

# Public! Porous!

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## Testing Democratic Public Space by Boundaries

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Architectural Association  
School of Architecture  
2020-2021  
Diploma Unit 5  
Design Brief

Gabu Heindl  
Bostjan Vuga



DIP5 will focus on design interventions that respond to the burning issues of public interest in our contemporary environment. The unit will develop site-specific architectural projects that impact and add value to their wider contexts. An architectural project's public character – its publicness – defines an inherent catalytic strength in the work. The unit projects will function as case studies, demonstrating the architect's capabilities and responsibilities in actively engaging with physical and social space.

Public space is essential for democratic society. It does not imply 'limitless' space; rather, boundaries are required in order to define and differentiate it from private space. Simultaneously, porosity is defined by the character of boundaries in an architectural object – the boundaries between the object and the site where it is situated, between the exterior and interior, and within the object itself. We will explore how porosity relates to the politics of architecture, how one creates porous interventions and what spatial, social and environmental effects these generate.

DIP5 interrogates connections between spatial and socio-political categories, drawing from the hypothesis that porosity is a link and a method to contest and establish various boundaries. The unit will test the potential for porosity within specific sites and confront them with urgent issues of publicness through mapping and prototyping to increase democratic participation, to provide climate justice and accessibility to public space, culture, landscapes or housing. We will demonstrate how architects can engage with activism in order to materialise the claim for public space and generate architectural projects that are: Porous! Public!

# Public! Porous!

## PUBLICNESS

Public space is where democratic societies happen, where democratic processes can take place. It comprises sites of conflict, and it is itself contested, just as democracy is. In the design of publicness, architecture plays an important part. While the public, in the sense of enabling non-routine occurrences and encounters, is being jeopardized, we start out to even radicalise publicness: to design public space and to broaden its meaning and scope of publicness even more.

This does not imply 'limitless' spaces; rather, our approach acknowledges that public space also needs boundaries in order to be defined and to be differentiated from private space, and even to remain open and universally accessible in the first place.

Boundaries are generators for publicness.

Publicness is not just a characteristic of open public spaces, such as city squares or parks. Publicness can also be related to an architectural structure. It does not depend on its size nor on its temporary vs. permanent character. It can be characteristic of a small temporal pavilion or of a large megastructure.

Publicness can occur either in a high dense urban area or in a remote spot of the countryside. Publicness is not necessarily a consequence of the main program of a building. Architectural design can foresee publicness for a private commercial development, as well as for genuinely public institutions such as libraries, museums and sports halls.

Publicness encourages the increased use of an architectural structure by various individuals and social groups throughout the day and the year. Unused building space, such as abandoned and derelict structures, empty offices and commercial centres - unfinished construction sites become sustainable when imbued with publicness.



1 Don't Let Belgrade Drown, Protest Against Speculative Project for River Front, Serbia, photo: Nedavimo Beograd  
2 GABU Heindl Architektur, Wiener Festwochen Festival Centre Vienna, photo: Lisa Rastl  
3 Sadar+Vuga, Central Part of the National Gallery, Ljubljana, photo: Hisao Suzuki

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## POROSITY

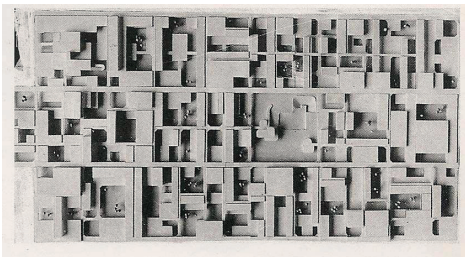
Porosity is a measure of the void spaces in physical matter. It is a fraction of the volume of voids over the total volume. Porous means capable of being penetrated.

Architectural porosity is defined by a character of boundaries in an architectural object — the boundaries between the object and the site where it is situated, the boundaries between the exterior and interior, and the boundaries within the object itself. It is a physical characteristic of a built structure that generates ambiguity and degrees of freedom of perception, of movement and of use.

Based on effects of architectural porosity, our tendencies to explore, to unveil and to discover spatial sequences are stimulated – and so are active participation and engagement with the built environment.

DIP5 will investigate what porosity does in architecture, how one creates porous architectural interventions and what effects they generate. DIP5 proposes porosity as a spatial method to generate publicness in its diversity.

Porosity becomes a tool for dissolving or creating physical boundaries at different scales – from the micro-scale to the macro urban scale. DIP5 will shift from the site-specific to the abstract, from almost forensic mapping assessment of the specificity of chosen sites to the development of porous spatial models, from understanding the public interests of the sites to creating design projects.



- 1 Sample of Porous Stone
- 2 Candilis, Josic, Woods, Scheidhelm, The Free University of Berlin, 1963. Mat Building: Architecture of Multiple Accessibility
- 3 Sven Karlsson, Johan Talje, Placeholder, Administration Pavilion



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## BURNING ISSUES

DIP5 is about architecture interacting with burning issues which are of a larger public interest and which relate clearly to spatial questions. Challenging the position of architects, and with reference to the political theory of radical democracy, DIP5 will encourage the students to choose a site with an urgency. This may also be the site of local protests or popular agency of citizen groups regarding publicness.

What is a burning issue? What and whose claims are at stake? Spaces of isolation or quarantine? Unjust distribution of space? Environmental threats? Closed borders, enclosures of commons? Surveilled and controlled space, non-accessible public space? Your site could be a public space, such as a public park, museum, university, school, infrastructure, riverbank, etc.

DIP5 is interested in architectural agency: how can we as architects become active creators of change, how can we tap into the full potentials of architecture, while understanding architecture's own boundaries?

Our enquiry will embed an in-depth-understanding of connections between spatial and political categories of the chosen sites. DIP5 will operate with the diversity and specificity of the globally distributed sites as well their common denominators.

DIP5 leaps off from the porous as a stand-in for openings and closures, for gaps and thresholds, for incompleteness and non-identity. We will put to the test spatial, social and environmental porosity, and confront the specific sites with the urgent issues of publicness through mapping and prototyping porosity as an architectural tool – be it to increase democratic participation, to engage architecturally in climate issues, accessibility to public space, to culture, landscapes or housing and infrastructures.



- 1 Jan Bockholt, Ronja Engelhardt, Sports Park Stožice, Possible Futures, Urban Farming
- 2 Donaucanale für alle! Protest for a Public Waterfront, Vienna, 2015, photo: Donaucanale für alle!
- 3 Open Border Protest, 2020, photo: Gabu Heindl

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## CURRICULUM

### Chapter 1: Selection of the Site – What is its Burning Issue?

You are free to choose the site of your interest – which is marked by a conflict over spatial non-porosity. You are encouraged to find the site of your research and design intervention in your home-city. It could be a place which you have always been interested in or a site where you argue your design intervention will be needed.

Your focus should be on the lack of, and conflicts over, publicness, be it on the scale of a pavilion or a landscape, of a closed-off public space or building, a situation of an undemocratic distribution of space, of infrastructure or a whole urban cluster.

The choice of the site will be of great importance, since in the end, your design projects will be considered as a case study of how ‘burning issues’ of a similar kind could be considered somewhere else. We will provide a series of examples in which directions the choice of the site could go as with DIP5 we will tend towards a great variety and diversity of chosen sites.

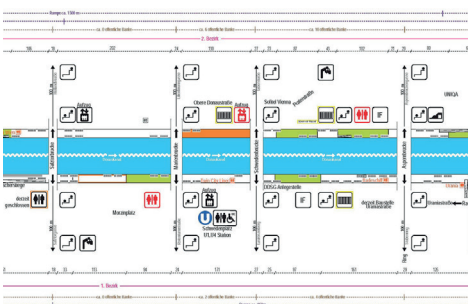
Think about the ruins, the abandoned areas, the grey secluded zones, redundant office spaces, hibernating tourist resorts, riverspace, highways which run through cities, protected monuments, etc. See the potential of developing a public space where no one even imagines that.

### Chapter 2: Mapping & Assessment of Potentials of the Site – Project Brief

In Chapter 2, you will map the existing architectural spatial and environmental qualities of your chosen site. You will present the site through different parameters which outline the site specificity: from statistics and regulation to accessibility and movement, materiality and structure, to name just a few of them. The mapping will lead to the assessment of potentials of the site. This assessment will lead to your intervention strategy. The intervention strategy sums up in a first draft of your project brief.

### Chapter 3: Prototyping Porosity Models

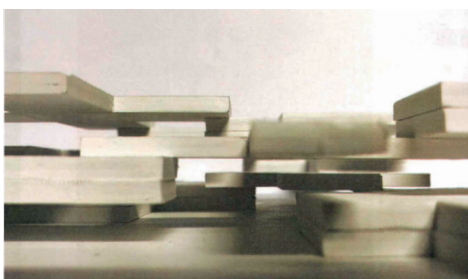
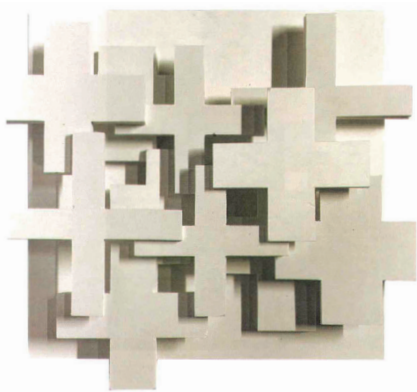
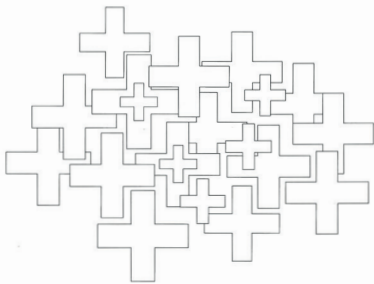
Throughout this process, you will be relating research to spatial prototypes of porous structures, you will think planning conditions, land ownership rights, democratic development policies with the core architectural tools of boundaries and openings. We encourage students who have an interest in engaging in architectural debate with built structures, in stretching the notion of what architecture can do.



1-2 Sadar+Vuga, Unfinished Part of the Sports Park Stožice, Ljubljana, photo: s+v archive  
3-4 GABU Heindl Architektur, Susan Kraupp, Non-building Plan, Donaukanal Partitur, Vienna

TERM I

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**1-5** G. Giabbadini, G. Guidici, T. Parascandolo,  
Porosity models, process

In Chapter 3 of term 1, you will develop research on different types of porous subjects, and develop a series of spatial prototypes with their specific spatial formulas. You will use the design tool of prototyping in order to explore porous spatial sequences. Prototyping is the moment in the design process when to abstract constraints of the site. The research on porous subjects will be the base for prototyping. Designing a set of testing models will form a tool for developing spatial concepts, which will be fed back into the site. The process will help in the development of spatial sequences which otherwise could not be even imagined. The sequence of prototyping will move from 2D images into 3D spatial iterations. In this phase, the set of models will help to explore the notion of boundaries: indoor boundaries, indoor/outdoor boundaries and object/site boundaries.

Through different design actions – subtracting, adding, assembling, dissolving, collaging, piercing, cutting, pasting, sealing – you will reflect, at the level of materiality, the spatial sequences and the boundaries on the site. Concluding this phase, the abstract machine of prototyping will be plugged back into the research on potentials of the site to develop and increase its publicness. This logic of inputting will form a feedback process of design. At this point, term 1 will conclude with a clearly defined project brief.

## Chapter 4: Design Project

As future architects you will need to demonstrate how your knowledge and skills on dealing with the ‘burning issues’ of public interest are embodied in an architectural project or a design intervention.

Understanding that design is a key product of DIP5, with which you demonstrate your ability to actively shape and change the world, you will develop a design project which is a response to the burning issue. Simultaneously, you are aware that your design project is not concluded as a frozen solution.

It is only a framework which triggers and stimulates public use and hence generates publicness.

## Chapter 5: Speculation on Publicness

Now, as you have your design project developed, you can speculate, describe and communicate what is the nature of its porous boundaries and what architectural effects it will generate.

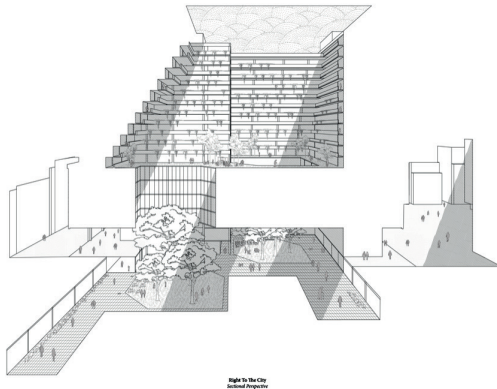
You shall speculate on the publicness of your design project, on what spatial, social and environmental changes it could generate, and what is its impact on the larger context of your site.

TERM II

TERM III



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## OUTCOME

- In-depth site reading and mapping skills: confronting the physical characteristics and the socio-political and economic dynamics of the site, e.g. orientation, accessibility, spatially and structurally, including parameters such as planning conditions, land ownership rights, democratic development policies, public/private agreements, identifying the obstacles and openings for architectural agency within the democratic public field.
- Skills and virtuosity in architectural design, Ability to design an architectural or planning project of highest quality, and also good skills in visual presentation.
- Employing the architectural tool of porosity to think critically and generate different qualities of boundaries and their impact on publicness.
- Knowledge and understanding of the distinct features and the history of concepts of the public, the private, and the commons.
- Critical reflection on architectural agency, popular agency, and the agency of public institutions.
- Ability to formulate and sustain an independent argument of critical nature throughout the length of the project.
- Drafting of a complete and well-crafted set of representations that touch on all the relevant scales of a project.
- Ability to speculate on what a design project could generate.

## TECHNICAL STUDIES

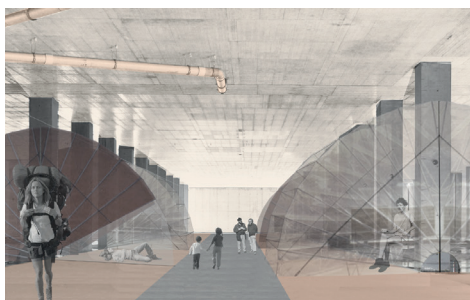
ETS 5 will provide a great opportunity to test the material and environmental characteristics of the porous materials and porous formations embedded in your design project and develop them further. DIP5 plans to join the later ETS schedule.

## REACHING OUT

### WORKSHOPS – COLLABORATION – GUESTS

An important feature of DIP5 is reaching out to experts and activists with regard to the burning issues of the chosen sites. We will invite guests with special regard to your topics and projects and organise special unit workshops throughout the year.

DIP5 will be in interdisciplinary exchange with experts from critical economy, urban sociology, political studies, (a.o. London School of Economics), critics and philosophers – as well as with internationally practicing architects and urban planners.



**1** Jasen Zi Xian Kok, The Right to the City  
**2-3** Martin T. Schulte & Stefan Pipp, Sports Park  
Stožice: Possible Futures, Work Ateliers

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"Porosity results [...] from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be at any price preserved. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes."

Walter Benjamin, Asja Lacis, 1925

"[P]ublic [...] means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. [...] Second, the term 'public' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it."

Hannah Arendt, 1998

"Urban porosity may be the result of such practices that perforate a secluding perimeter, providing us with an alternative model to the modern city of urban enclaves. A city of thresholds."

Stavros Stavrides, 2007

"Thresholds are substituted by barriers, protection walls, and strict zoning regulations. Against this backdrop, porosity turns out to be a positive goal for urban design and the architectural features of urban spaces."

Sophie Wolfrum, 2018

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Gabu Heindl  
gabu.heindl@aaschool.ac.uk

Boštjan Vuga  
bostjan.vuga@aaschool.ac.uk



Gabu Heindl and Boštjan Vuga preparing the unit brief in summer 2020, photo: Eva Tisnikar

### TUTORS

**Gabu Heindl**, PhD, is an architectural practitioner, researcher, educator and activist.

Her Vienna-based practice GABU Heindl Architektur focuses on public space, collective housing, urban planning and cultural and educational buildings. PhD on radical democracy in architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Postgraduate Master of architecture and urbanism, Princeton University.

Prior teaching at the AA she has taught at TU Delft, TU Graz and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Gabu Heindl is Visiting Professor at the University of Sheffield. She is the co-editor of *Building Critique: Architecture and its Discontent*, Leipzig (2019). Recent monograph: *Stadtkonflikte. Radikale Demokratie in Architektur und Stadtplanung*, Vienna (2020).

**Boštjan Vuga** is an architectural practitioner, researcher and educator.

He studied at the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana and at the AA. In 1996 he founded SADAR+VUGA architectural office along with Jurij Sadar, which focuses on open, integrated and innovative architectural design and urban planning. He is an associate professor for architecture at the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana.

He has taught at the Berlage Institute Rotterdam, the IAAC Barcelona, the Faculty of Architecture Ljubljana, TU Berlin, MSA Muenster, Confluence School of Architecture Lyon, TU Graz and Politecnico di Milano before returning to the AA.

Gabu and Boštjan share an interest in the pro-active role of practising and educating architects to critically engage with, and design for contemporary society.

