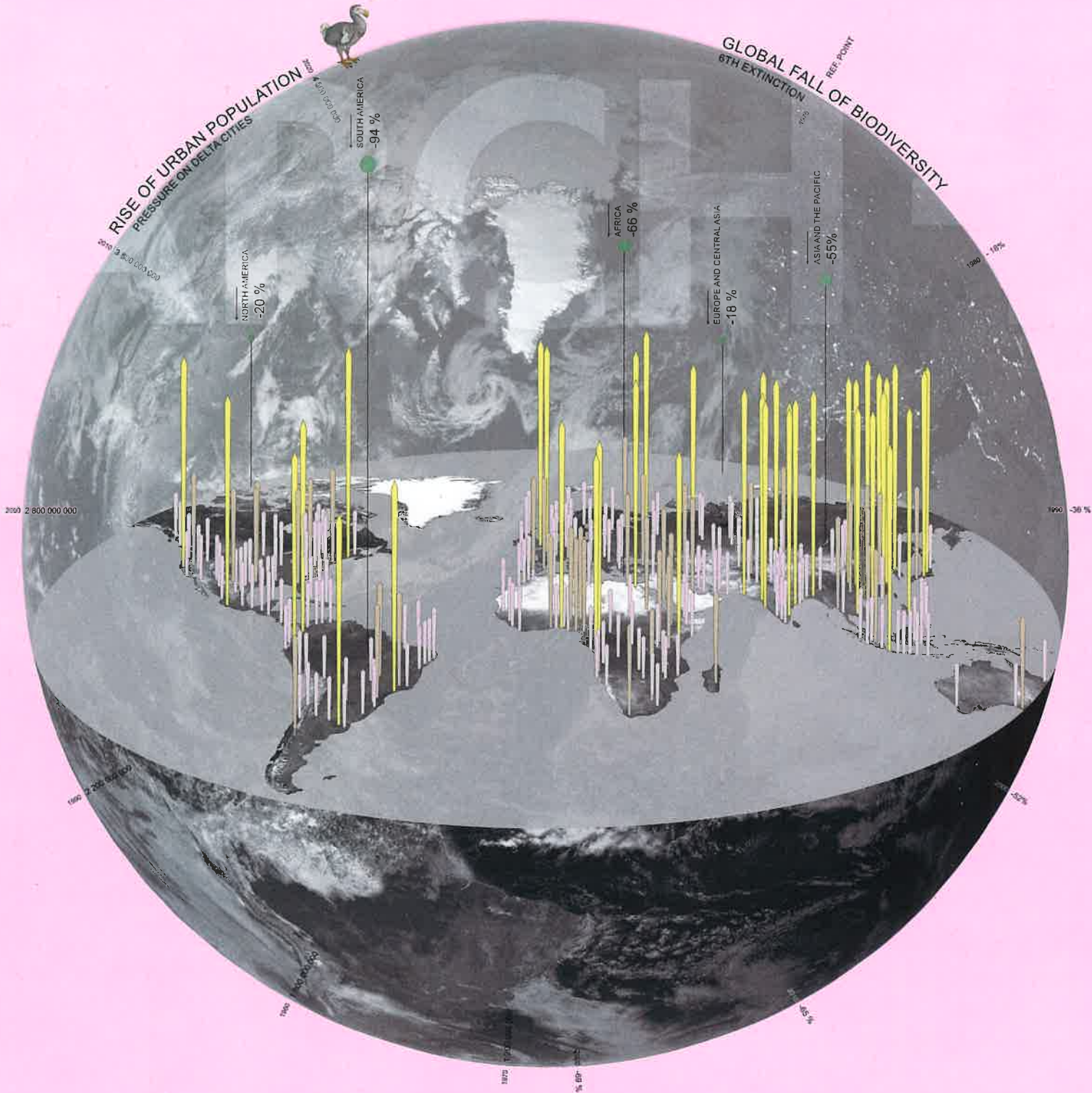


WE ARE ON THE BRINK OF
THE 6TH EXTINCTION

SO WHAT ARE WE
WAITING FOR?



THE BUSINESS OF ARCHITECTURE

TRUSTING IN ALTERNATIVES

Gabu Heindl in conversation with Jakob Walter and Sascha Kellermann



Institutions of the welfare state have been experiencing the impact of funding cuts for a number of years now all across the Global North. This trend has had its effects on architecture practices as well. Is there a way out of the neoliberal utility paradigm that takes economic profit as its sole objective? Is it possible to counter it with new economic and architectural models? A conversation with Vienna-based architect, urban planner, and author Gabu Heindl.

Greece (60%), Italy (56%), Finland (54%), Croatia (54%), Romania (54%), and Sweden (53%) have the highest share of women in the architectural workforce. ➤ The proportion of women is lowest in Slovakia (25%), Austria (24%), and the UK (27%). ➤ In Germany, women make up 42% of the workforce in the sector. 47% of European architects are partners, directors, or sole practitioners.



Fig. 1 The performative intervention titled *Fitting* was based on an idea by Gabu Heindl and brought to life in 2011–13 in Vienna, Paris, Graz, and other cities to raise the subject of the appropriation of public space. The concept and choreography are by Willi Dorner.

Jakob Walter: Your practice rests on various pillars: You are head of the Architecture Cities Economies department at the University of Kassel, where you focus on alternative economic models; at the same time you're a practicing architect and founded your own company, GABU Heindl Architektur, in 2007. What impact does your work in the academic context have on your architectural practice?

Gabu Heindl: I try wherever possible to translate my political aspirations into my practice's output. From early on, back when we were young architects, we decided for instance not to work on any suburbanizing single-family homes, nor on any senselessly (self-)exploiting projects.

To the contrary: In 2016, we supported the Viennese nonprofit Verein für die Barrierefreiheit in der Kunst, im Alltag, im Denken (Association for Accessibility in Art, in Everyday Life, and in Thinking) in converting a three-story, turn-of-the-century building into a single-kitchen house for a large flat-share based on solidarity; we called it the *Intersektionales Stadthaus* (Intersectional Townhouse). Like its members, this nonprofit association has hardly any money, so most of the users had to move in to what was still a building site as they could not afford to rent two places, their old apartment and their share of the new house, in addition to funding the construction work. As for fees, we decided that everyone on the construction site would earn exactly the same hourly wage, independent of whether they were working primarily on the construction or on the computer. In that constellation it was beautiful to see how consciously everyone treated other people's hours.

The nonprofit also put into practice an alternative rental model based on solidarity. Instead of a fixed rent per square meter, everyone pays only as much as they can afford and gets as much space as they need. Hence, a wheelchair user who needs space to be able to move around lives next to someone who can fit her office and bedroom on a much smaller footprint. The former can pay 200 euros a month, the latter 600. Even if, at first sight, this doesn't necessarily have much to do with the economy of our office as a company, it is absolutely crucial for us to decide whom we work for and how the client looks at the value of that work.

JW This way of practicing architecture is not something every company can afford to do. What are working conditions like in your office?

GH In Austria, there's a collective bargaining agreement for architects that sets minimum wages across the industry; of course, we pay that. Some commercial offices can undoubtedly pay more. What an architecture practice such as mine can offer, with a certain ethical claim, is work that, hopefully, is actually meaningful. Whether or not you are able to afford a certain type of practice is a matter of social policy. Even in a comparably affordable city like Vienna, an office like mine faces the dilemma that the cost of living is steadily rising for the members of my team, and many newcomers to the city have no other option but to take the expensive rentals they are offered on the private market. Your career chances essentially depend on the respective social security systems. If these aren't in place, you can call on people to be critical, radical, and self-confident as much as you want and tell them not to accept every project out there—at the end of the month, rent is due for all of us. Only when you don't have any existential fears can you actually be free in your own professional choices. Only then can we all start to focus more on what issues we want to work on. Do they seem meaningful and are they in line with our own political convictions? And can we, as architects, do work for which there is no lobby? With this in mind, I very much hope that the community of smaller offices continues to exist.

JW Where does your political awareness stem from?

GH My basic trust is definitely due to the fact that I grew up in the Austrian welfare state at a time when there was a consensus that no child which needed help and assistance would be left behind. I was always able to co-finance my education through stipends and scholarships—from school, to high school, to university—and I would still want every child to get that kind of financial support today. It provided access to education independent of your social class, and that sort of thing produces a sense of security, even if many people look at it today—after the dismantling and devaluation of the social security system—and think that security is guaranteed above all by solid financial backup from your family. At any rate, my generation gained self-confidence through what was essentially unconditional support from the state. But we shouldn't look back at that period with too much nostalgia, either, particularly as regards the discrimination of marginalized groups.

Sascha Kellermann: It is precisely with your activist mindset that you seem to find clients who want to build projects like the Intersectional Townhouse. Such alternative architectural concepts first need to be developed, and the overtime invested in that development has to be financed somehow. What does an acquisition strategy that enables you to work outside the contradictions you describe look like?

GH It's not as if I simply give activist groups my business card and say: "Hi there. I'm a political architect." It's more about slow processes of building confidence. In my early days of self-employment, I took part in conventional competitions, partly because we wanted to gain a foothold in the public discourse as an office—knowing full well that we could realistically expect to win one in ten of them. That said, the other nine proposals can be turned into a study or a project that also garners recognition. It has always been important to me to attend and organize lectures and debates, something I have frequently done since I first started teaching at TU Graz. That's where I found out that it is interesting to help shape the discourse in addition to designing buildings. I was a member of panel discussions on multiple occasions. At some point, after I had won a competition for a school I then built, the Austrian National Real Estate Company

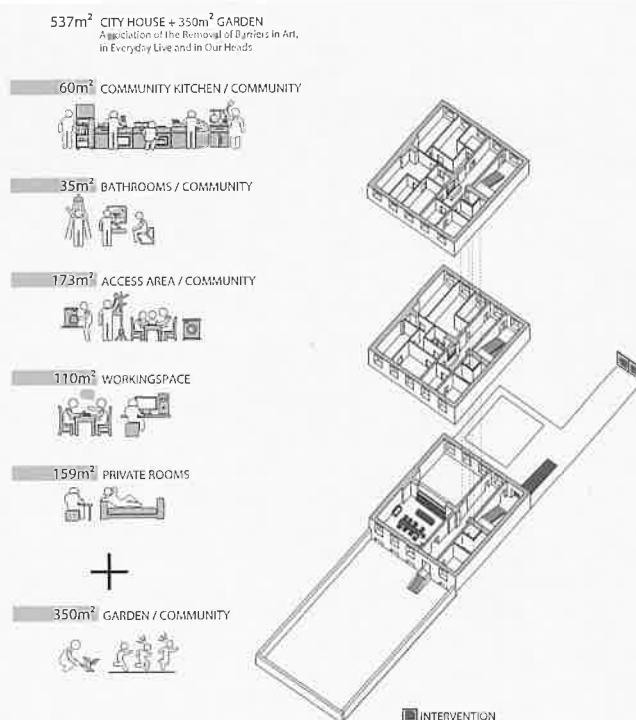


Fig. 2 GABU Heindl Architektur, Intersectional Townhouse, Vienna, 2016
Spatial subdivisions for living together collectively

asked me to become a member of its advisory council. That was at a time when there were fewer and fewer public competitions. This position allowed me to advocate for keeping those doors open. I believe it is important for us to play an active role in public committees and in urban planning.

Many of the NGOs and self-organized groups with whom I work today have not always had the best of experiences with state-run, top-down organizations and urban planning and are often very skeptical in this regard. It required time and effort to create a feeling of trust and make it clear that not all urban planners work on behalf of private interests in the pursuit of profit. Only when such trust exists will people contact you in search of support in making their project a reality—and sometimes without actually having much of a budget. Often, our support in the beginning of any project is to explain how to realize it economically: Where can the clients apply for funding? What are the real costs? We explain that architects cannot work for free, but that architects' wages are not the lion's share of building costs. On the contrary: If we make smart choices during the planning phase, the building itself will often be cheaper. It is precisely when budgets are tight that a dedicated architect can save you a lot of money.

JW The sums people inherit from their parents are growing with each generation, and just as you set ethical standards for your work, some heirs set ethical standards for their wealth. Surely there's an opportunity here to divert this money into alternative architectural projects.

GH That was exactly the case with the Intersectional Townhouse. The owners had inherited some cash from their Nazi grandparents and initially felt they didn't want to touch money from such a source. But in the long term, the question was no longer *whether* to use the money but rather *what for*. They eventually decided to use it toward a meaningful, non-speculative solidarity project. This touches on the fundamental question of the historical distribution of money and thus also the question of how to set a redistribution project in motion—on a small scale, at least. To my mind, it is crucial to make it clear to people that they can invest their money in a feminist, progressive project while also safely investing it, since it is nonetheless parked in real estate. Nonprofit projects like these are also capital investments. Yet, the additional parameters make the difference: Whether people have expectations of a higher return—and the focus is on value added in line with market principles—or whether the value added of a project is actually of a more social or ecological nature instead. As architects, we have the chance to support alternative or collective forms of ownership and possession.

SK Would an ideal working environment for architects not be one where the staff do not have to constantly think about how to realize their political ideals on the side? Shouldn't the tasks be socially meaningful *per se*, so that it would be unimportant what personal mindset I bring to work?

GH Sure, it would be great if that were the reality in both society and the architectural profession. But the need to position yourself will remain. We tried to respond to calls for a better working environment by introducing a four-day workweek, among other things. It's something we have been doing in my practice for some time now, as I think it's important to have three full days for other things—days when everyone can decide for themselves what they want to do, whether you want to lie on the couch for three days or work on other projects during that time. For me personally, it's important to teach and to write in addition to my work as an architect. Teaching and writing interact productively with work on a construction site.

JW On the one hand, you advocate for a culture in which small practices rival for competitions in what is essentially a free



Fig. 3 GABU Heindl Architektur, Intersectional Townhouse, Vienna, 2016
In collaboration with Verein für die Barrierefreiheit in der Kunst, im Alltag, im Denken, this three-story house in a courtyard in Vienna's Ottakring district was transformed into a single-kitchen house in a cooperative planning and a collective conversion process. It houses a large flat-share organized around the principles of social solidarity.

market. On the other, you emphasize the safety function played by the welfare state; you're against public-private partnerships; you teach alternative economic models. How do you square free competition with restriction imposed by the state?

GH Architecture competitions—as a cultural praxis which repeatedly proves that there are many alternative routes for developing any particular site—are something I continue to find persuasive precisely for that reason: In an age when people constantly say there is no alternative to the way things are going, architects are producing alternatives. The major dilemma of competitions is that the labor invested is seldom paid for, and that the contributions—as contributions to a discussion—simply get lost in the ether. It would, for example, make sense to hold public jury meetings and create processes that can trigger a democratic discussion if we as planners have already laid the foundations for that. My take on competitions is therefore somewhat ambivalent. Of course, there's a vast amount of unpaid work and ideas that get lost, but we need constructive debate around proposals on how we want the future of our cities to look like. If every place could develop in so many different directions, why are so many projects still developed in the same way? We need to find a way of expanding the public discussion as it relates to a collection of ideas while reducing the economic competition.

JW Can you imagine a large-scale solution as opposed to this individualistic approach? One of these was the London County Council Architects' Department, a large structure established by

the welfare state, the likes of which could perhaps be more effective than competitions or nonprofit work.

GH It is difficult today to really believe in this kind of centralized, government- or municipality-run structure. But smaller practices like mine often already work in shared structures. We share space and the office infrastructure—that's already everyday practice. And in the Vienna office world, at least, there is an increasing number of projects where practices collaborate with one another, structured around loose networks. More formal networks generate a kind of collective knowledge that can, for example, be tapped via a mailing list, just as can information on potential partners, specialist planners, and tradespeople with whom one could collaborate. Now that can't really be equated with a truly collective work process, but it is nevertheless a collective organizational tool. It was in the wider context of one of these networks, the IG Architektur (interest group of architecture practitioners), that the organization of something like a small architects' strike happened: The City of Vienna held a competition for a large school campus to be developed as a public-private partnership. Ironically, they wanted me to join the jury, but I didn't want to give them a leg up and declined. Subsequently, many participants, instead of submitting competition entries,

handed in beautifully designed protest posters bearing the slogan "We won't design your PPP school!" In the end, some practice nevertheless won the competition, but we did manage to draw the City of Vienna's attention to the fact that we architects are organized in a quasi-trade union and collectively refuse to plan such a neoliberal project. It was thanks to this existing network that architects were able to organize the refusal so swiftly.

JW The opinion that the professional practice of architects as a whole needs to be fundamentally questioned has grown louder recently. Why are so many young people still studying architecture? Given the plethora of current crises, should we even still be building things? Where should we be directing our efforts instead?

GH I would by no means contend that there are too many young people studying architecture. Actually, there are too few. After all, we're talking about our built environment, and that, to paraphrase a quote by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky on architecture, is something that affects everyone's lives! In this light it would make sense for a large number of people to understand the issues at play. The misunderstanding here tends to stem from the fact that people think studying architecture must invariably have something to do with building new buildings. As a professor of urban planning and now for ARCHITECTURE CITIES ECONOMIES, I have always been speaking of urban *conversion*. To a large extent, going forward everything will be about converting, expanding, improving, and renewing the existing. Of course, there will also be new buildings, but we will focus much more carefully on what really needs to be built anew and what can be converted, and how we can protect resources in the process. We'll need a lot of creativity to tackle the repairs to the legacy of modernist urban spaces, for example. The problem, though, is that there still are entire generations of students who graduate from university having only focused on building anew. Now that has to change, meaning we should also instill in students the self-confidence to go down these new paths. Which brings us back to the question of how to make a living. All those students who are asking today how they will be able to sustain themselves and their practice in five years' time, given rising rents, should find out that their training offers an invaluable tool. After all, they are the ones who can create alternative living spaces, who can plan the adaptive reuse of vacant spaces, even if they may need to initiate the projects themselves.

JW For their own use, too?

GH Yes, why not? We will need to be active on many different levels if we are to set in motion a paradigm shift. That is why I want my students not only to know how they can design affordable and ecological housing, but also how they can fight for the opportunity and the right to access project developments—not just for themselves but also for everyone else. If we want to counter the despair among students, we need to highlight the agency they already have. To understand their own power, they need to have a sense of how the built environment relates to its underlying economic, ecological, and social conditions, as only then will they themselves later be able to explain this system to others. And we have to make clear to them that, during their studies, they can try out creating the visual representations of what they want to champion politically. We can all use our visualizing and Photoshop skills toward a particular goal; it is, however, a matter of choosing that goal. We can, for instance, produce drawings that present the potential embedded for society in buildings which have been earmarked for demolition. But if we are not able to make that alternative visible, if we cannot convey that alternative to others, then there will be nothing to talk about, and the demolition of too many buildings will probably continue.

WETTBEWERB BILDUNGCAMPUS BERRESGASSE - 1220 WIEN

ALLCOLOURS Architecture & Urbanism

543210

**NO
PPP
IN THE NAME OF
ARCHITECTURE FUTURE
CULTURE SOLIDARITY
SUSTAINABILITY
SOCIETY AND OUR KIDS**

Fig. 4 A competition held by the City of Vienna in 2015 for a school campus sparked a great deal of criticism from planners, as it was supposed to be developed as a public-private partnership. Many architecture practices responded by submitting protest posters instead of designs.



Fig. 5 GABU Heindl Architektur, *Draußen im Gefängnis* (Outside in Prison), Krems, 2009–11
In this art-in-architecture project, the men's prison yard at a correctional facility in Krems was redesigned to feature leisure and sports zones.

SK In other words, your aim is to give your students the tools to realize their own political ideas in the built environment?

GH I feel that the world is lacking in reified ideas and alternative scenarios, and that's something we must try and change politically. Now, we don't all have to go into politics, of course, but as architects we have to become more insistent—and more radical. We need to be able to convey, in both visual and economic terms, what we want to change in the world. That way, we can highlight credible alternatives to the structures of the current real estate market. As chair for architectural design and critical economy, I ask the students for a good design proposal, but also for the development of the corresponding economic models to finance their alternative for a certain place. And we likewise highlight how we can benefit from the existing creativity of potential clients and how, together with the latter, we can work to create a city that is more equitable. Architects who call themselves “not political” actually take a very political stance, if you ask me, albeit one that is fatal because they give up on the possibility that anything might change and therefore contribute to maintaining the status quo of the relations of production in architecture.

SK I would contend that the vast majority of architects would claim to be unpolitical.

GH It is impossible to avoid being political. If we believe that we can't intervene in anything, then we just abet the way things are. The fact that the younger generation is, once again, increasingly politicized shows that many people do not subscribe to that claim. If I were a student today, given the massive crises I, too, would fundamentally question the validity of the current curricula. As faculty, we face a didactic challenge, namely to teach students how they can understand, design, and create socioecologically sensitive spaces in a system in need of more radical critique, especially since there is no guarantee that they will actually be able to put these skills to work toward a more ecologically, socially, and economically just way. Yet, our task is to give them the confidence that the architectural profession continues to be meaningful. And while we're at it, I'd like to take the opportunity to reject the romanticization of everyday office work. I, too, spend a lot of time gazing at Excel spreadsheets. But if that's part of what has to be done for a project to succeed—to experience how, for example, the users of the Intersectional Townhouse create a beautiful space for marginalized people to have the space they want while paying what they can afford—then that's definitely worth the effort.



HouseEurope! The European Citizens' Initiative



station.plus
DARCH ***ETH*** zürich

Spector Books
ISBN 978-3-95905-861-2



9

783959

058612