

5 HOW TO INSTALL PUBLIC SPACE

Using COPS and a Non-Building Plan Gabu Heindl

To confront the need for concepts and strategies to (re)install public space, we must start out by briefly defining the notion of publicness, at least in the context of western European cities. With a history in which 'the public' is a concept related to 'the urban', 'the social', or even 'the democratic', various categories come into play, such as ownership of spaces, their accessibility, their control, their function and also the degree to which they allow for a plurality and change of usages. In recent years however, with public space in cities coming under increasing pressure from investment capital, ownership seems to have become the one quasi-transcendental category ruling over all others, with ownership predetermining accessibility, control, function and openness, or rather closeness, vis-à-vis a plurality of social interaction.

Urban regions are increasingly becoming targets for global surplus capital, with London in the lead in Europe. In this aggressive search for profit options, we are witnessing entire

city parts being owned and developed by private investors, corporations, banks and pension funds. Among phenomena reminiscent of colonial rule, the spatial outcome of this process has been given a funny name, or rather an acronym, common in urbanist discourse: POPS, which stands for 'privately owned public space'. And it is not just for reasons of rhyme that POPS frequently come with cops (or uniformed private security employees) to protect them, and to exclude people and types of behaviour through restrictions with self-defined parameters, not governed by a public or community.

COPS

I'm using cops as the starting point for a different concept that is also an acronym: COPS, short for 'commonly owned public space'. This is the type of urban space we should be discussing and advocating.

To briefly address the individual elements of that name; first, what is the *commonality* of a commonly owned public space? What kind of embodiment guarantees the quality of a space as being common to all, there for all? Is it state ownership? City ownership? Ownership on the part of a community?

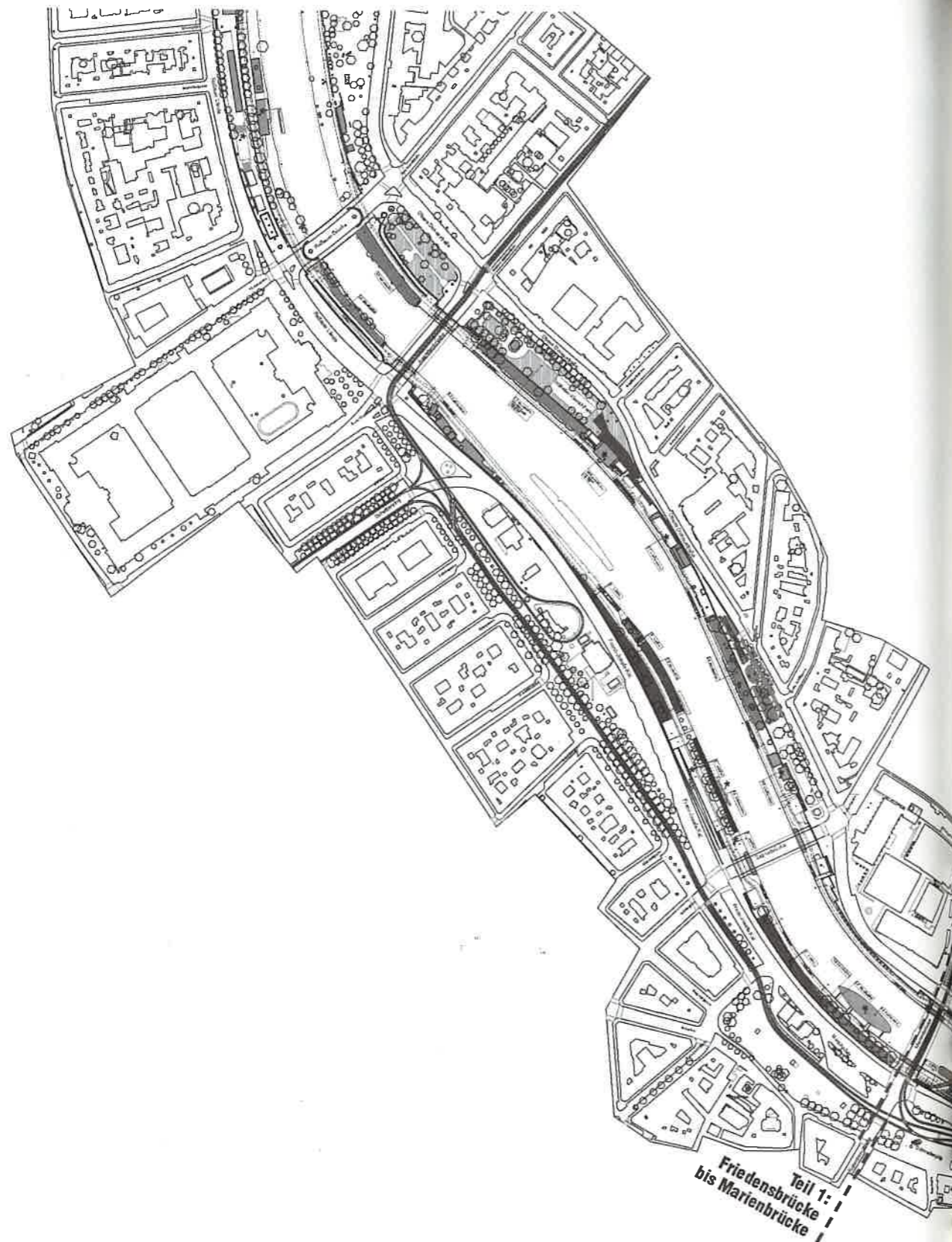
So the first term leads us to the second: *ownership*. What 'commonly owned' means depends not least to its placement, in the sense of geopolitical context. To many people in the formerly socialist countries of Eastern Europe, common ownership has negative connotations of state ownership – with Communist Parties ruling over everyday lives and spaces – so that a liberalist conception of freedom paved the way to privatisation.

In an already heavily privatised environment such as London however, the concept of commoning may be seen as a new way of sharing space collectively. It's worth noting that in cities where welfare state institutions and mentalities are more intact, what is labelled commoning has more of a de-publicising ring to it, because spaces that were universally accessible before may now fall under the exclusive usage of a more narrowly defined, often middle-class, local community. The fences around urban gardening zones are a classic example of this. As Italian theorist Silvia Federici points out, in western contexts, formerly resistant behaviours have been co-opted by neoliberal capitalism.

In a way, the excluding fences of such middle-class commons are the opposite of what social philosopher Hannah Arendt has

called the necessary 'hedges' of society. These hedges are the forms and laws governing public space with the purpose of maintaining its *publicness*. Even more, they install and institute public space in the first place. If today we are very much used to perceiving such laws and forms as being opposed to freedom, then this is because of the decades-long ideological hegemony of neoliberal concerns about regulations that would strangle the fragile lives of economies. Progressive perspectives may of course also advocate for free, ungoverned public space, in order to make unforeseen public life possible. However today's urban landscape of privatisation and POPS shows all too often that, as soon as public space is unoccupied and ungoverned, it will be occupied by investment capital, and submitted to private regulations and exclusions. So, for a democratic framework regarding cities and their spaces, one that is oriented towards universal accessibility, the public occupation of space is necessary. It is a paradox, but one at the heart of democratic societies, that public space as a space hedged by laws provides for the unexpected to happen.

After commonality, ownership and publicness, the S in my COPS proposal points towards the more narrowly *spatial* aspects of this political context, of building infrastructures for agency, in the sense described by Indian theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as 'the effort to establish, implement, and monitor structures that allow subaltern resistance to be located and heard'. Taking up the task of planning democratic infrastructures does not demand from architecture to explore only its own identity or interiority. What is at stake, rather, is an openness for alliances with movements. This involves a certain degree of conscious self-distancing on the part of planning experts, a critical stance towards power effects inherent in expertise, yet without renouncing the expert position. Additionally, in the context of public space, a democratically active architecture should be sceptical of the notion that architecture and urban planning necessarily centre around the act of building, resulting in growth in volume of built structures. And yet, when it comes to installing public space, with or without buildings, planning is indispensable.



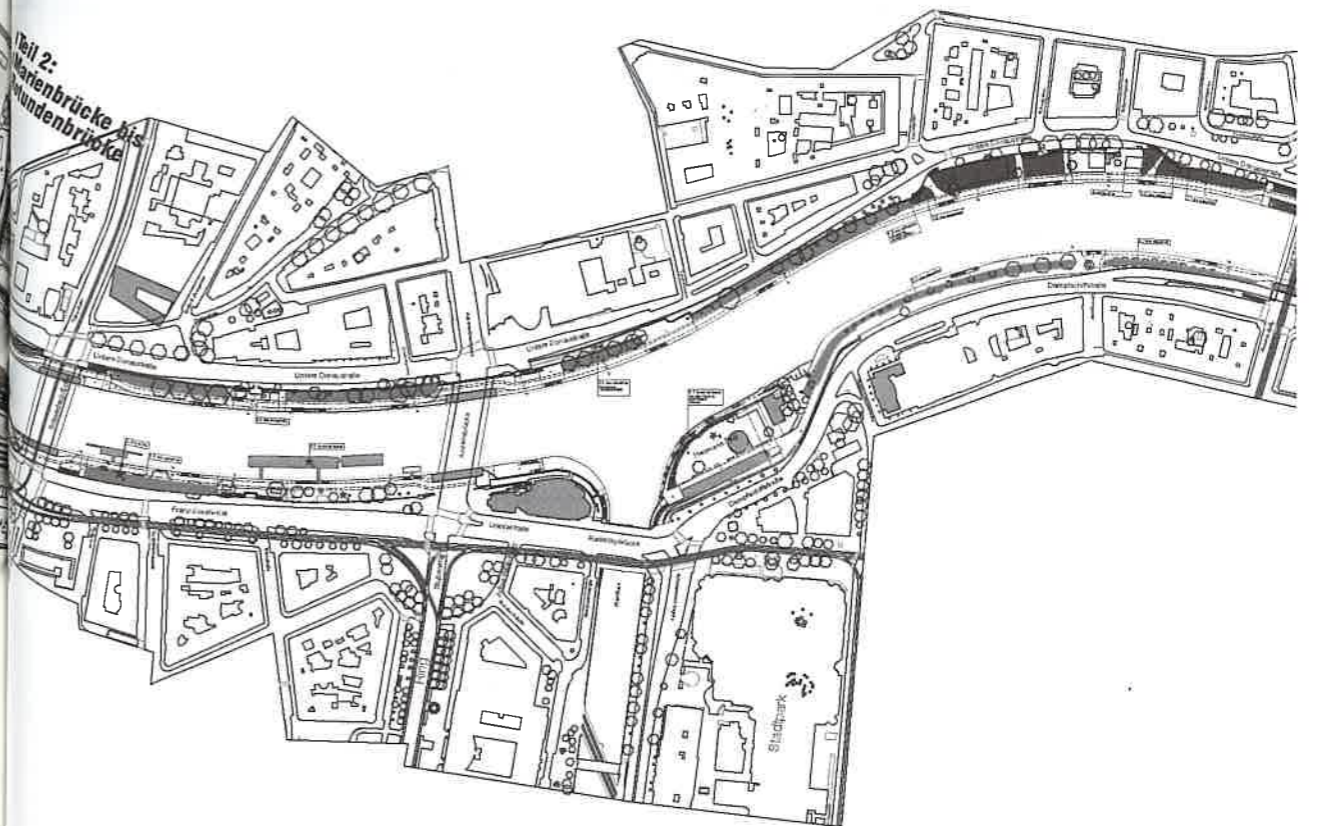
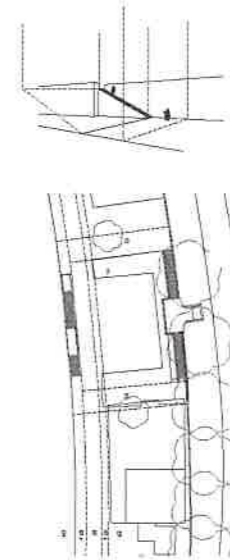
Legend

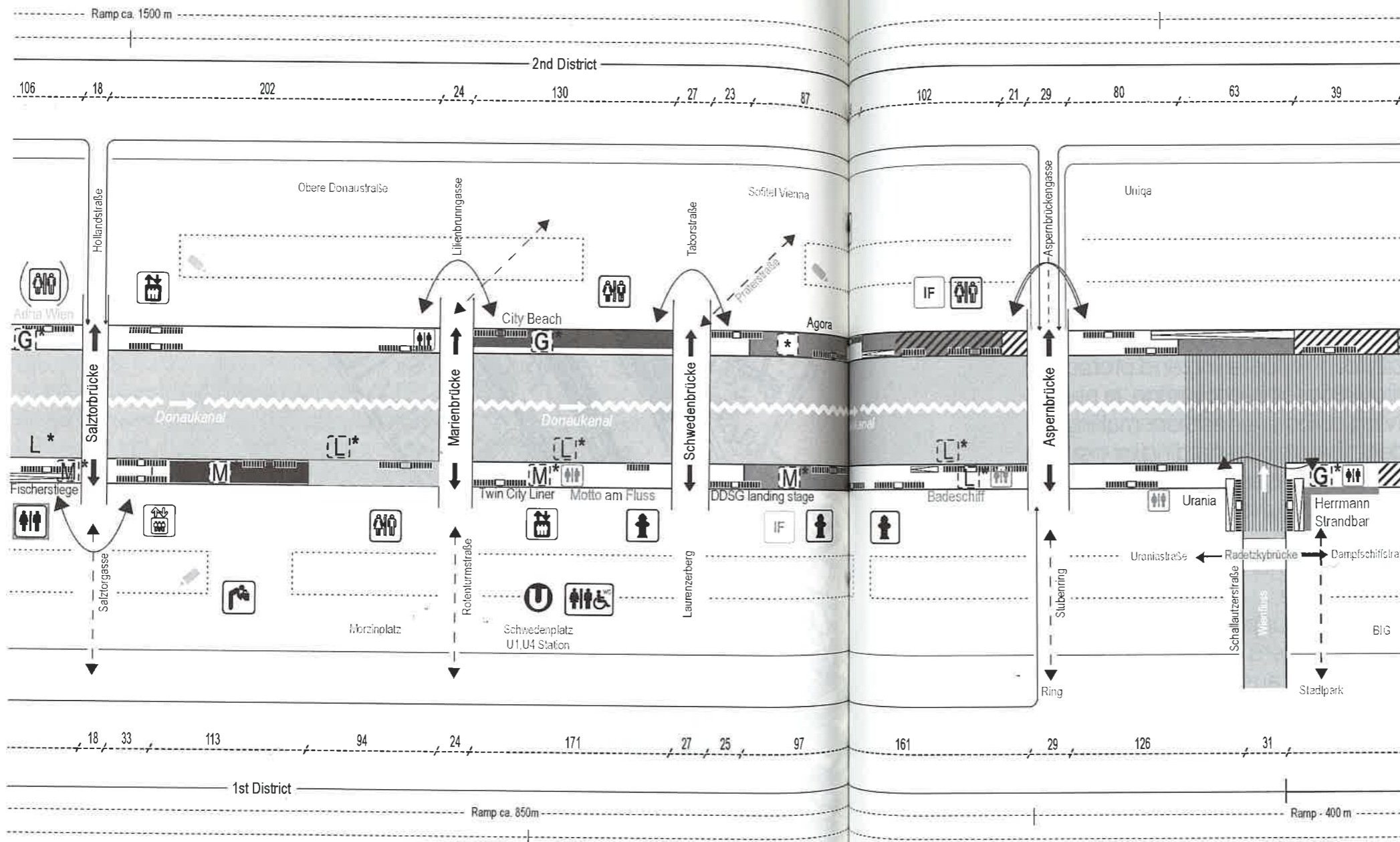
- Intervention Areas**
- Enabling Space
 - Commercial Area
 - Recreational Non-Commercial Area

Leaseholds (Short-Term)

- ✳ Leased Premises Gastronomy
- FZ Free Access
- FZW Canal Crossing
- FA Free Vision
- BF Pedestrian Area
- BFa Pedestrian Area Extra
- ÜW Overhang Water
- RF Miscellaneous Area

Annotation





Legend Partitur "Infrastructure"

Intervention Areas

- Enabling Space
- Commercial Area
- Recreational Non-Commercial Area

Leaseholds (Short-Term)

- Leased Premises Gastronomy
- Leased Premises Market Use
- Leased Landing Place / Floating Object

Access to Danube Canal

- Lift
- Stairs
- Ramp

Infrastructure

- Subway
- Existing
- Demolition / Removal
- Renovation
- New / Suggestion
- New / Evaluation
- WC Public
- WC Private
- WC Public / Suggestion
- Hydrant
- Drinking Fountain
- Trash Bin

Planning Measures

- Canal Crossings
- Improvement of Accessibility Overcoming of Levels
- Access to Urban Area
- Follies / Suggestion

Non-Building Plan

To install public space may demand such a double move of disengagement and radical engagement. I can explain this by introducing the idea of a 'non-building plan', used by my own planning practice on a project in Vienna. In 2014, architect and city planner Susan Kraupp and my office, Gabu Heindl Architecture, were, after winning a competition, commissioned by the city's magistrate to draw up urban-design guidelines for the Donaukanal (Danube Canal), Vienna's central waterfront. This recreation area has in recent years come under high pressure from gastronomy investments. There was a quasi-privatisation, where entrepreneurs were given long-term ground leases almost for free by public authorities. Our guidelines were conceived as a reaction against this ongoing privatisation, with an agenda for the publicness of the riverbank and public (rather than private) investment in its infrastructure.

To describe the aim of our guidelines according to my COPS logic, we firstly aimed for maintaining the commonality of the riverbank, or what was left of it, in the sense of universal access for potentially all people in the city. With the scale of the project, comprising much of Vienna's city centre, installing and protecting public space was our way of providing for participation, in place of a participatory project involving collective decision-making by a limited group of stakeholders. Secondly, regarding ownership, we changed long-term to short-term leases and temporary usage, allowing for change in the social functions of this or that part of the riverbank. This is precisely what defines our third criteria, publicness, the possibility for contingency and the unforeseen to be present in urban space.

As to the fourth, spatial aspect of our project, this is where the role of the architect as a planner enters the picture in the most classic but twisted way. This is because the main tool we invented for our guidelines was a building plan that was not one, to be exact. We conceived this part of our guidelines as an explicit non-building plan (Nichtbebauungsplan).

This non-building plan is not to be confused with what in the 1960s became known as the non-plan, because this approach to urban architecture carried the critique of master-planning over into a neoliberal deregulation agenda. The opposite is the aim of the non-building plan, which aimed at securing openness by occupying it through a set of spatial regulations; the Arendtian hedge surrounding publicness here took the

form of red lines on white paper. We made the non-building plan the double, the anti-neoliberal twin, of an ordinary building or zoning plan. It described with precision where, why and how spaces were to be kept open to use by all and how no monopolising investments were to be built. The planning tool was accompanied by a more content-based guideline manual and a series of notational score drawings to choreograph the complex planning process for the instalment of public infrastructure.

It was important for the non-building plan to be as diligent, precise and strategic as a plan of gastronomy buildings would have been. It needed to employ the same techniques and codes, making it into a document of considerable discursive authority. It was not least this authority, this bringing to bear architectural expertise with all its planning insignia, that made the non-building plan useful in an unexpected constellation, at least for a local grass-roots initiative. It was not the magistrate but a group of activists, fighting for the protection of the last horizontal meadow remaining non-commodified, who relied on the non-building plan and its clear designation of this piece of ground as a non-building zone. And the non-building plan did so as an architectural plan. Its political potentiality was activated by this movement's popular agency, because the non-building plan implicitly, in the language of planning, laws and forms, reached out for such an alliance in the first place.