DEMOCRATIC DESIGN

Space for Cooperation, Collaboration and Compromise

Aedes

Exhibition
13.12.2025–28.01.2026

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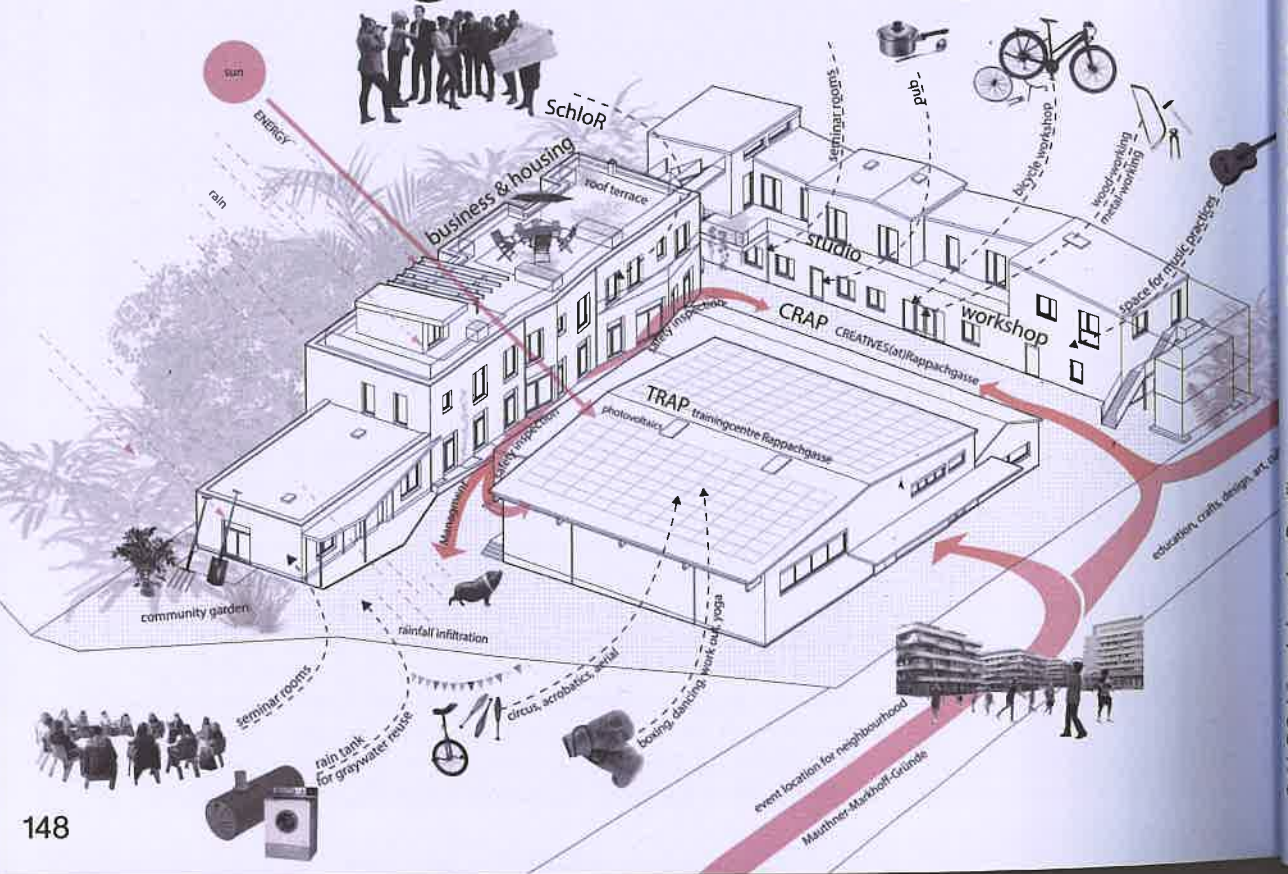
Content

It's just architecture—Alliances, Positions, Goals and (Self-)Criticism in Radical-Democratic Planning and Building



SchloR Schöner Leben ohne Rendite, Vienna. Mietshäusersyndikat project concept drawing. Architectural concept: © GABU Heindl Architecture

Gabu Heindl is a professor at Kassel University, Germany, heading the department Architecture Cities Economies for building economies and project development. As an architect and urban planner, she runs GABU Heindl Architektur in Vienna. She plans, conducts research, and publishes with a focus on housing, public space, and conflictual issues of wealth distribution and property in architecture. She also designs architectures for historical exhibitions on National Socialism. Her most recent monographs include Stadtkonflikte: Radikale Demokratie in Architektur und Stadtplanung (2020), the research report Gerechte Stadt muss sein! (2022) and, with Drehli Robnik, Nonsolution: Zur Politik der aktiven Nichtlösung im Planen und Bauen (2024).

Drehli Robnik is an essayist and freelance theorist in matters of politics, film and history—also an edutainer and disc jockey. He holds a PhD from Amsterdam University (2007) and is co-editor of books on David Cronenberg, Siegfried Kracauer and male violence in domestic thrillers. He has written monographs on anti-Nazi resistance, on Jacques Rancière, on Kontrollhorror-kino, on the power logics of pandemic-themed movies and on popular cinema and politics. His most recent monographs are Flexibler Faschismus, on Kracauer's analyses of right-wing mobilisation then and now (2024) and, with Gabu Heindl, Nonsolution, on the politics of planning and building (2024). He is currently finishing a book on 'penultimate truths' in politics.

Democratic design—let´s take a minute or 1500 words to think about what that might be. While we are not going to attempt a definition of design (the mere rhyme must do), we want to ask: What is it that gives design—or, for that matter, activities in planning and building—a political quality of the kind one calls democratic? What puts planning and building in affinity with democracy?

We are quite comfortable with a (somewhat literal) understanding of democracy as 'power to the people', but this must come with the question: what kind of people? How do we understand, in the context of design, the demos that exerts power—cracy, as it were? Well, not as a people gone crazy over identity and nostalgic self-restoration—that would be how nationalism or disruptive neofeudalism understands it. But rather, in light of theories of radical democracy and conflictual politics, as a people marked by a crack (that's our

Für alle. Detail from the central kitchen in the Intersectional Townhouse, Vienna. Renovation, architecture: GABU Heindl Architecture. Photo © Alejandra Loreto

preferred democracy pun), by a split that prevents the closure of its identity. And, we hasten to add, societies are always split—the problem is whether the split can be lived and negotiated in conflict as a way of being together (and its most damaging effects treated) or whether it is filled with resentment and violence.

So, in our approach to democratic design, we understand 'the people' as split—from the perspective of the crack. Or, which amounts to a similar thing, from the perspective of those parts of the people who embody that crack, that incompleteness of a society or population—as in Jacques Rancière's 'part of those who have no part', the counting of those who, in the given distribution of riches and functions, do not count.

The crack—the split in the social body, the uncounted—is what we see our planning and building (and writing) oriented towards. This should not be confused with 'working for minorities', 'providing housing for the have-nots', etc. It would not be interesting—as it would be neither fun nor politically relevant—to merely plan and build for them. While it goes without saying that people need affordable housing and that the many need public infrastructures, we want to highlight this 'power to the people' aspect of democracy. (Which is not without its pathos—but what would politics and also democracy, be without any pathos?) So, people's agency is what matters to us. This makes planning and building into collaborative processes, going beyond mere division of labour in carrying out tasks. Rather, what matters—and what we aim for—is as many alliances as possible with a political dimension.

This takes shape in the connecting with communities, joining them and their networks to some degree—politics as 'acting in concert', in Hannah Arendt's sense. This involves the experience of learning from the people who will use the buildings planned and erected.

Learning, for instance, from Afro Rainbow Austria, who—together with the association Planet 10—run their project for the redistribution of privileges and participatory use of their house in Vienna, which we are working to enlarge with as many housing units as possible. We can learn about the self-positioning of a small architectural office in relation to queer, migrant, anti-racist housing, and the project's people who will be living in and using Planet 10. Learn about the realities of a diversifying society marked by migration—and also by systemic racism and antisemitism, by sexism and homophobia, and by massive inequality in the distribution of wealth, space and effects of the climate crisis.

Or with the Association for Accessibility in Art, in Everyday Life, in Minds, we confront ableism in the earlier Intersectional City House (2016). Together, we learn about and confront anti-democratic forces and tendencies—and the problem of how to minimise their impact. Generally and on the project in question.

Or take the housing and cultural project *SchloR*, also in Vienna. From this solidarity-oriented building group, which is part of the habiTAT umbrella organisation, we learn about practices in dismantling property. To be more exact, we learn about the way in which *SchloR* (short for *Schöner leben ohne Rendite*, roughly 'Live more beautifully without profits') intentionally complicates the property relation between the urban ground and the buildings on it on the one hand, and the organisation of the people working and living there on the other.

What does this mean? In a time when neoliberal or libertarian politics want ever smoother, less complicated regulations for capitalising property—or aim to do away with regulations altogether—*SchloR* and other solidarity-oriented, anti-capitalist building groups pursue the opposite goal: They buy and, as it were, plan and build pieces of city or countryside out of the market. Plus: they make the juridical ties between ground/buildings and a group of people deliberately complicated. Because, at the moment (and when we're young), 'we're all happy anti-capitalists', so to speak—but what about a moment in the future when we want or need the money to be made from giving your share, or all of the place, back to the market?

The juridical self-thwarting by regulations preempts this by uncoupling property from a linear will—the kind that drives the amputated rationality of entrepreneurial behaviour. This makes it—to sum up—super difficult to turn that which you relate to

(because you live and like it there—so, a place 'proper' to you) into profit-generating capital. Let alone into the type of propertied Sachherrschaft—the domination by and over objects—that Eva von Redecker theorises.

These examples already show that radically democratic action—including planning and building—also requires, beyond the alliances of acting together, a goal pursued politically: to make societies or vicinities less racist and less capitalist, plus, of course, the technical and existential purpose of housing people and workplaces. For this combination of collective collaboration and goal-orientation, we have frequently used the term just architecture in its double meaning:

Architectural activities are conceived as taking part in pursuing goals of justice—i.e., equality as a necessary part of democracy—so, justice-driven architecture. But then again, it's just architecture—it's only planning and building (and discursive activities surrounding them). It's not a master plan or master discipline for changing and remaking all of society.

Well, since there is today a consensus (perhaps an all-too-hasty consensus?) about rejecting the socio-technology of modernist master plan architecture, such a pretension may not be the most imminent threat posed to architectural politics in our time. But one should add—perhaps closer to contemporary misconceptions—that architecture is also not aesthetic therapy: not some kind of sensualist healing offered to overstressed bodies and minds of those who can afford it.

Becoming self-conscious of the fact that what you do is just architecture does not mean going easy on critical and political positions. You can't have the one 'just' without the other. Rather, it means, first, to worry less about the purity and self-identity of architecture as a discipline, and think more of its possibilities for entering into meaningful connections and alliances. And it means, second, to mind the hierarchies that all too easily take shape—as in all collective situations—also in collaborations of planning and building.

So, briefly put: there is equality (justice) as a democratic goal—but then there are unequal relations in pursuing that goal, and that is a contradiction—one to keep in mind and address.

We do not want to be misunderstood here. This is not about architects, planners, and architecture theorists taking the noble stance of 'Who am I to tell you this or that?' This is not about

SchloR Schöner Leben ohne Rendite, Vienna. Co-architecture:
© GABU Heindl Architektur with SchloR, photo: Bruno Klomfar

refraining from making strong, clear statements or taking outspoken positions in doing architecture in contexts of democratic design. There is always the role of 'the expert' to be played—albeit self-critically—by architectural actors. There is no neat and easy way out of this, no complete levelling of the 'participation', 'designing together' type.

This points to the way in which democracy—also democratic planning and building—combines movement politics with institutional politics, grassroots and activist politics with administrative and legislative functions. The role of the expert is also already an institution—one that often proves helpful when the movements (or networks, communities) that you are part of or allied with (have to) relate to institutions, to the trades and disciplines of building, to administrations and regulatory bodies. Here, in our non-ideal world, it makes sense—time and again—to use expert knowledge and the modicum of 'authority' and symbolic capital that comes with it, for the purpose of democratic movements. Yet it's best to handle it with care—it's not at all a purpose in itself and it's a game best played only with 'adversaries', not within the alliance.

Finally, this democratically goal-oriented and connection-prone type of democratic design as just architecture does what it does also in close contact with established institutions and in the discursive fields beyond planning and building already hinted at.

To be so vain as to mention our own work: As for contact with administrations and full-blown political organisations, GABU Heindl Architecture offers knowledge, research expertise and all manner of criticism—for example, to the administration of Vienna's inner-city Donaukanal, to the Arbeiterkammer, the Chamber of Labour (a book-length study on the necessity of a Just City) and to left-wing parties and party-affiliated discussion forums.

There is the realm of a politics of public history, a narrower field of democratic design, in which GABU Heindl Architecture is active by reframing or filtering the promising—and sometimes problematic—legacy of social-democratic inter-war Red Vienna; also active as designer of architectures for exhibitions on aspects of the Nazi past (Hitler entsorgen, 2022/2023; Die Verleugneten, 2024/2025). So, histories of democratic politics and of violently anti-democratic politics concern us here.

In academia, there is Gabu Heindl's teaching as Professor at Kassel University in the fields of diverse building economies, with foci on architectures of solidarity and rebuilding and on critiques of property and, acutely, of vacancy.

And then there are the institutions of thought—of knowledge—that, hopefully, are sometimes also movements of thought. We mean theories and concepts. On those, our works with regard to radical democracy (Gabu Heindl in her 2020 book Stadtkonflikte, Drehli Robnik in his 2024 book Flexibler Faschismus) have fed into our collective investigations on the (not too alarmistically labelled) 'fascist city': on disruptively nationalist or neo-feudal authoritarian tendencies in the urban present.

Together, we have reworked and refurbished concepts from radical democracy, the philosophy of acting and Critical Theory (especially Siegfried Kracauer) into our book on nonsolution as a way of thinking and doing politics in planning and building (English version forthcoming). And together, we have at least sketched these thoughts on democratic design.

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