

CUMMA PAPERS #23

CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

An Interview with Gabu Heindl

SITUATING

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RESISTANCE

On Reappropriation
of Public Space

More than ever before, public space is being subjected to private appropriation, commodification, and the hegemony of capitalism. This notion of public space is a common subject matter for both radical architects and radical curators, as they both deal with the physical and social construction of public space while taking into account its political dimension. In both of these professional fields, radical democratic theory has been a strong reference in the rethinking and reappropriation of public and social spaces. Through the lens of this philosophical approach, public space is understood as a conflictual space, opening possibilities for new architectural and curatorial strategies which strive for greater democratisation and equality in contemporary society.

“My interest lies in the contemporary condition of architecture and urban planning within the neoliberal city—the disappearance of public space, and possibilities to reappropriate it.”

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← Gabu Heindl is an architect and urban researcher in Vienna who specialises in public interventions, cultural and social buildings, and urban planning. Through her architectural projects, she questions the use and disappearance of public space, targeting pressing issues (such as speculation, privatisation, gentrification and expropriation) by focusing on the possibilities to reappropriate these physical spaces in the urban environment.

In the following, Heindl discusses contemporary conditions of public space, radical architecture, and urban planning. She addresses the material side of social space, drawing connections between architecture and curation within institutional frameworks. Heindl envisages the future of radical architecture and asks: how can what is doable be done differently?

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Where does your focus of working with the design and re-shaping of public space come from?

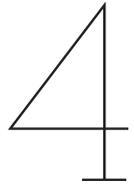
My interest in the public sphere came from realising that by designing public buildings and urban spaces, I can be part of a much larger heterogeneous and anonymous activity (or agency, in the sociological meaning of the term). Public space affects many people and it is also created by the same many people. It is the space that we need for creating subjectivity and meeting others who are different from us. For me to participate in this “making of” is, for example, much more rewarding than a private commission to design a single house for a specific couple. Rather, my interest lies in the contemporary condition of architecture and urban planning within the neoliberal city—the disappearance of public space, and possibilities to reappropriate it.

The political subject has always been a part of architectural discourse, but lately it has gained new urgency and more radical overtones. For example, architect Pier Vittorio Aureli has pointed out the duality of architecture as a profession and as a form, as the “ideology of consensus versus the reality of the conflict”. What is your position in this discourse?

I am a reader of radical democratic theory which conceptualises possibilities of acknowledging conflicts. So, I try to be critical of the ‘ideology of consensus’ in my practice and theorisation, in a similar way to Aureli. By thinking politically in-between the profession—which is related to the consensus and the form of the city, which in turn is related to the reality of the conflict—Aureli rightly critiques the profession of architecture and its history of dedication to consensus. But I think that even though it is a challenge to act critically or even politically within

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the institution or the profession of architecture, it is not at all impossible. In fact, it is rewarding to work on an architecture which would enable, acknowledge, or support a conflict.

For instance, the Italian architect Giancarlo De Carlo beautifully critiques the modernist architects of the twenties who designed apartments for an “existential minimum.” He considers that this generation of architects were using all their creativity for the purpose of how to do it, rather than asking themselves why and for whom: who does it actually serve, and why would an “existential minimum” be needed? Or why would we use our creativity to design apartments to keep people from realising that they are actually the subjects of the “existential minimum”? In this sense, De Carlo also reminds architects of today that before the question of how to do things, we should ask why, for whom and what for.

In the seventies, Manfredo Tafuri certainly drew a rather sobering picture of practicing architects. He saw architects within the “drama of modernity,” as he called it, supporting general injustice and thwarting possibilities of resistance through a kind of appeasement politics.

In the framework of radical democratic theory, what is the potential of spatial and architectonic design of public space to challenge existing power relations? How can spatial design contribute to equality and the democratisation of contemporary society?

Every design of public space, which ever way it is intended, can be repurposed for resistant aims in some way or another. For example, when we discussed Haussmann’s brutal changes to the architectural tissue of Paris, I would say first that it was the most awful way of cutting through a city and destroying the living grounds of workers. But in the end, we may still say that the boulevards created a ground for workers’ resistance and protests. We can never separate the spaces from the subjects: from the

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people who are actually using them, changing them, protesting on them, or resisting them.

I think that public space design could become more active in the redistribution of space or vis-a-vis the accessibility of space, and that this is a matter of spatial architectonic design. The form of certain places itself may have nothing to do with the question of who can enter or not. When it comes to the democratic right to spaces or to accessibility without discrimination, the question is quite often about ownership, or the legal rights to access. Architecture has a lot to do with what it is physically based on: its grounds. With the question of ownership of urban grounds, we enter into the issues of designing not only the formal appearance of the space, but at the same time, the way it could be collectively used or even owned: the way it could be open to different ways of commoning and collectiveness.

You have introduced the term “just architecture” and suggested justice to be taken into account as a planning parameter. Can you elaborate more on this concept and its meaning in the context of materialising social space?

I am interested in the concept of justice mostly with regard to urban planning, even though I know it is a complicated concept. We can see now in parliamentary politics how the concept of a ‘just world’ is used by politicians both on the left and on the right. So, the question is: ‘just’ for whom? This implies a positioning, a radical political stance. Democratic planning would first and foremost include minorities, and definitely not ask majorities for their agreement when it comes to securing minority issues. Here we can question contemporary practices such as participation processes, which are often mainly suited to the interests and lifestyles of majorities.

When I was a guest editor for the Czech magazine ERA 21 and proposed the title *Just Architecture*, my goal was to point out the double

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meaning of this concept. On the one hand, using justice as a planning parameter enables us to look for less unjust forms or conditions of architecture and urban planning. On the other hand, of course architecture alone cannot work towards, let alone ‘create’ a fairer, less unjust world. So architecture is always also ‘just’ architecture in the sense of ‘only’. Architecture alone cannot build a less unjust world. It has to enter into alliances with specified aims and demands and oppositional self-definitions in specific constellations of injustice. Architecture has to enter into chains of equivalence.

There are many common spaces which belong to everyone and no one at the same time, spaces that used to be places of coming together but today are imbued with a sense of isolation. How do you understand those spaces, and how do you think we can reactivate them?

We could consider public space as an ‘infra’-structure which can connect and divide. Public-space-as-dividing-space of course contrasts with concepts of urban planning that have collectivity as their goal. Let’s look for instance at former socialist/communist countries. I just had the opportunity to work on a project in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and this work connects to topics that are central to my overall endeavours: the heritage of modernist architecture and utopianism. What was at stake in Plovdiv was how to reintroduce the notion of community and diversity in the public space between modernist housing blocks, in which all of the apartments are now privately owned by their tenants. The project which I named *The Promises of Modern Premises* dealt with this loss of communality in a space which was ideologically built on the ideas of communism. After the fall of the iron curtain, radical privatisation of real estate (and also of lifestyles) left behind spaces that are completely undefined. This public space—and now we are coming back to radical



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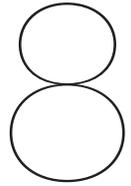
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democratic theory—is essential for confrontation with others, in order for conflict, negotiation and all manners of communication to happen.

Of course, the leftover space between the blocks of flats, in this particular case of the Trakya in Plovdiv, needs to be redefined. We need to profoundly rethink the qualities of space and what its purpose is. A starting point is to define such spaces as common goods. Who actually has access? And who will maintain this space in the future? I believe these discussions should not be kept within one field of expertise, rather, we need to bring together professionals from various fields.

Private and public spaces are being increasingly merged due to profit-oriented public-private partnerships (PPP), which creates a conflictual zone. How can you as an architect, or we as the public, subvert public-private partnerships?

Thank you for that question. It's a great question, because sometimes it looks as if this issue is so detached from the creative processes of architecture. But I believe it is the responsibility of the architect to understand the conditions of the situation in which they are operating. I am happy about a recent architects' protest against plans of the City of Vienna to build schools as PPP, with the private partner controlling the quality and budget. In public building and public space design, we instead have to demand the maximum of comfort, quality, maybe even luxury for exactly those spaces in which society's orthodox 'austerity' perspective would say that what is needed here is support, reform, and standard—but not luxury. What I am getting at here is the maintenance of unwarranted claims, of demands that go beyond the rationale of well-policed social reality. To give you a simple, concrete example: When I planned a school extension in Wiener Neustadt (which is not a PPP project), a town close to Vienna, I advocated strongly that the extension



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should include a roof terrace. I was told that we shouldn't have a roof terrace in this school, because then all other schools would want one as well. But of course, rather than accepting such a reduced or down-levelled minimum quality, we should encourage all schools to demand their own roof terrace. Ultimately an architect can do that (even though it is still "just architecture")—if, of course, others are joining in.

The school received the so-called *Bauherrenpreis* (German Builder's Award), which is awarded to the client. I think that's great, because it supports the role of the client and their participation. The prize was of course not only for the roof terrace, which we finally built, but in large for thinking of this school as a specific place where the kind of changes like the ones I mentioned are possible and encouraged. And this is just as much a part of the architecture as is the design. Architecture is never only done by the architect. The division of work is really a potential as much as it can be a problem. In the end, we shouldn't just fight for the unusual element to be added to a public building, be it a roof terrace or something else; rather, it is important that such a demand is embedded within a bigger structure of support and not only related to a single architect's practice or quality of practice.

Oliver Marchart understands the curator's task as organising the public sphere for conflicts to emerge. How do you see the relation between the architects, who materialise the social space, and the curators, who conceptually enable the social space to happen? How can these two roles empower each other?

Architects and clients, nowadays, are more and more interested in the curation of the space they create. I do not mean only in the context of museums and exhibitions, but the active programming of any particular space. For example: in social housing, in order to form a community



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(to come together and to know each other), social space needs to be organised, or “curated”. Within museums, curators are increasingly organising participatory public debates or research-based projects to stimulate interaction, rather than just organising acts of looking. Hence, whether it is a housing project or an exhibition project, there are a lot of commonalities in terms of spatial practices, of bringing people together. Their tools, however, are different. Architects have a particular role in thinking of physical space in relation to the legal and physical conditions of space, so there are differences between architectural thinking and curatorial thinking. Still, there is a certain contiguity between these two roles. It is a great pleasure and also a great responsibility to be a part of an exhibition team, and to design the best possible spatial concepts and materially to support and emphasise with the curatorial idea. Within the expanding fields of the curatorial and the museum also lies a great potential to overstep the boundaries of the traditional field of art, and to collaborate with other professionals striving together towards the organisation of grounds for debate, conflict, and dissensus.

Architecture has always been expected to be durable in time, while curating is less about spatial durability and more about the durable transmission of an idea through materiality. How do you understand temporality in building projects? Do you consider temporality to be a useful experimentation tool in your practice?

Temporality is, first of all, implied in every project because you can perceive buildings only by moving. More importantly: buildings change, public spaces change, and they should be able to change. I think nowadays new buildings should be robust, and at the same time more easily adapted and reappropriated. As for temporality as an experimentation tool, I think that it is really interesting to experiment with temporal things, and that

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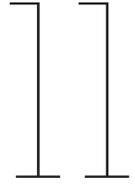
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is why temporary art, exhibitions, and projects in public space are also very useful for testing various ideas and approaches. They can be a sort of temporal laboratory for the possibility of setting ideas into space that could be confrontational, conflictual, and that could really propose substantial questions. On the other hand, I am also critical towards these temporal experimentations because they are often used to test or even to prepare grounds for the privatisation of public space. It is the classical gentrification approach: to use art or temporary installations in public space to explore the possibilities of how it could be used in a profit-oriented way. Therefore, I am a bit careful with looking exclusively positively at the experimental quality of temporality. As it is with everything, whether it is short-term or long-term, it is always a matter of what, what for, why, and how.

What does the future hold for radical architecture? In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges, and what methods or gestures could be employed in order to reclaim and reshape the urban sphere?

First of all, I do not wish for these things to be discussed within the closed circles of specific fields, but rather to bring together different professionals in collaboration. I think there are multiple tasks on various levels that we have ahead of us. The questions that remain in terms of public spaces are: Who will pay for them? Who will maintain them? Who will have access to them? Architectures' dependence on high investment is a big issue in times when city administrations have less and less budget to spend. There are multiple ways to actively support a radical and pragmatic change, and to challenge how the city is currently being targeted by speculation, privatisation, gentrification, and expropriation.

One approach that relates to both curating and architecture is researching and informing the wider public about the current conditions and relationships between capital and built structures. I can hopefully



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stimulate and raise awareness about finding new economic and political ways of redistribution, but what I think we need to do much more of—aside from the analytical critique of the status quo (and this is also my own challenge)—is to actually define, develop, and invent alternatives and real possibilities to show how things could be done differently. And again, from the perspective of temporality, we have the chance to test solutions on a small scale.

Another task would be to find ways that this analysis could go beyond the current state of things by also referring to and reactivating history. For me, a very useful example is the housing policy of Red Vienna in the 1920s. Although it was and is still today based on paternalistic practices of governance (based on the social democratic administration of the city), it is a valid example in the sense of how it was intrinsically linked with a redistribution tax from the rich to the poor. To challenge paternalistic aspects, we have to ask ourselves: how can we actually empower people to become a part of a new redistribution regime? And what are our responsibilities as connected to our professions?

What is already existing, and will increase in the future, is an urgent need for affordable housing. As a citizen, I advocate open borders in the context of migrations, while at the same time as an architect I have to develop mass-housing concepts in the least paternalistic and most empowering way possible. I think that's quite a challenge for us all.

When it comes to our “right to the city”, I see the most pressing urgency is to defend all the spaces that are not within private speculative conditions. We need to make sure that there is enough space left for us to develop new ideas and concepts of public space, and not to risk gradually becoming dependent on the benevolence of private owners in order to allow space for change to happen. We need to invent new supporting tools to protect and to reappropriate public space in the most equal way for everyone. This is the beauty of democratic planning: planning for equal possibilities for everybody, and finding possibilities for sharing and interaction with public space in the most diverse way.

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Heindl has taught at numerous universities like the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, TU Vienna, University of Technology Graz and the University of Technology Delft, and has lectured internationally as an invited guest and critic. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Geijutsu Daigaku in Tokyo, and obtained a Postgraduate Masters with a Fulbright Scholarship from Princeton University.

She is the author of several books and publications in architectural journals (JAE, Volume, UMBAU, GAM, *dérive* a.o.), as well as guest-editor of *Just Architecture*, ERA21 (1.2012), editor of *Arbeit Zeit Raum. Bilder and Bauten der Arbeit im Postfordismus* (turia+kant, 2008) and co-editor of *position alltag—architecture in the context of everyday life* (HDA Verlag, 2009). She has been an editorial board member of UMBAU and the Chair of the Austrian Society for Architecture (ÖGFA) in Vienna since 2013.

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