

**The Publicness of  
Architecture;**

**Radical  
Democracy**  
in Urban Space

Gabu Heindl,  
Eleanor Dodman  
with Liza Fior as critical friend

**Diploma 17**

*25,000 land owners (far less than 1% of population) own half of England.*

Guy Shrubsole, *Who Owns England? How We Lost Our Green and Pleasant Land, and How to Take It Back*. London: William Collins, 2019

*Land ownership accounts for over half of the total UK net worth.*

Brett Christophers, *The New Enclosure. The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain*, Verso, 2018

*Since 2000 the amount of homes owned by London Councils has fallen by 150,000 homes.*

[https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional\\_resources/housing\\_databank](https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/housing_databank)

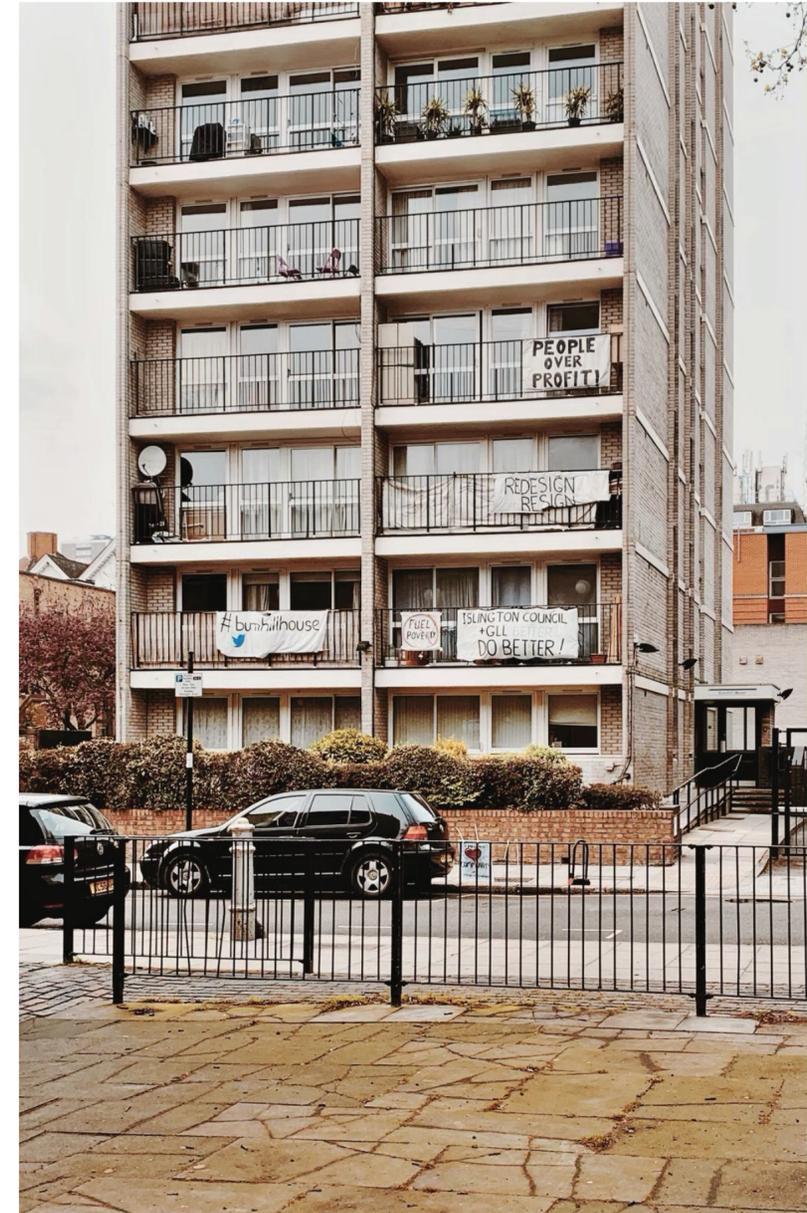
London is our site and Public-Private Partnerships are our leap-off point. This short acronym, PPP, has become iconic in the designation of neoliberal urban planning initiatives and the financialization of housing and public space. In Public-Private Partnerships, the public is increasingly and undemocratically interpreted as governmental institutions that delegate the responsibility of planning and design to private actors – those bolstering the generation and power of capital and embedding inequality.

### **What is the architects' role in all this?**

**The unit will give you the tools, support and provocations to work with the current state of neoliberal London and mess around with it.**

Diploma 17 will work within the purview of 'radical democracy', a term borrowed from political theory. Radical democracy sets out to re-democratise democracy itself in this moment of collective crisis. Through this lens, planning will be read as a 'setting-in-dispute' that hinges upon alliances between architecture and the popular agency of social movements and bottom-up initiatives that work to ameliorate democratic participation, climate justice, accessibility to public space and affordable housing provision. We will conceive of architectural agency as 'acting in public', designing public infrastructures and supporting the commons.

## **Introduction**



**First:** Most urgent tasks – “burning questions”. Our research focuses on and maps urban sites in which public infrastructures are taken over by private enterprise, e.g. in housing, public space, schools, (climate) care. We will exploit architectural representation and gain a critical understanding of the city they live in, its processes of gentrification, financialization, uneven development, and the involvement of architecture therein. As a parallel map the unit encourages students to read London as a site for critical architectural agency, in alliance with the popular agency of social/climate movements and bottom-up initiatives.

**Second:** Architectural agency in the political field – “just architecture”. Through this enquiry we will aim for in-depth-understanding of planning conditions, such as ground ownership/politics, the housing question, history and critique of democratic planning, Section 106 legal agreements. This research will aid us in mapping the dilemma of the limited range of architectural agency within the political field – yet at the same time reveal ever more options for architectural agency.

**Third:** Create forms in the face of their impossibility – “nonsolutions”. The results are test-cases of the agency of architecture, situated between methods of activism, unlearning some disciplinary habits and radical expert engagement. The projects employ architectural tools and skills, deeply grounded in the expertise of architecture, and at the same time may be *nonsolutions*: acting on the urgency of the situation, yet not denying the dilemmatic position we are positioned in. Such a *nonsolution* is nothing less than a well-crafted and represented architectural or planning proposal, precise and implementable, while keeping visible contradictions as well as contact zones for the agency of others.

# Term 1: most urgent tasks - “burning questions”

*“But if we apply to the present the lessons of the past, we realize that the reappearance of witch-hunting in so many parts of the world in the ‘80s and ‘90s is a clear sign of a process of “primitive accumulation,” which means that the privatization of land and other communal resources, mass impoverishment, plunder, and the sowing of divisions in once-cohesive communities are again on the world agenda.”*

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, NY: Autonomedia, 2004, p.239.

12 weeks

Monday, 23rd September to Friday, 13th December 2019

In term 1 the students will be introduced to topics including neoliberal city development, the financialisation of public space and housing as a public task, the political concept of radical democracy and postfoundational thought, militant design, activist demands, a.o.

The first tasks will use different research means and methods to analyse the topic: papers, documentaries, films, activists, etc.

**1.1** Collective film evening with documentaries on ground politics, housing crisis, etc.

**1.2** Walks through London, on-site investigations: Initial site investigations will take the form of a series of collective walks through London. The first one will take us right through the neighbourhood of the AA. We will visit Poplar council housing estates, the Golden Lane Estate and Heron Tower as well as investigate POPS (privately owned public spaces) on site, e.g. around City Hall.

**1.3** Students, in small groups, will chose a site of public interest to visit and confront their burning questions, survey them by means of photography, video, interviews, deep research on the economic, political and social conditions of the site. A collection of public site protocols will become part of the collective research output.

**1.4** Research of popular agency: current and historic forms of activism, NGOs, guerilla movements climate justice, public space and housing activists, etc.

## 1.5 Result:

The final result of this term will be the collective fabrication of a map or physical model of London as a site for critical architectural agency. It will be created through detailed analysis of material focused on the neoliberal situation of London's urban space, its agents and counter-agents.



The layers of this map or physical model of London consist of:

- “burning questions”: facts and figures of London’s public space and public tasks.
- “urgent sites”: specific urban sites in which public infrastructures have been taken over by private enterprise, by processes of gentrification and financialization. Specifically, we will be looking into the implications for public space and the housing crisis, as well as the agents of such development.
- “possible alliances”: If with architecture we want to make a difference, we need to enter into alliances, hence the third layer is a mapping of counter-agents: NGOs, activists, militant initiatives and bottom-up movements.

The result will be presented as a publicly accessible document or map, allowing its agency to extend beyond the unit itself.

# Term 2: Architectural agency in the political field – “just architecture”

*“Social space is produced and structured by conflicts.  
With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins.”*

Rosalyn Deutsche: *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics.* Cambridge, Mass-London: MIT Press 1996, p. xxiv

11 weeks  
Monday, 6th January to Friday, 20th March 2020



Term 2 is dedicated to developing an individual design brief based on the knowledge production from term 1. It focuses on the questions: What can architects do under current circumstances? How can they support radical demands for change, while also supporting everyday spatial needs?

## 2.1. Assignments of Term 2:

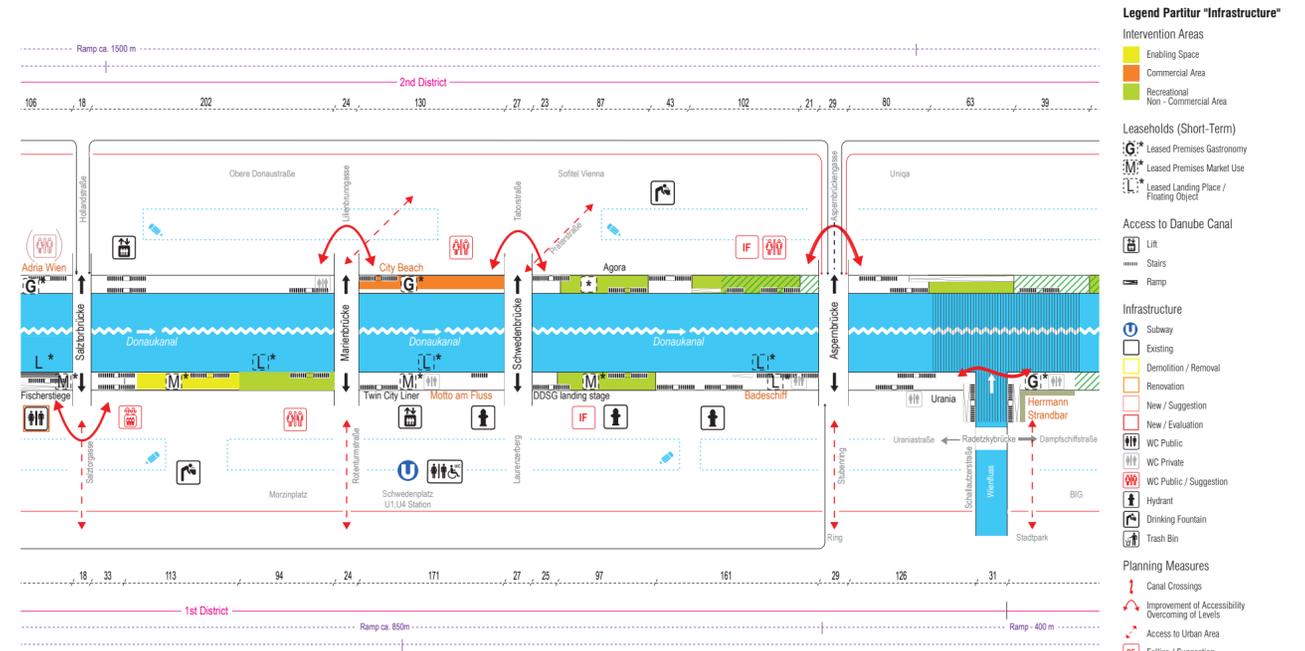
Students will focus their research on a specific topic and site within London. This site will act as a case study through which to critically assess the interrelation of ownership, the financialization of urban space, and architecture’s role within such developments.

Research of this specific case study will include analysis of its evolution, its economy and politics, its (top-down, and bottom-up) agents and its potential for architectural agency.

With the end of this term students will have elaborated a thesis and design brief that relates radical democracy to the site investigated, its historical development, its currently urgent problems.

**2.2** Technical studies will form an integral role within the unit with much of term two being devoted to the production of your technical studies documentation. This document will serve to compliment your project and by extension its thesis.

**2.3** Unit lecture series / dates to be announced:  
 Workshop lecture #1: with political actors on the crisis of publicness in London  
 Workshop lecture #2: with NGO speaker on current battles and movements  
 Workshop lecture #3: on postfoundational theory and the concept of nonsolution  
 Workshop lecture #4: on radical democracy  
 Workshop lecture #5: on solidarity and emancipatory politics



**2.4** Study trip to Vienna and Bratislava  
 February 3rd - February 7th, 2020

In Vienna students will gain knowledge and understanding of the social housing system of Vienna and its history of Red Vienna. Also, its ground politics including a recent building code amendment, capping the price of urban land for social housing, the most recent new urban developments, cooperative housing initiatives and public space politics will be in the focus of discussions and seminars.

Bratislava, the twin city of Vienna, and less than 1 hour train ride away will serve as a comparison due to similarities (Habsburg Empire until 1918) and massive differences (Cold War divide) in their historic context and hence differing understandings of public and collective space.

# Term 3: Create forms in the face of their impossibility – “nonsolutions”

*“In the end everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done to it.”*

Jacques Rancière, Politics and Aesthetics. An Interview, in: Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities 8:2, 2003, 191-211: 201.

9 weeks  
Monday, 22nd April to Friday, 19th June 2020

## 3.1 Assignments of Term 3:

In Term 3 every student will work out a powerful architectural or urban strategy project for a piece of public infrastructure or a structure supporting the publicness of architecture. As a radical demand the project may also question the conditions of the context and find/enter into alliances by means of activism and radical engagement.

The refinement of a body of material – architectural drawings, visual renderings, models – to express the architectural proposal, which is precise and implementable: It responds to the immediate urgency of a given issue, but does not deny its inherent contradictions. (It is this intentional exposure of conflictual constellations within a form for which “nonsolution” is an adequate term.)



## 3.2 Outcomes:

Acute understanding of London's processes of gentrification and financialization.

In-depth-understanding of planning conditions, land ownership rights, democratic development policies, and Section 106 agreements, in order to identify the obstacles and openings for architectural agency, within the political field.

Knowledge and understanding of the distinct features and history of concepts such as the public, the private, and the commons.

Ability to comprehend the political, social, and economic dynamics of a chosen specific site.

Critical reflection on architectural agency, popular agency, and that of public institutions.

Use the tools you have gathered as an undergraduate to both develop your own "voice" and make yourself useful.

Ability to formulate and sustain an independent argument of critical nature throughout the length of the project.

Ability to design an architectural or planning project of highest disciplinary qualities, employing architectural tools, means and elements, while reflecting critically on the larger implications.

Drafting of a complete and well-crafted set of drawings that touch on all the relevant scales and articulate fully the student's position and project.

Ultimately, the work of Diploma 17 will serve as a testbed for the agency of architecture in the contemporary social and urban condition.



Outcomes

**Gabu Heindl** is an architect, urbanist and activist; her Vienna based practice *GABU Heindl Architektur* focuses on public space, collective housing, urban justice. Gabu holds a Postgraduate Master in Architecture and Urbanism from Princeton University (as Fulbright Scholar) and wrote her Doctor of Philosophy on radical democracy in architecture and urban planning at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Since 2018 Visiting Professor at Sheffield University. Gabu will share her knowledge of strategies for cities, such as the history of utopian Red Vienna and its possible futures, her research on radical democracy and experience on relating political philosophy to activist practices of architecture and urbanism.

**Eleanor Dodman** is a graduate of the AA and a practicing architect. She has taught at the AA, Birmingham City University and Cardiff University. Her London based practice focuses on residential and cultural projects. Eleanor will share her knowledge on the relationship between architecture, representation and the power of the image.

**Liza Fior** will be a regular guest, to bring her experience (and networks) of how the cookie (London) crumbles. Liza is founding partner of muf architecture/art, only UK winners of the European Prize for Public Space and is currently working on multiple “would be public” projects in London, negotiating all that is necessary to make them so.



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