All About San Riemo
A Conversation with SUMMACUMFEMMER

Jolanda Devalle

San Riemo, model view. Courtesy SUMMACUMFEMMER with Büro Juliane Greb.

SUMMACUMFEMMER is a practice based in Leipzig, founded in 2015 by Anne Femmer and Florian Summa. Their acclaimed cooperative project San Riemo (2020), a house for around one hundred inhabitants, is arguably one of the most important housing projects produced in recent years. San Riemo is a strikingly innovative scheme, featuring a field of neutral same-sized rooms, where kitchens replace corridors and the lines between apartment units are blurred. But beyond the architectural floor plan lies a world of challenges and a great deal of luck. In this interview, Summa and Femmer shed light on what goes on behind-the-scenes while designing and building experimental and affordable housing. From navigating fire safety regulations and other restrictive codes and standards, to decibels, radiators, and not-so-legal room partitions, the design of housing is for SUMMACUMFEMMER an open-ended exercise, for which there can be no "recipe."

Interviewees: Anne Femmer (AF); Florian Summa (FS)
Interviewer: Jolanda Devalle (JD)

JD*: I'd like to start by asking about how the San Riemo project came to be: How did you come to design this project and what opportunities are out there for young practices like yours?*

AF: Well, I guess for Germany—and for us, of course—this project was quite special because it gave young practices the opportunity to participate in an open competition. It was open to anyone, and since we knew our architect friends Juliane Greb and Petter Krag, who work in a way similar to us, we decided to participate together. There aren't many—actually, almost no—opportunities like this. It's different from Switzerland, where you can become an architect quite quickly. Here, we have to be part of a chamber, usually work for two years, and collect references and credits. At that time, we didn't have any references which would have even qualified us to take part in a bigger competition. And then there was Ko-

operative Großstadt, who had enough trust to give young architects the chance to actually build a rather large project. And, as you probably know, this wasn't just a one-time thing. It was the first project for the cooperative, but not the only one. They later held more competitions, where again, young architects won. That's really special—maybe even unique.

Anne Femmer and Florian Summa. Courtesy SUMMACUMFEMMER.

FS: What I find interesting is that when we talked to Kooperative Großstadt, they said they wanted to create opportunities for young architects, but they didn't see it as a program just to push young practices. They were simply looking for the best and most interesting solution, open to anybody. In the end, the fact that young practices won was really just by chance, since the competition was completely anonymous. In the second competition, larger offices also participated. That's something we really appreciated about our client. They were very trusting, simply looking for the best possible solution for the project.

AF: They also wanted to set an example for the German architecture scene—promoting open competitions, or maybe even competitions in general—because many cooperatives avoid them. There's always some excuse, whether it's time constraints or cost. But San Riemo was developed in parallel with a much larger housing complex. Both projects bought the land at the same time, and they also had to be completed at the same time. So they wanted to prove that it was possible to execute a competition-based project within the same timeframe—which, in the end, we did, even though they spent a lot of time on the competition process.

FS: What I also find quite interesting is that, in the end, the ambitions of the cooperative itself led to a competition. Kooperative Großstadt at this time was mostly made up of architects with a lot of experience in both Switzerland and Germany. Many of them had worked in well-established offices and on interesting housing projects. Any one of them could have built this project themselves. But it was very clear to them that they didn't want to do that. Instead, they deliberately stepped away from the classical role of the architect and tried to find a new position within the city of Munich. And I think that's an interesting shift, which we could also talk about later.

Exterior views of the San Riemo cooperative. Courtesy Florian Summa.

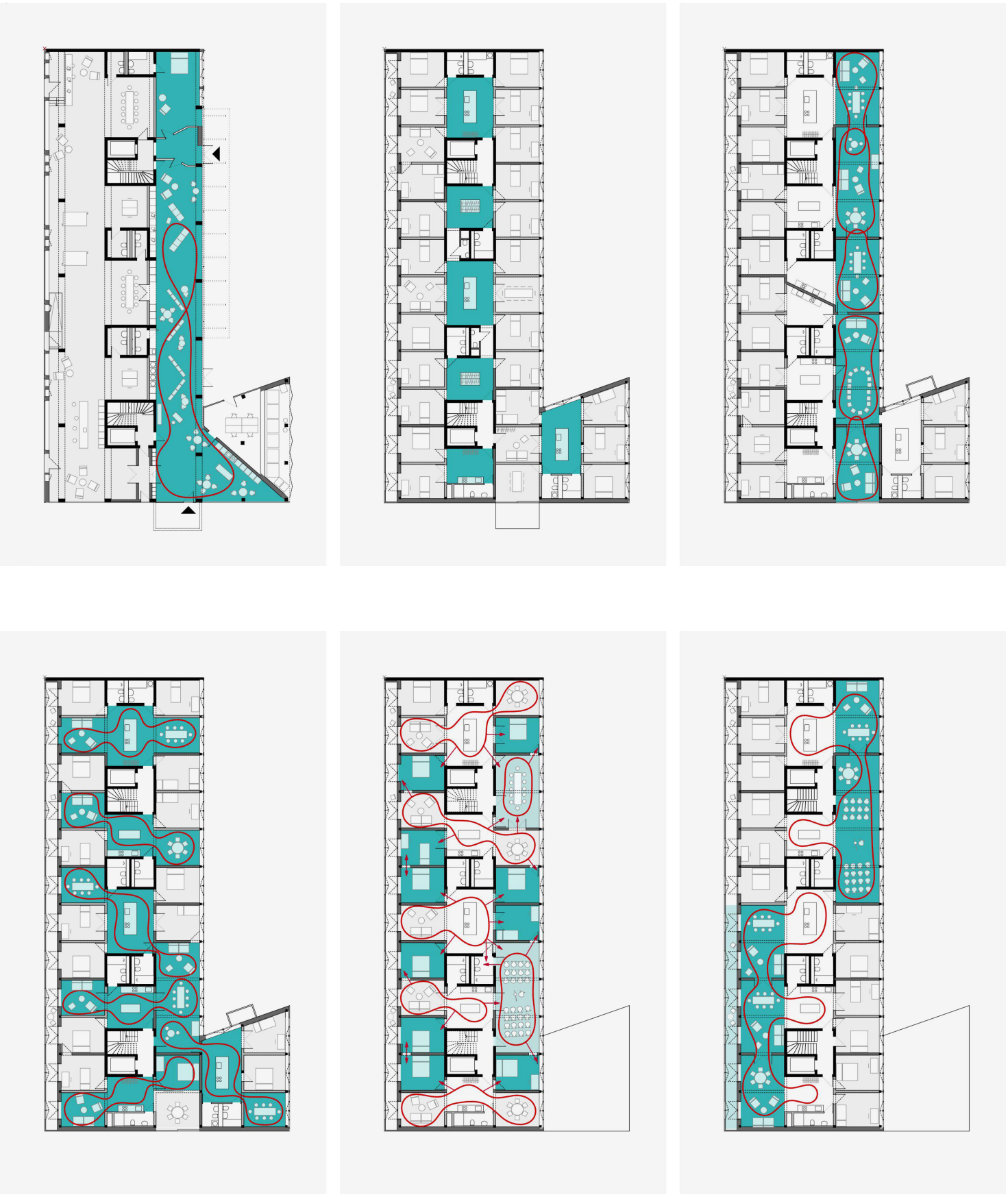
JD: *How much was already programmed and defined by the brief provided by the cooperative?*

AF: They had a very clear and specific description of different forms of living together, dividing them into three categories: "basic" living, "co-living," and "nucleus" living. But the details were so specific that we felt, in a large building like this, you can't predict exactly how many people will fit into each category. So, we felt the need to generalize it. The grid concept definitely came from us, but the idea of sharing, flexibility, and adaptability came from the cooperative. It was something they were really dedicated to and wanted to implement. Some of the architects—though not many—are actually living in the building now, so they both initiated the project and became part of it.

FS: It was very interesting reading the brief because it was clear that it had been written by architects with a clear vision for how a building like this could work. For example, one of the jury members of the competition was a film director, and he introduced the concept of the "breathing house"—seeing the building as a kind of living, breathing organism. That's something a filmmaker or an architect might imagine, not a typical investor. But this idea was never spatially defined; they left it entirely open to the architects in the competition. That's what made it so interesting—and also challenging—to have architects as clients. They didn't write a brief that had a clear spatial outcome; instead there was a certain openness to it. If I remember correctly, there was even a sentence in the brief motivating the participants to critically question the program of the house, if necessary. So, as Anne said, we generalized the concept and took it a step further, ensuring that all these different forms of living could be possible throughout the entire building.

JD: *How do you envision the role of architects in projects such as these? What are your thoughts regarding taking on a greater role in the process of developing affordable housing?*

AF: I think this presents a significant opportunity for us to open up our profession and step outside our traditional roles. Many of the good examples that we like involve architects who go beyond their classical responsibilities. I'm not sure how much we can do by solely focusing on the design aspect. I think you have to go into the political side as well or become an active figure in the development of land and buildings—and take the initiative, let's say. This is quite an opportunity because, as professionals, we can convince others to start—having the knowledge that is necessary for that. So, I see this as an opportunity we should seize.



Floor plans of the San Riemo Cooperative. The centrally-placed kitchens allow for various forms of living such as shared flats (nucleus living), large residential groups (co-living) and individual apartments (basic living). From left to right: Promenade; WG-Wohnungen; Familienwohnungen; Durchwohnen; Nukleuswohnungen; Filialwohnungen. Courtesy SUMMACUMFEMMER with Büro Juliane Greb.

FS: This also raises the question of what actually makes a building an affordable project. We might feel somewhat limited as executing architects, even when initiating a competition to transform a housing project into an affordable one. So, I think the real power lies elsewhere—not where we draw the apartments. That's important because, in the first place, the client needs to allow us to draw apartment plans like these. This was possible in the Kooperative Großstadt projects, specifically in the San Riemo project. Many other clients would have dismissed our idea of having these kitchens in the middle as a circulation space—that would have been the end of the story before we even started. I think that's why it's so important to have this knowledge of architecture, not just during the design phase but much earlier, in the phase of establishing these structures.

JD: *Is having an intentional community a precondition for designing this sort of housing scheme?*

AF: I guess the group we initially started with, the cooperative, might have been a bit special; they had specific ideas. However, this is quite a large house with almost a hundred inhabitants, which creates a broad mix. Not everyone initially agreed with all the concepts of sharing. We also recognized the need to include a significant number of what we might call "normal" apartments. It's still a somewhat luxurious concept, as you can share but don't have to.

So, there are intermediate forms. Many of the shared spaces between the apartments also serve as circulation access. We could promote this concept by highlighting that we were saving on staircases and lifts, for example. There was also a financial or economic incentive to share these spaces. If you want to utilize square meters that would otherwise be taken up by a staircase, these rooms could be rented out at half the normal rent. This approach helped convince a larger group of people who might not typically embrace an alternative lifestyle.

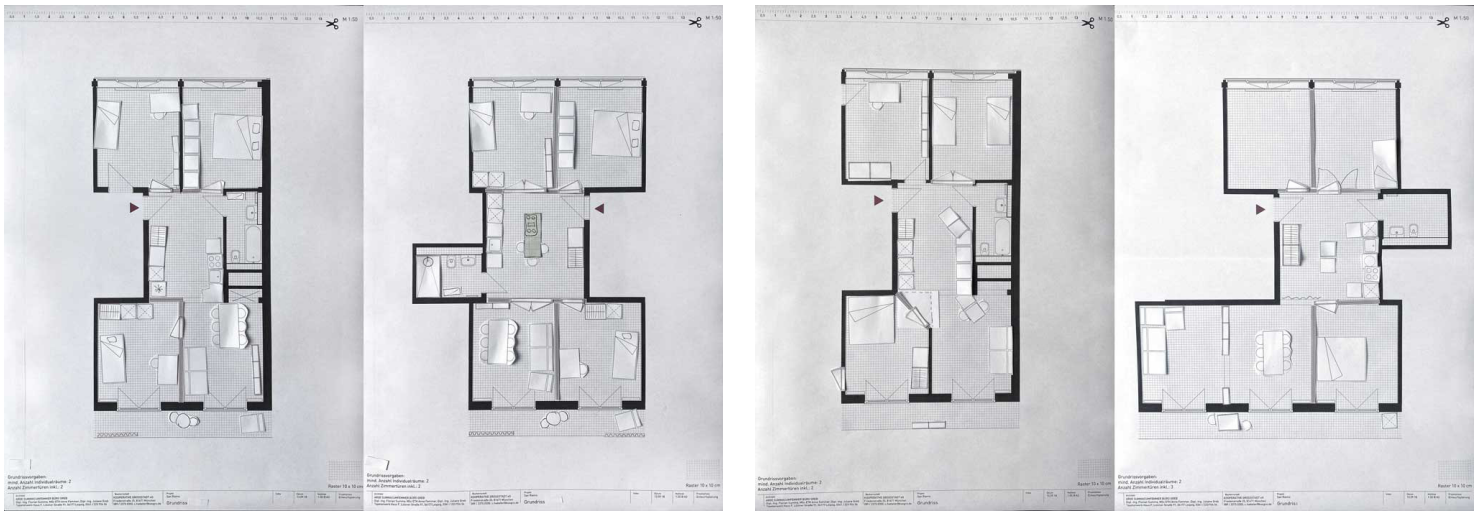
FS: I think it's also important to discuss who it was that we worked with during the design process. It wasn't until later that we started talking more intensively with the inhabitants: once the general grid was established. Up until that point, the cooperative was very importanWWral level, and they, in turn, did a lot of communication with the clients. It was incredibly helpful. Sometimes we didn't fully agree, but they managed to facilitate really open discussions with the inhabitants, and they would filter that feedback back to us. This process worked well because of their well-managed approach.

JD: *So once you established this matrix, how did you go about opening up the possibility of adapting to the different needs of the inhabitants?*

FS: Well, I think we realized that we had such a strong structure and layout, with the kitchens in the middle and neutral rooms that could connect to larger spaces. We decided that if the rule was that walls always needed to be within this grid, beneath these beams, we should have a discussion. We sent blank plans to the residents to gather their thoughts. Some were desperately looking for a high number of closed rooms, which is quite rare in Munich; for example, families often want separate children's rooms. Some families opted for a small 14-square-meter living room to accommodate additional children's rooms, while others preferred a more open living arrangement, where the bed is almost part of the living room. This flexibility was something we wanted to leave to the residents.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, everything went digital, but it was really nice to receive all their ideas. Some residents went quite deep into the design, specifying where everything should be. We were also able to offer some architectural advice, suggesting that if they moved a door slightly, the space would feel wider. This small adjustment phase was a relief for us, as we saw that it would allow for so much flexibili-

ty in the end. We incorporated this information relatively late in the building process, particularly regarding non-bearing walls, which we could still change late in the process. For example, even after one wall had already been built, we were able to connect two apartments by removing that wall to create a very large apartment. This wasn't something we had planned initially, but it felt obvious in the end.



Plan variations discussed via e-mail with the future inhabitants. Courtesy SUMMACUMFEMMER with Büro Juliane Greb.

FS: When you walk through the site, it becomes quite hard to tell which apartment you're in. Everything looks similar, and as I mentioned in the lecture, it appears simple on the plan, but there are a lot of regulations working against that openness. We spent a lot of energy trying to navigate these regulations; for example, many doors have closing mechanisms for fire safety, which create additional barriers. Having a very good fire consultant was incredibly helpful; he was the best we've worked with. He managed to make things possible, despite how impossible the fire safety concepts initially seemed. He was convinced and argued effectively for our approach, which ultimately made it work.

AF: Yes, also the strict regulations for funded housing are not really helpful of course. They sometimes include paragraphs for experimental housing, but obviously, clusters or large apartments are often not part of them. Additionally, special standards for something like storage rooms present their own challenges.

JD: *Could you speak more about the kind of challenges you had to overcome in terms of regulations and code in order to make the plan layout of San Riemo feasible?*

AF: One example would be the funding guidelines requiring that if you build four individual rooms, at least four people must move in, even if these four rooms are designed with a smaller square footage typically suitable for only three people. As a result, in one case, we had to tear down a wall that had already been erected, while other families built their walls after the final inspection in order to obtain a higher number of individual rooms.

FS: In the end, I would say that the regulations and norms in Germany are much more complex than in Switzerland, and everyone feels negatively about them—including us. However, these regulations also presented a

kind of friction or resistance that motivated us to work with them. You need to understand these regulations anyway, so we aimed to understand the regulations and then make something out of them. We tried to apply this approach to every part of the project. We don't want to romanticize the restrictions, but in this project, they ultimately helped us by forcing us to work creatively within constraints.

But we also don't want to fall into the trap of thinking we've found some kind of "recipe" that we could now standardize or replicate. There's also a very pragmatic reason for that: we're skeptical that there's a universal solution to the housing challenges of the next century. The needs are so context-dependent. What worked with this client in Munich, for example, will definitely not work everywhere.

JD: *On your website you write that you are interested in an architecture that is "continuously built upon and never really finished." Can you elaborate more on these notions of resiliency and flexibility in housing design?*

AF: For us, the freedom to build and change continuously is something very precious. In our own house, we appreciate the ability to add rooms, move things around, and invite more people to live with us. We hoped to pass on some of that same adaptability to the people living in San Riemo. This kind of flexibility is also a form of personal freedom—it encourages engagement with the space. We enjoy working with our hands, and this hands-on approach allows us to break out of the typical role of the architect. Here in our own house, we're not just architects—we're also residents and contractors. That kind of control over the process is a complete form of freedom.

FS: In the end, it's all about seeing architecture as an ongoing process rather than something static. But that process can take many different forms. For example, here in our house, we can directly shape and change the space ourselves, which leads to a more spontaneous, hands-on evolution of the architecture. In San Riemo, on the other hand, we knew we wouldn't be able to physically alter anything after it was built—there are too many constraints, from insurance policies to structural regulations. So instead, we approached flexibility strategically: we designed a grid framework that allows changes to happen over time.

There are also hybrid forms of this process. When we work closely with clients on smaller projects, for example, there's often a more traditional architectural dialogue—using models and plans—but we also try to involve them directly in phases of the building process. Sometimes we take part in construction ourselves, or we find ways to build alongside others.

JD: Beyond the floor plan, how did you treat details in the building so that they would complement and enable this scheme to work? I am thinking of the positioning and sizing of rooms, windows, and choice of material treatments, etc....

AF: One of the things we enjoy—maybe similar to pushing against certain rules—is working with details. There aren't many elements left in a project that we can manipulate without increasing costs, so we focus our attention on the things we can refine.

For example, take the windows in San Riemo. At first glance, they might not seem particularly striking, but they follow a specific logic. They are full room-height, without a beam at the top, which makes deep floor plans feel more open and spacious. We also made sure that, in some areas, the windows stretch from wall to wall, bringing in as much light as possible. These might seem like small details, but they have a big impact. They also make construction more complicated, but we think these kinds of precise adjustments are what give a space its generosity.

In our own house, another example is the oversized door panels that extend higher than the actual doorway. The house itself is relatively com-

Interior views of SUMMACUMFEMMER's home in Leipzig. Courtesy SUMMACUMFEMMER.

pact, but small design manipulations like these can make spaces feel grander. It's about finding moments where we can shape things and fully designing those elements.

FS: This also ties into the question of comfort and regulation. We like to be strategic—minimizing in some areas so that we can invest more in others—rather than applying the same average quality across everything. That said, we have to be careful with these discussions. In academic settings, for example, there's often a push to strip things down to the absolute minimum—reducing regulations, cutting back on comfort—all in the name of affordability. But in reality, residents often do have certain expectations of comfort. Acoustics is a good example. In theory, it's easy to say, let's reduce sound insulation to the legal minimum to save costs, but in practice, living next to a loud elevator shaft with just two decibels less insulation might have a real impact—especially at night.

So, while we're definitely interested in pushing limits, we also have to be precise about which limits matter and how they affect daily life. In the early stages of a project, clients are often open to reducing things, but as construction progresses, they start to realize what those reductions actually mean—whether it's warmth, noise levels, or spatial quality. Our role is to find the right balance so that what we push is still accepted and appreciated by the people who live there.

JD: *The plan of the San Riemo project reminds me of The House of Meanings (1970–72) project by feminist architect Susanna Torre, where she abolished the corridors and hierarchically sized rooms and replaced them with a field of neutral, equally sized rooms. Does the critique of domestic typologies play a role in your thinking?*

AF: Absolutely. We're very interested in questioning conventional standards and rethinking spatial norms. Of course, it's difficult to completely step outside of what we know, but we try.

For example, when I worked in Japan for three months, I saw how bathrooms could function completely differently. There was a house by Go Hasegawa where the sink was always outside the bathroom—why do we assume sinks have to be in a separate, enclosed space? That experience stuck with me. Similarly, in our own house, we use the bathroom in a different way. And in San Riemo, for instance, the door to the toilet opens directly into the kitchen. At first, this might seem unusual, but in the end, nobody really questioned it. It shows that some habits are easier to shift than we think.

The placement of the kitchen was another key decision. Instead of being a closed-off workspace—like in the 1950s model, where the kitchen was a separate domain for women—it sits in the center of the apartment,


Details of San Riemo interiors. Courtesy Florian Summa.



Different types of kitchens in the San Riemo cooperative. The kitchen is also a cloakroom, and a distribution space to all adjoining rooms. Courtesy Florian Summa.

open and visible. The residents also installed a larger communal kitchen right at the entrance of the building, which we love. Similarly, the laundry machines are placed in visible, shared spaces. These design choices make labor and daily life more social and integrated rather than something tucked away.

FS: Once you start working with these ideas, you inevitably find yourself in conversation with other architects exploring similar themes—whether or not that was the initial intent. It's interesting because while these field-like plans may start from different motivations, they often result in a kind of typology, even though the outcomes vary greatly.

We had discussions with Sophie Delhay, for example, and while her housing projects also deal with non-hierarchical layouts, they look and function very differently from ours. Similarly, architects like Anna Puigjaner and her office, MAIO, have experimented with communal domestic spaces in their own ways. So even within a simple framework—say, a 3x3 grid—the possibilities for interpretation are vast.

AF: But maybe also interesting is that though these schemes may now feel evolved, there's actually at least three examples that were just realized recently. So maybe there's also some sort of spirit or a new search for answers that comes up in this time that we're living in right now.

FS: Or these figures—perhaps not strictly architectural but more philosophically rooted—have become more present in architecture schools in recent years. We also discovered them step by step throughout our own development. For example, we didn't start with Dolores Hayden as a reference point for the competition, but in retrospect, we realized our architectural approach aligns with many of her ideas.

Similarly, we came across Sophie Lewis's book on the abolition of the nuclear family, which explores alternative, non-genetic forms of family.[01] When you read something like that, you start to think: Could this be translated into a spatial reaction? But these theories are often quite abstract—they don't dictate how something should look in reality. That's what makes it interesting: once a project is completed, you can start reading theories into it, even though they weren't necessarily the starting point. I don't think it works to begin with a theory and then build a project around it—it's more of a process where many things are in the air.

AF: And then there's also a long-standing non-academic tradition in places like Berlin and Leipzig—particularly in ex-squatted houses. My sister, for example, lives in one of these 19th-century buildings where they've organized a communal kitchen on the ground floor, and the rest of the house consists of individual rooms. No architect was involved in designing it—it simply evolved as a way of living. In Berlin, these housing models have been tested since the 1980s.

FS: Or take something as simple as having a bathtub next to the kitchen. When people see it in our house, they're often surprised, maybe because it looks more intentional or stylized. But in many older homes where there wasn't space for a separate bathroom, you'd find exactly that—a shower in the kitchen.

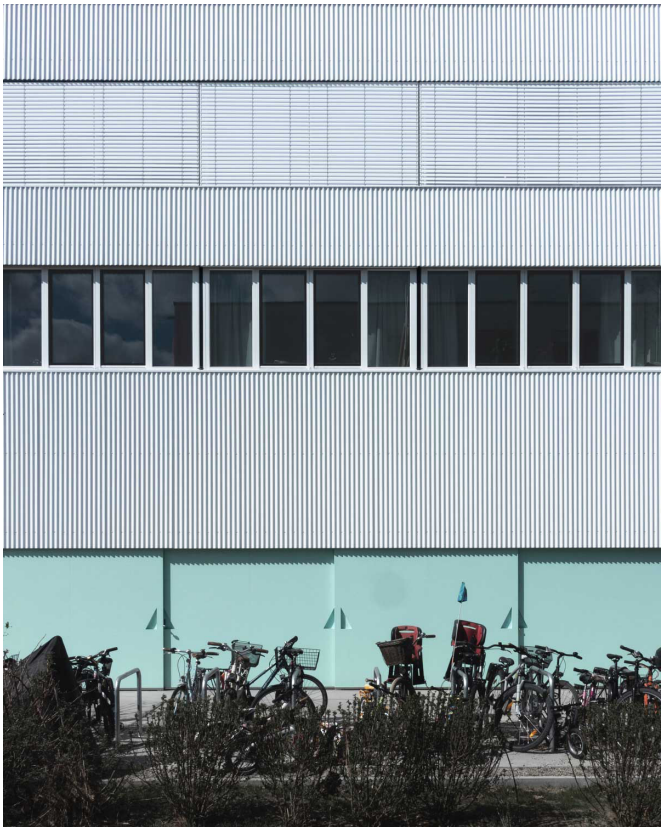
JD: *This reminds me of your choice in the San Riemo project to have the kitchen act as an entry, cloakroom, and circulation space: it is very interesting how this room addresses many functions and tasks simultaneously.*

FS: Yes, when we later spoke with Sophie Delhay, she mentioned a conversation where someone predicted that soon, living rooms as a typolo-

01 Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso, 2022).




Views through the units onto the kitchen acting as central access area. Courtesy Florian Summa.




Façade details of the San Riemo cooperative. Courtesy Florian Summa.

gy would disappear entirely. Instead, there would only be kitchens with large tables. I found that fascinating—the idea of completely abolishing the traditional living room in favor of large kitchens, where people work, gather, and socialize. It reflects how our ways of living are changing. Maybe the living room is no longer this romanticized place of relaxation that it once was. But at the same time, we never wanted to romanticize the idea of the kitchen either.

AF: What's most interesting to me is the overlap of functions. There are also studies suggesting that kitchens are increasingly becoming more of a representational space rather than a functional one—almost like a stage set—because people cook less at home and eat out more. So, in some cases, the kitchen exists primarily as a visual element rather than a practical one.

JD: *Going back to the plan. The grid and the modular field feature strongly in the San Riemo project. How do you feel about reclaiming repetition and sameness in housing?*

AF: Repetition is always an interesting strategy for us. It can create a certain sense of monumentality and universality, which we appreciate. But at the same time, the way the building sits in the city—how it marks the end of a block and forms a clear façade toward a square—contrasts with this structuralist utopia. We liked working between these two extremes: sometimes emphasizing repetition in the long façades to create a certain monumentality, while also introducing small exceptions—like the entrances and large ground-floor windows—to break monotony and adjust the scale.

FS: Repetition works especially well in larger-scale new-builds, where you can settle into a rhythm. But in many cases, particularly when working with existing structures, we start with a repetitional concept, only to quickly encounter the first necessary exception. At that point, the idea of pure repetition often dissolves.

If you look at the architecture of Flores i Prats, for example, you see a much looser, more flexible interpretation of repetition. That's what interests us: the ways in which repetition allows for deviation, rather than becoming a rigid constraint. We don't see repetition as a universal solution; it's not as simple as just repeating something and assuming it will work. Repetition can just as easily be restrictive, boring, or reinforce bad ideas.

JD: Outside the modular field of the dwelling units, the communal spaces—the ground floor, the rooftops, the lodge, the circulation spaces—stand out as spaces of exception and are more formally expressive. How did you approach the design of these spaces?

AF: Our goal was to give each of these spaces a distinct character, a unique identity. For example, when you walk into the yellow ground-floor hall, its design elements are inspired by other types of work environments. The loggia, painted green, serves as an in-between space, bridging the indoors and outdoors. In a way, we wanted to create deliberate contrasts, making each communal space as specific and intentional as possible.

FS: It's about creating a counterbalance to the large-scale repetition. As a resident, you might not even fully perceive the overall repetition because you only experience your specific part of it. But the distinct entrances, the unique courtyard—these elements break the monotony.

In the San Riemo project, we had a lot of freedom, partly because Kooperative Großstadt had already specified in the brief that the ground floor should be four meters high. That naturally made the space feel much more generous. They also asked for multiple communal functions—a

laundry room, a library, a café, and a workspace. Instead of dividing these into small, separate rooms, we decided to combine them into one large space. A small, twenty-square-meter café might feel cramped, but when it's part of a big, open lobby, the entire space feels more expansive. That sense of openness was something we were really interested in exploring.

Communal spaces in the San Riemo cooperative, including the residents' café, a communal launderette, and a large communal garden on the roof. Above: photograph by Petter Krag; below: courtesy Florian Summa.

JD: Going forward, what would you do differently and what are your new horizons in the field of housing?

AF: Currently, we have a smaller series of projects that we find interesting, particularly those related to cultural and collective spaces in Leipzig. Many of these projects involve reusing old industrial factories, but they are often illegal initiatives. We're working on three or four of them, focusing on small, almost invisible interventions—what we call a series of invisible architectures. Our goal is to appreciate what has already been built, as these communities have been developing these spaces for years. They've reached a point where they need to become official, so we're exploring how to legalize these projects with minimal interventions. Despite the challenges, it's exciting because they all serve as cultural spaces, like cinemas and large working studios.

FS: As a practice, we've learned a lot about these invisible elements, which often go unnoticed. For instance, in the San Riemo project, there are many behind-the-scenes aspects—like the heating system and the regulations regarding non-load-bearing walls—that might seem dull but are crucial. Understanding these elements is essential for architectural practice. Interestingly, we've had some interest from investors who want to replicate the San Riemo building for profit, which highlights the need for more housing models like this. However, the structure itself isn't the problem; it can be misused, especially when it falls into the hands of investors who prioritize profit over people.

AF: We're currently working on an existing building that will have a rooftop extension and another extension. This project is being initiated by a private individual in Bavaria, which adds complexity since it involves an existing structure. Expectations around building materials have changed since San Riemo; this new project will use wood, which we couldn't use in San Riemo due to cost constraints.

FS: While we're actively seeking new jobs, we enjoy the opportunity to actively build ourselves and experiment. It never feels like we're just waiting behind a computer for someone to hire us. In Germany, there seems to be a hesitance among people to take risks regarding new cooperatives, possibly due to the economic climate.

AF: You're referring to the economic crisis, but I'm not sure it affects us much because we haven't worked with commercial investors so far. We've been fortunate to have clients who are either establishing cooperatives or working in cultural or social fields. That's crucial; we will still have to see if we can achieve something meaningful within a commercially driven project. We might have to find new strategies.

FS: The concern is whether the San Riemo project was just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us, thanks to the cooperative's support. Realizing such projects often requires a good combination of factors and people who are committed to making it happen. It's a reminder that even for ambitious practices, luck plays a significant role in getting to build something. We've experienced that luck firsthand.

JD: *Thank you for your time with me today.*

AUTHORS

SUMMACUMFEMMER is an architectural office based in Leipzig, founded by Anne Femmer and Florian Summa in 2015. The cooperative project San Riemo was developed together with Büro Juliane Greb, from Ghent, Belgium, and built for the Kooperative Großstadt, Munich.

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