



Casual Collectives?

An ad-lib exchange on
“young [architectural] groups”
between Dietmar Steiner and
Gabriele Kaiser



Dietmar Steiner, Author and
Director Architekturzentrum Wien
Foto: © Herbert Fidler



Gabriele Kaiser, Author and
Editor “Architektur Archiv Austria”

Dear Gabriele, regarding that rampant phenomenon of the “young groups” that have sprung up all over Europe in the past decade: I admit that I am somewhat at a loss about what to make of it. I know of no text, no theory that would have sparked this movement.

The fact is that European universities and academies have simply churned out too many architects over the past decades. More in any case than the market could absorb. But what is the “market”? Back in the ‘70s and ‘80s, it was the classical architecture firms where young architects spent their apprenticeship with the perspective of opening their own office after a couple of years. All of a sudden, this did not work any longer. Why? Where there less commissions for architects in the 1990s? Maybe. Has the “technology of the profession” changed? In any case, a fundamental change in architectural production has occurred in the 90s of the past century. Architecture has entered the digital age. The computer monitor has replaced the drawing board. I would doubt, though, that this development really brought an increase in productivity and hence cutbacks in employment.

Rather, it can be assumed that it lead to a shift of architectural purview. As there was no more need to return to plans on paper at the architect’s office to discuss the development of a project with individual specialists – structural engineers, construction physicists, facility technicians – and, instead, “data sets” were distributed, a number of activities were outsourced from the architectural office to other places.

I am astounded that so little pragmatic attention and reflection was given to this change in the technique of making architecture. After all, it also entailed a fundamental change in the ways of speaking about the making of architecture, in the forms of communication.

In any case, this change in the technicalities of making architecture was paralleled by a new discussion of the (cultural sociological) image of the architectural profession. Suddenly, the “craft” of the architect – the individual drawing, the sketch, the idea – was no longer the central carrier of an idea, the essential work of art, the foundation of architecture. Suddenly, what counted most was the quantity and quality of communication. With whoever. The message, the logo, the brand.

What resulted from this in the new market of attention was that architecture was emptied of content. The demand is for what is new and chic. Anchorage in the history of the profession has become obsolete. Collective brains-storming substitutes for individual thought; advertising modes of production are infiltrating architectural production. The flexible group, the creative company has superseded the image of the individual ingenious architect who relied on his own capability to search his way.

Dear Dietmar, to me, it is actually not astounding that this young-group phenomenon does not have a meta-text to it, let alone a theory that would have sparked the movement. What was considered a short-lived fashion a few years ago has become normality today, and one would not even think of looking for a statement behind these more or less telling short names. It is a surface phenomenon, and we can leave it at that. After all, a team name or group formation do not say anything about architectural quality, nor has collective brain-storming really taken the place of what you call “individual thought”.

In my view, contemporary architectural production in Austria gives not reason to doubt the potential of the profession. I would even think that the heterogeneous architectural heritage, to put it in simplistic terms, greatly enriches



↑ **Way out 2, Just build it: "addon",**
 temporary useful object, Vienna 20, 2005, Peter Fattinger,
 Veronica Orso, Michael Rieper et.al., photo: Dietmar Steiner



↑ **Way out 1, ReUse: "House on the Coal Mine",** Gliwice,
 built in the 1960s, reuse 2003, medusa group, Przemko Lukasiak,
 photo: Dietmar Steiner
 → photo: Gabriele Kaiser

*You're
 a shining
 Star
 no matter
 who you are*

the building culture of this country, whether you explicitly invoke it, or implicitly respond to it.

On the one hand, the modernist vocabulary, stripped as it is of its avant-garde impetus, and even if employed in the service of consumerism, still holds some material for creative refinement; on the other, this country's strong tradition of "personal styles" has helped to ensure that architecture as a gesture, as an expressive space-sculpting manifestation does not give in to superficialism, but continues to be appreciated, and rightly so, as an idiosyncratic instantiation of articulated space. This field of tension is not a bad terrain to explore, architecturally; you just have to look at what is being built all around, not only in Vienna, Graz, and Vorarlberg, but in all Austrian provinces; there sure are exciting contributions here and there. Quality has always been singular, or have we really seen so many better times? In a world of globalized data transfers, regional identities continue to exist also in architecture, if only because of the differences in topography and mentality, but they are becoming ever less identifiable in terms of schools ("pupil-of-..." genealogies) and isms. I think that this is a liberation that the younger generation of architects can benefit from.

Dear Gabriele, of course, I would admit that there has never been so much so called quality architecture to be seen up and down the country before. Not in the past decades at least. In my view, the reason for this is the new professional self-image of the "young groups" who assertively and brazenly approach clients, instead of wallowing in the self-glorification of unrecognized geniuses. Nor would I doubt that there are lots of gestural, space-sculpting manifestations. But there also are lots of modernist trifles, which may pass, and survive, as contemporary style, but in fact have no real foundation in anything (those kitschy art-decoish jackstraw supports, for example). What I miss about the architectural production of these young groups is some relevant statement about what they do and why.

It's all just being something "modern". Celebrating an academic and acquired notion of modernity that vaguely pretends

to have something to do with the future. The critique of given conditions boils down to little more than complaining that these oh-so-modern young architects are not always allowed to build as they would want to, and that they are not getting enough commissions. In the end, they represent nothing but the 19th-century ideal of the offended genius. If only the contrary were true: we build for a hip minority sailing along with the lifestyle zeitgeist – definitely a minority style – and all we want to do is make life more beautiful and comfortable for our clients. So are all these "young groups" maybe only the adept and gifted decorators of a certain social class? Somehow original, somehow new, somehow different?

Dear Dietmar, if you are not set on walking the high ridges of the architectural canon only, but take time to wander the plains, there is a lot to see that is interesting, and you get a relatively unobstructed view of the architecture. What can thus be gathered from the works of the "young groups", which, incidentally, are anything else that a homogeneous formation (just as the "wonderland" pixels, as far as I can see, don't add up to a European cross, sum) is the mobility of the scene, its robust resistibility as well as its service mentality. The fact that young architects get together into groups often is less a programmatic question, rather than a question of economic conditions; it is a possibility of making a start, and this is more difficult than ever (just think of the hordes of graduates mentioned above). Networking simply is part of the survival training, and the solitary repoliticization of the scene by interest groups such as the "ig architektur" has, to my eyes, little to do with a 19th-century image of the profession.

As long as you consider the young groups in the light of the so-called lifestyle zeitgeist only, no architecture (no matter by which generation) will look particularly profound. I doubt that what you refer to as lifestyle still is a minority program; on the contrary, it should rather be called a mass phenomenon. The question is whether architecture, and in particular the built object, is at all a suitable medium for criticism of those "given conditions". Maybe it is true

that we live in a downtime of architectural theory (unless you divorce theory entirely from architecture), but we can rely on the cyclical nature of history: after all, phases in which cultural production takes the form of manifestos are always followed by periods of implicit implementation "from case to case". Stylizing this into a movement is not a job for architects. Isn't this actually where people like us are supposed to step in?

Dear Gabriele, to keep the discussion open-ended, I shall conclude by flatly contradicting you. The academic lifestyle architecture of the so-called high-quality projects is of course not at all a majority thing, but still a hip insider business without, and this is something I would insist on, any reflection-based message. And what the "ig architektur" does is of course not repoliticization; rather, it is a highly efficient new architectural lobbying agency, perfectly suited for our present time. It is only networks like these that will be able to secure the survival of the architectural profession.

But, and this is something I have come to be certain about, the old architect of modernism is bound to go out of date in the future. Groups get together and part again, or merge with other groups. And some day the big will swallow up the small, and architecture will be offered by companies listed on the stock exchange. I am not talking about the end of architecture here, but about a different type of production that will have become similar to the creative businesses of the advertising industry. The models to follow will then be American architectural firms or the state design studios of China, or Japanese creative construction-industry conglomerates. European architects will then have sacrificed, voluntarily and unforced by external pressures, their culture of difference and their tradition of individual authorship to the communist-capitalist powers of the market. This at least is something that the protagonists of the "young groups" should be aware of. This is why there are no cyclical movements any more that are informed by an alternation of thinking and doing. The "young groups" are an avantgarde that blazes the trail for a new mode of production, without even knowing.