

A TALE

LP3's two houses in Oberweningen aim a subtle wink at gabled roofs in the vicinity.

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The houses can be seen as a subtle wink at gabled roofs in the surroundings.

'We assessed innumerable samples throughout the day and in various lighting conditions'



Various models made to test façade cladding are exposed to weather conditions outdoors.

Oberweningen is a small village in Switzerland: two handfuls of buildings scattered on gently ascending slopes. The landscape is beautiful here in the foothills of the Faltenjura range, as it is nearly everywhere in Switzerland. At first sight, Oberweningen is no different from neighbouring towns. With its white stucco houses and gabled roofs, the village isn't exactly known for its modern architecture. Until now, that is.

From the train station, it's a ten-minute walk to the site where L3P Architekten recently completed two houses. Standing close together, the structures resemble two dark cliffs on a hill. 'From a distance, they seem to meld with the natural surroundings,' says Boris Egli, a partner at L3P. 'It looks as if the building site has nothing on it but some sort of rock formation.' That may be the case, but the two dark blocks do arouse the viewer's curiosity. 'Our work often evokes strong emotions,' says Egli, 'sometimes positive, sometimes negative. There are no neutral opinions.'

His observation is understandable. According to the architect, the two roofs can be seen as a

subtle wink at gabled roofs in the surroundings. The project was developed in collaboration with the owner of the land, Fredi Duttweiler, who simply wanted to build 'something special'. Because the houses were erected first and sold later, the architects had total freedom.

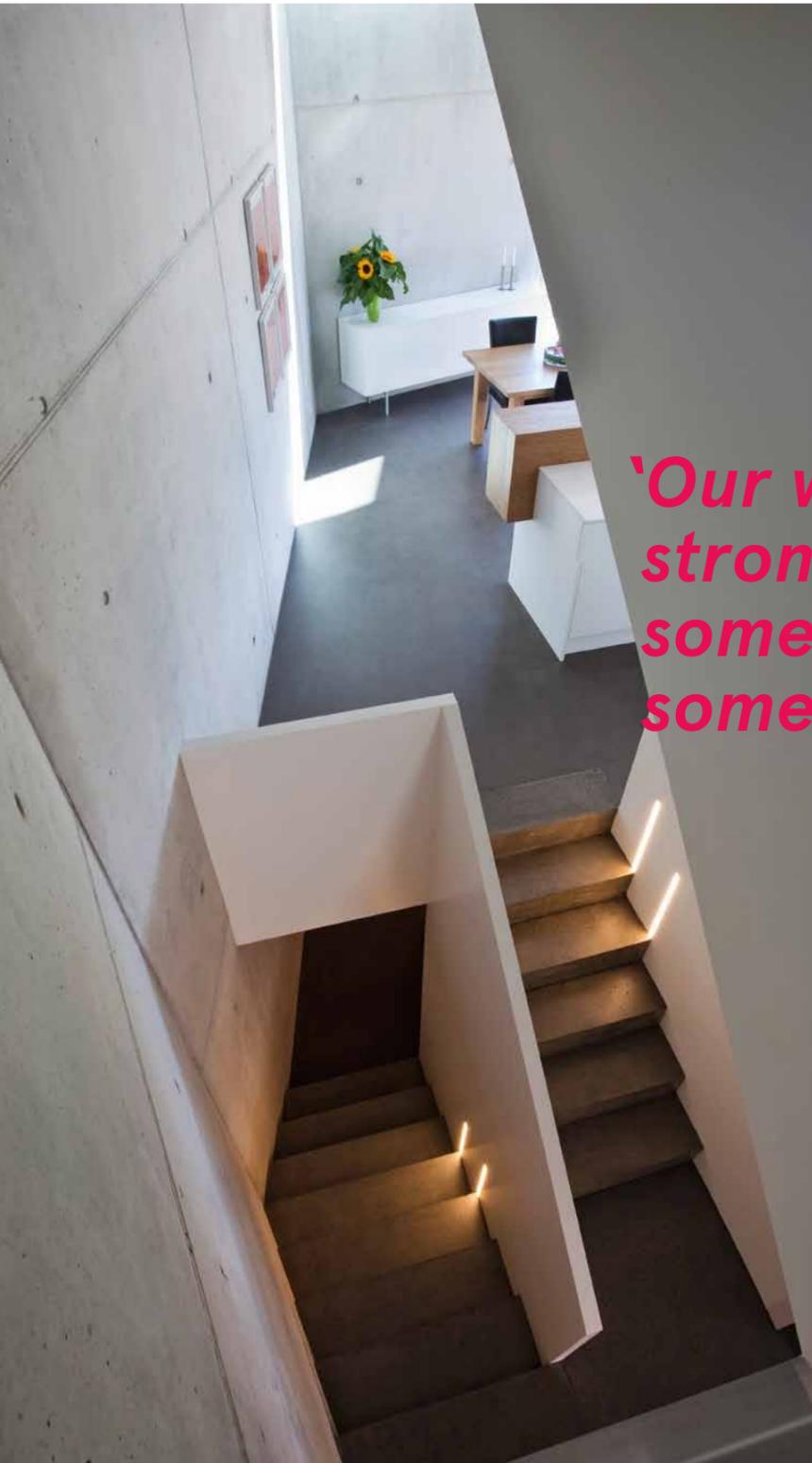
'We developed the project logically,' says Egli. 'When we started drawing, we saw that the plot was too big for a single house but too small for two detached houses.' A normal pair of semidetached houses would have led, however, to one unit orientated too strongly to the east and the other completely to the west. To achieve a greater sense of equality, the architects designed two dwellings, 'both of which profit from morning and evening daylight'. They divided what might have been a single volume into halves, each slightly shifted with respect to the other, and separated the two with a pool that features stepping stones.

The architects worked on the divided houses like sculptors. Rich diagonal edges and well-considered angles allow sunlight to enter both houses. Huge panorama windows frame views over >



A net prevents people from falling into the basement patio just outside the studio.

Kitchen and stairs occupy one large open space.



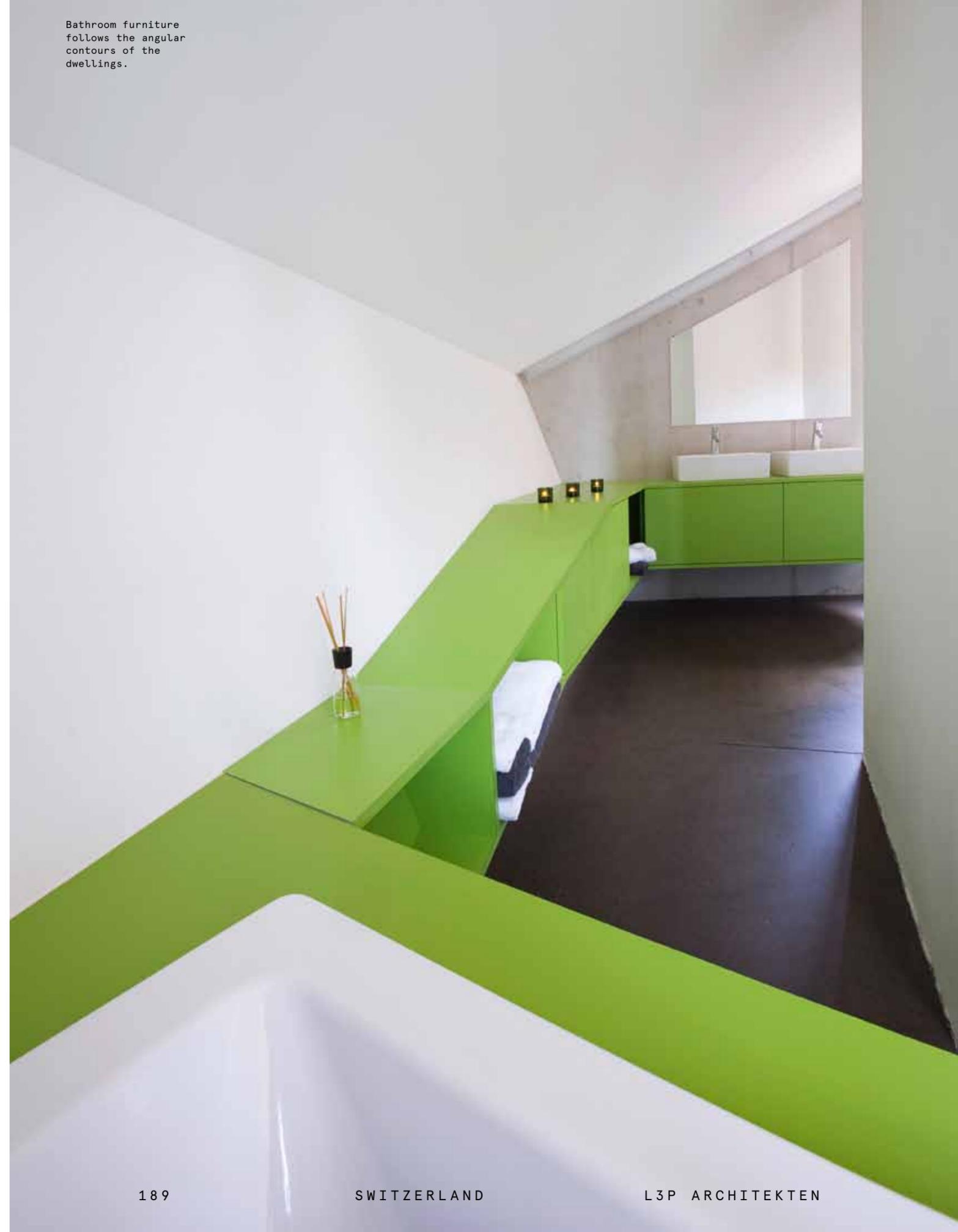
A custom-made cabinet separates the living room from circulation areas.

'Our work evokes strong emotions – sometimes positive, sometimes negative'

the Wehntal valley; here, too, the buildings don't get in each other's way. 'We planned them like Siamese twins,' says Egli. 'They're not the same, but they're very similar. Despite their different orientations, they are the same size and similarly built. We were reassured when the first buyer had a hard time choosing between the two. To us it meant that despite all the differences, the houses both have good qualities.'

At first glance, the façade looks as if it's been done in coloured exposed concrete. An apt assumption, especially in Switzerland, but the cladding is actually zinc-plated steel. 'Concrete was our first thought,' says Egli. 'But it would have resulted in a flat surface and been very complex in the roof area. For these unusual forms, we wanted an extraordinary material with a wilder, more varied effect – something that acquires a patina and changes colour in daylight. Initially, we weren't convinced that steel panelling was the right choice; we thought it might leave us with an optically fragmented façade. After making visualizations and a 1:1 model, we realized that a minimal seam width >

Bathroom furniture follows the angular contours of the dwellings.



would give the impression of a cohesive monolithic surface. This effect is confirmed by the fact that the façade is invariably mistaken for concrete.'

One of a kind, the façade was developed for the project in collaboration with Swiss metal artist Thomas Sonderegger, who was brought on board after the architects spotted his work at a fair. The appearance of the façade was tested in Sonderegger's studio. It took the artist 'years of trial and error' to perfect the phased chemical treatment he used on the zinc-coated steel panels, and he prefers to keep the details of the process to himself. Egli reveals only that 'Thomas made innumerable samples, which we assessed throughout the day and in various lighting conditions. We were immediately fascinated by how versatile and lively this material seemed to be.'

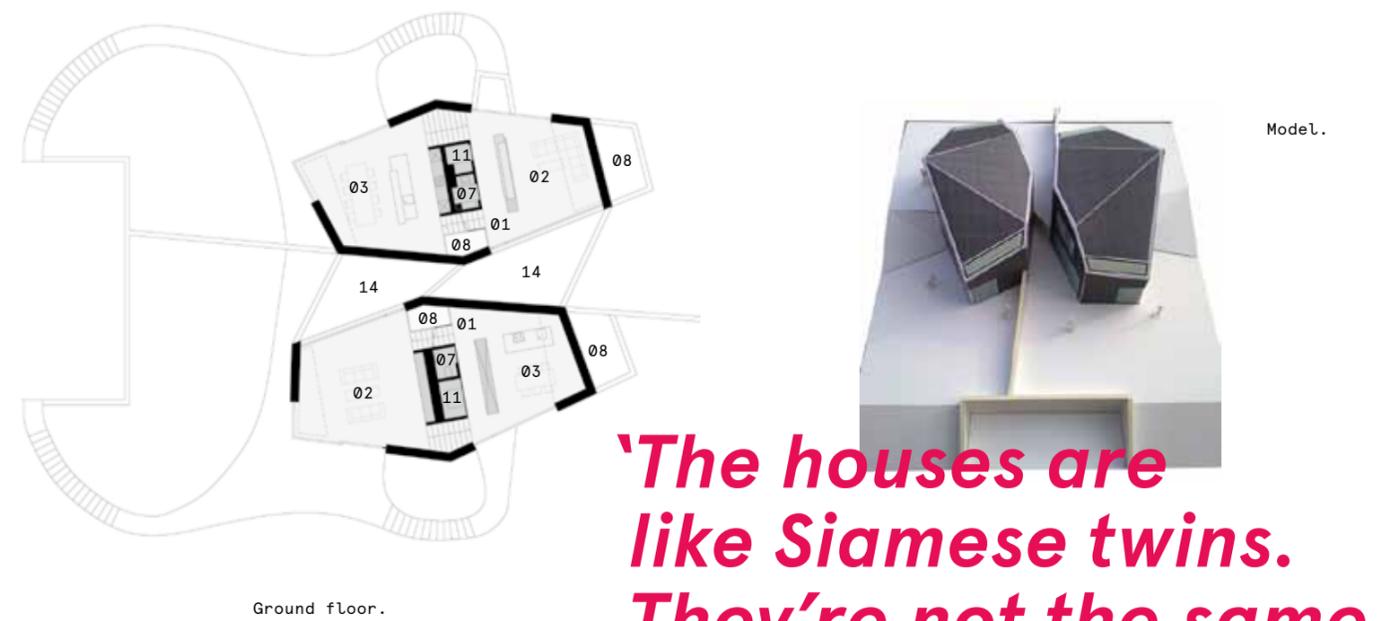
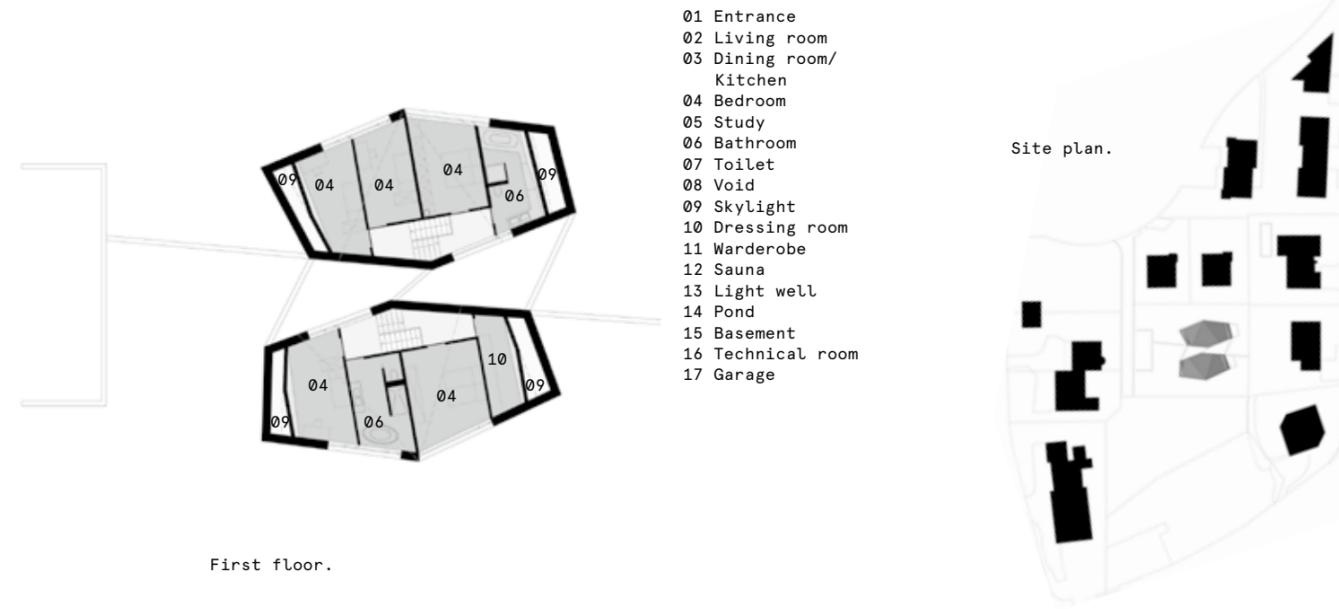
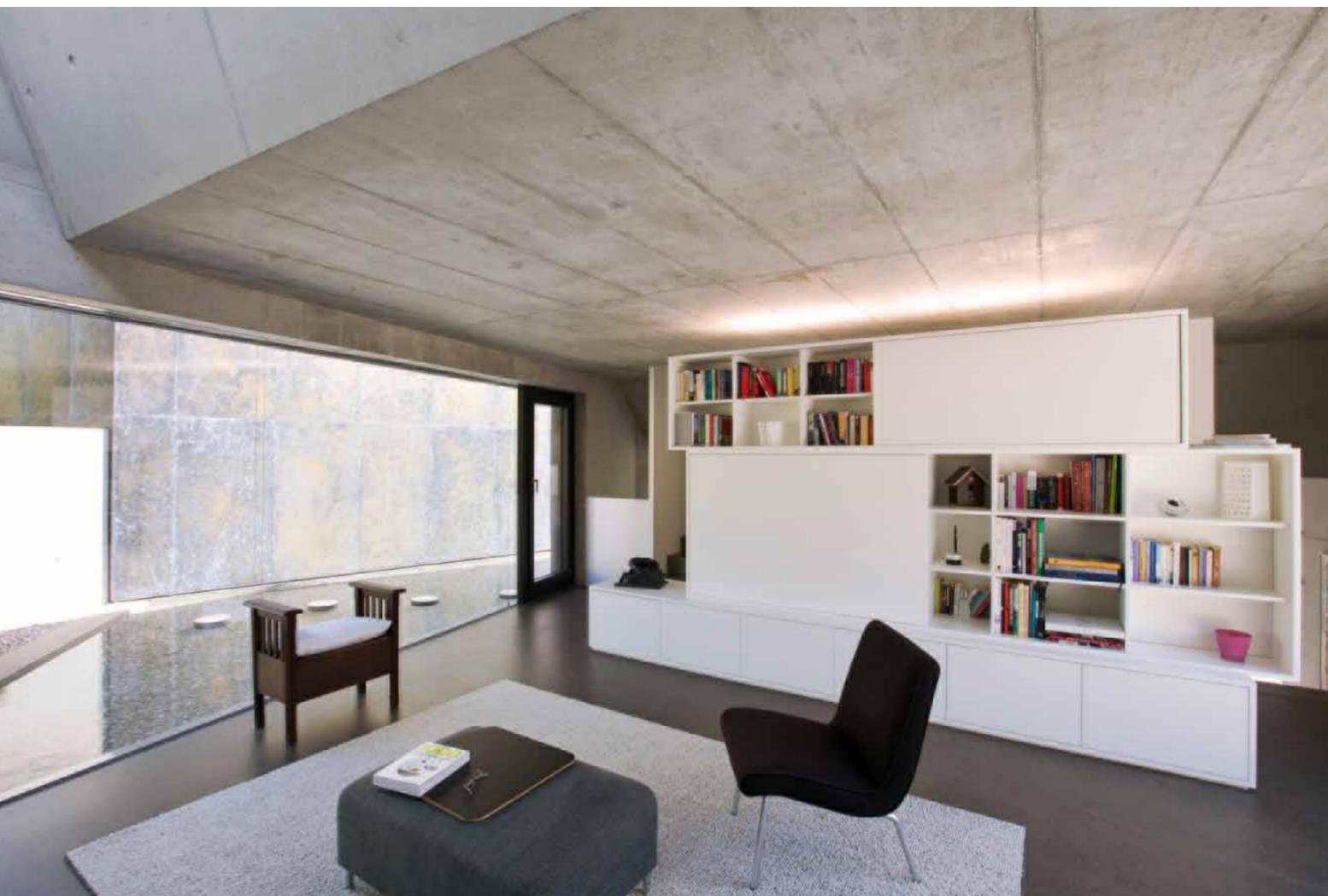
Indeed, the façade does react to different types of light and times of day, which can make it look beige, brown, dark grey or almost black. Its texture produces a strange perception of depth that breaks the light. Not at all smooth, the surface has a rather grainy appearance and seems warmer than we expect steel to be. And the colours will continue to

change, although no one knows quite how or when. Without a precedent, it's impossible to predict.

Changing colours and interesting surfaces are another reference to regional geology. Across the valley rise the foothills of the Lägern mountain range, craggy ridges of Jura limestone that is beige when freshly broken but weathers to become a dark anthracite or black. This connection to the mountains may be why neighbours have responded so positively to the project. 'Normally, when doing rural projects we run into problems with permits and need all our powers of persuasion,' says Egli. 'In Oberweningen, a place with no other modern buildings, the authorities were astonishingly open and even characterized our project as a "fresh wind" blowing through the village. We were also surprised by a lack of negative reaction from the people next door. The neighbour living on the slope above the houses said that when he looks over the two rooftops into the valley, he has the feeling that the original stretch of undeveloped land is still there.'

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A panorama window offers a view of the pool between the houses.



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