

"The City is a Conflict Zone", a lecture by Gabu Heindl

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This article was written based on the recordings of a guest lecture by Gabu Heindl.

Architect and urban planner Gabu Heindl is an urban researcher with a particular interest in the historical, economical, ecological and social dimensions of the city and the observed space. Heindl's numerous projects were significantly shaped by her attentive and critical approach, regularly questioning the hegemonic and neo-liberal appropriation of (public) space.

Politics of history

National Socialism and the system's implications on (public) space have occupied the architect several times. In the European Capital of Culture of 2009, Linz, the public exhibition project "The Building. Amidst Us. Deconstruction of a Building", realised in cooperation with artist Hito Steyerl (Berlin) raised attention. In the city centre of Linz the façade and inner corridors of the "Brückenkopfgebäude", one of Hitler's favourite local buildings, were altered to remind of the building's history of forced labour, displacement and annihilation. Another similar project was a planned - but due to political debates never realised - memorial for Polish people that had rescued Jews under the Nazi occupation in the centre of the former Jewish ghetto in Warsaw (a cooperation of Gabu Heindl with Eduard Freudmann). Heindl also co-created and contributed to various exhibitions, e.g. "Verfolgt. Verlobt. Verheiratet" for the Vienna Jewish museum, describing Jewish women's histories about marriages of convenience entered with foreigners to save themselves from Nazi persecution. Another exhibition displayed the history of architecture and city planning in national socialist Vienna at the Architekturzentrum Wien.

The "Donaukanal Partitur"

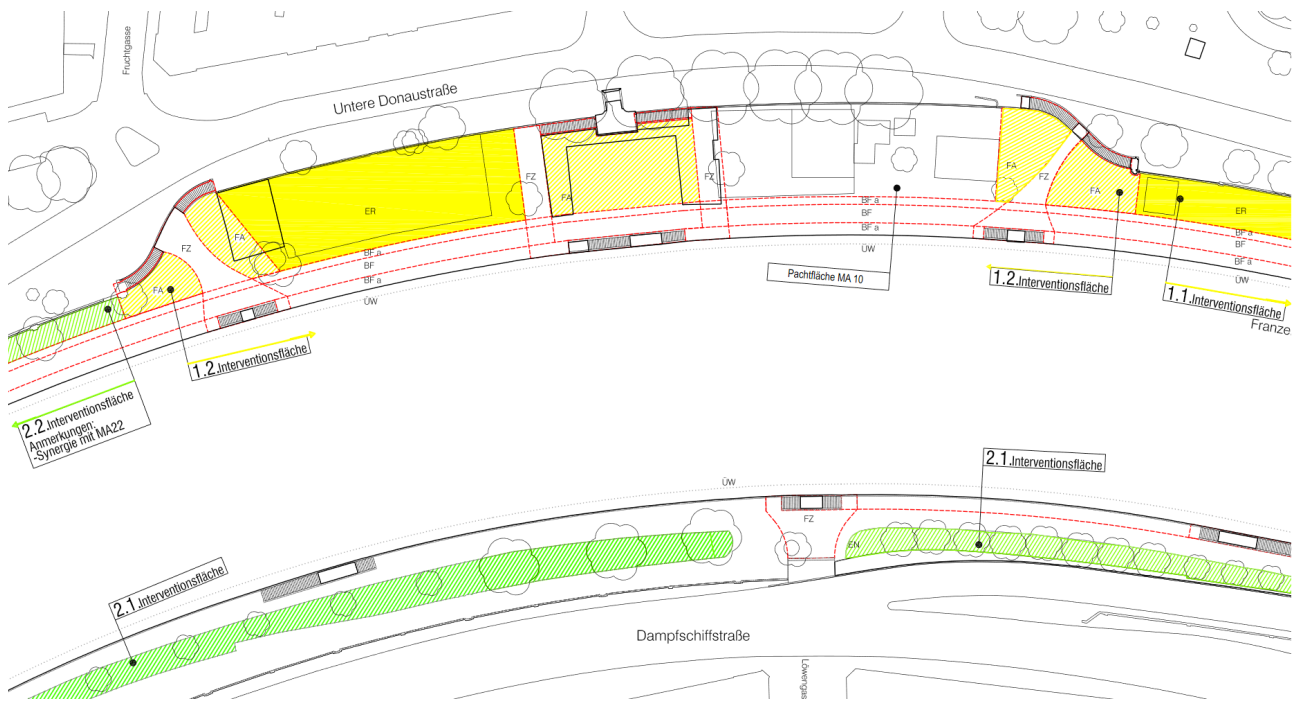
Among Heindl's best known projects is the "Donaukanal Partitur", the winning project of a municipal competition for development guidelines for the Viennese Donaukanal around 2011. In cooperation with fellow architect Susan Kraupp, and based on the results from 50 workshops with various stakeholders, development guidelines were drafted over the course of two years. The architects decided against a broad participatory project, as they did not

deem such a format inclusive enough for a space in fact belonging to all two million inhabitants of Vienna. Because of the availability of an abundance of research data and questionnaires from earlier projects and visions for the Donaukanal, the team decided against gaining more data. Furthermore, at the time of the competition the canal area was already facing great pressure and steadily being sold out, so the focus was set on becoming active while there was still public space left.

In the late 19th century the Donaukanal was one of Otto Wagner's key areas of focus. He shaped the canal architecturally and had already imagined the area as a recreational area. Since the early 1930s, a period of economic uncertainty, the canal was frequented by homeless and unemployed people but also working-class families from nearby apartment buildings. The area was used by poorer segments of the population to spend their free time and thus affectionately dubbed the "Viennese Riviera". After 20 years of activation by the city of Vienna, supporting gastronomy operators and other commercial players, the central Donaukanal area had developed into a lively and popular spot for a large variety of social groups. However, when Heindl and Kraupp began with the analysis, what they actually found was an over-activation threatening the public and not commercially used space. A constant expansion of the commercial space towards the walkway and waterfront and poor quality of public space could be observed.

Initially, the responsible municipal department MA19 had asked the competitors to develop aesthetic and functional guidelines for restaurants and other commercial activities on the canal in order to create arrangements that would be compatible with public space. But Heindl and Kraupp had different guidelines in mind, guidelines that actually questioned the number of commercial activities, their size and density. "Freihaltezone und Bewegungsräume", which defined the most essential public areas focusing on accessibility, infrastructure and public furniture, formed the framework for these structural guidelines. On this basis, the architects developed a *non-building plan* as a pendant to the classic instrument of the building

Illustration 1: Example section of the non-building plan for the Donaukanal



Source: G. Heindl, S. Kraupp 2014, p.11.

plan (Bebauungsplan), that illustrates areas with specific purposes and quality requirements.

The *non-building plan* uses the same language and the same style of abbreviations as the traditional building plan, which gives it an authoritative character and a certain sovereignty. It covers the entire central canal area in a scale of 1:500, a level of detail that requires the capturing of even the smallest and seemingly redundant elements. In addition, the architects formulated general rules to guide future development: No privatised areas can be located directly on the waterfront, all stairs must remain publicly accessible and views over the canal must be protected. A second planning instrument apart from the *non-building plan* was the “Donaukanal Partitur”, which reads the topographic space of the canal as a linear space. It can be described as a rhythmic notation tool, describing the density of public infrastructure and elements (elevators, bridges, toilets etc.).

The development of the guidelines was challenging, as the canal area is shared by nine city districts, five municipal departments and three territorial authorities (Vienna, Lower Austria and the state of Austria). And apart from these formal responsibilities, there are various other institutions and private actors with specific interests in the development of this extensive public space. *“In a rapidly growing and fast developing city like Vienna, this level of complexity is a challenge but also valuable, as it slows processes down, that we might otherwise lose overview of.”* (Heindl 2018).

The territorial authorities, jointly responsible for the canal area, decided to lease the land in large plots ranging from one bridge to the next in order to reduce actors and management efforts. As the large-scale leases could not be changed, the *non-building plan* refers to a concept to equally share these plots following the “one-third rule”: One third of the area only may be built upon temporarily, one third may be used commercially, but not space-defining (e.g. restaurant terraces) and one third must be public space. By clearly delineating the three types of areas, the plan makes the contracts visible and builds a ground to argue upon. Despite the necessary but often difficult cooperation with private developers, the architects chose to accept the regulations in place and primarily focus on the (re-)development of public space where it had not yet been monopolized.

One of the architects’ central wishes was the establishment of an inclusive committee for the Donaukanal which would introduce and integrate outsiders into the decision making processes. However, such a committee was never implemented and decisions regarding new commercial activities are still made internally between the authorities and the developers.

The Donaukanal Partitur had only little influence on the city’s decision making regarding the Donaukanal, but the *non-building plan* has to some extent become a fighting tool for public space. Heindl argues, that its special significance lies in the lines drawn: *“Sometimes you have to draw lines to actually argue about something. They might not be right or wrong, but once they are drawn, you can*

discuss them, have a conflict about them." (Heindl 2018) And indeed, there are a few examples for the effective use of the instrument: The Donaukanalwiese above Otto Wagner's Schützenhaus is the last flat, not yet commercialised green area on the canal. But this is not a coincidence: the negotiations about "Sky&Sand", a development project on Donaukanalwiese envisioning a two-floor restaurant with 800 seats had already been well under way in 2015, when a local citizen's initiative started to mobilise and organised large sit-in protests. The initiative built their argumentation upon the *non-building plan*, which specified the space as free of commercial use. The protests attracted a lot of attention and the *non-building plan* effectively supported the bottom-up fight for public space. Another example is the Fischerstiege, where the city had already been negotiating a development project at the time when the *non-building plan* was drafted. A restaurant was meant to be built, covering the historical stairs and extending to a platform onto the canal. As a civil engineer, Heindl saw it as her duty to become active and persistently managed to arrange a meeting with the vice mayor, Maria Vassilakou. She there informed the vice mayor about the project, stating that it was not only against the guidelines for the canal, but also politically irresponsible to let an investor change and ultimately destroy this historic public element. After an emergency meeting with all involved parties and the development of alternative solutions, the project was indeed called off.

Public space is fiercely contested – not only because of the growing number of city dwellers, but also because quite some money can be invested in and earned from public space. The fight about public space is a continuous one and it is not always only between the private sector and the public. Recently the Donaukanal has been the subject of discussions due to the lack of trash bins. The city reacted to this problem by illegalising and persecuting the canal's small-scale private beer sellers, claiming this measure would directly contribute to resolving the trash issue on the canal. Heindl instead advocates for regulation on higher levels, as for instance through returnable deposit for cans and bottles or a ban thereof, rather than making examples of small sellers.

"When guidelines such as the Donaukanal Partitur oppose hegemonic ideas and promote anti-neoliberal ideals by saying that development in the city centre does not mean commercialisation and private development - there will be fight. Our plan fights for the rights of people that are much weaker than those who invest to make profit with the city. Public space is a conflict zone between money makers, but in the end we all want to profit. And the question is: what is this profit – is it financial revenue, an image or the right to just be - and how can it be distributed more justly." (Heindl 2018)

On November 30th 2018, architect Mag. arch. Gabu Heindl gave a guest lecture in the framework of the seminar „Sozialer Raum und Diversität - free Space / öffentlicher Raum“ at the Institute of Spatial Planning at the Vienna University of Technology. Heindl's students of the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts were also present, therefore the lecture was held in English.

Quellen

- G. Heindl, S. Kraupp (2014). Donaukanal-Partitur. Gestaltungs- und Entwicklungsleitlinien für den Wiener Donaukanal. Kurzfassung. Magistratsabteilung 19, Wien.