment blocks as one way of easing the situation. The company purchased the land of an old weaving and spinning mill that lay in a bend in the River Limmat in the Damsau area of the Aargau Commune of Neuenhof, with the intention to build the new community of Webermühle, featuring buildings using prefabricated concrete components. The area was only a short distance from Wettingen SBB station on the main line from Zürich to Baden, but the presence of the Limmat, and a series of high cliffs on the far bank carved by the river, meant that it would be of little direct use to the residents. The first apartments of the CHF10m development were completed in 1974, but for various reasons it was only in 1981 that the whole 368-apartment complex was finished. Sadly, due to poor estate management compounded by issues of dampness, lack of insulation, etc., which had come to characterise these System-Built estates across Europe, Webermühle gained a poor reputation.

By the mid-2000s it was realised that these properties had to be brought up to conventional Swiss residential accommodation standards. In 2008 the property arm of Credit Suisse acquired the development and worked with the Commune on preparing a master plan for the refurbishment of the apartments and the infrastructure. This long-term project required access to some 50% of the accommodation at any one time so as leases ended the new owners took possession of the properties leaving only 25% of the original tenants remaining when the CHF50m renovation works commenced in 2013. In this process the original properties were gutted to enable major repair work to be undertaken and new facilities installed. The exterior of the buildings was clad with modern weather resistant insulating materials and high-tech glazing installed. The original heating scheme was replaced with one based upon drawing up to 70% of the needed heat from the water of the adjacent

Limmat – a form of modern ‘ground source’ heating. Renamed Neue Webermühle the area will be as environmentally friendly as possible, including better connectivity to public transport.

A footbridge crossed the Limmat but access to the transport hub at Wettingen SBB required a climb up the steep, tree-covered, cliff face using a zigzag path that was only suitable for the fittest. The path was also unstable during periods of heavy rain. This access problem was seen to be a major barrier to providing good public transport access for Neue Webermühle, as many of the incoming residents would wish to commute using the SBB. As an integral part of the redevelopment it was seen as a priority to improve this link. The solution was to commission Inauen-Schätti in Schwanden (GL) to construct a 27m long electrically powered inclined plane funicular with a 10-person glass cabin. This installation, commissioned on the 15th September 2016, follows the alignment of a major water main through the steep forest, as it climbs the 21m-height difference in some 35 seconds. From the top station there is an easy 150m walk to Wettingen SBB. The installation’s lower riverside station is clad in blue glass, taking up the theme of water, whilst its top station (accommodating the drive systems) is clad in brown-green glass, the colours of the forest. For safety reasons the stations are CCTV monitored and very well illuminated at night. The automatic funicular can be used free-of-charge from 06.00 to 20.00 – outside those hours only Neue Webermühle residents can gain access with passkeys. These modern-style basic funiculars are now becoming common across Switzerland. Lacking the charm of the older installations they do provide a useful public service, as here where it is a key element in the regeneration of this area. With the opening of the funicular marking the completion of the project it is good to note that many former residents have returned to the new eco community. 

Editor’s Note. I would like to thank Ernst B Leutwiler for supplying technical details and photographs of the new funicular.