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# The Fight Club

TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER

Meet Austria's most competitive architects. Not only do they eagerly participate in competitions, they are also prepared to tackle awkward subjects like the backwardness of the Austrian Architects Association or the ethical implications of asylum seekers in this conservative nation. In what they describe as a rather boring architectural climate, they are prepared to fight. Every last Friday of the month they step into a self-created arena to debate the quality of their work. 'Hard, straight and really personal.'

## Reactivate Austria



† The Fight Club (from left to right): Bernd Scheffknecht, Christoph Leitner, Erwin Stättner, Markus Bösch, Marion Gruber, Irene Prieler, Günter Mohr, Michael Wildmann and Michael Aigner

Sue Architekten, YF architekten, franz architekten and PLOV Architekten are the real prizefighters.\* The more tactical players are grundstein and Günter Mohr. Erwin Stättner and Robert Diem founded franz architekten in 2009. Since then, they have won many competitions, among which a gymnasium in Gainfarn, a music school in Zwettl and a youth accommodation in Hollabrunn have all been realized between 2012 and 2014. Working 24/7 at querkraft for nine years, without ever having the time to talk, the pair met over a beer at an opening, discovered they had similar ideas, started their own office and won their first project soon after. 'We stopped talking after that... too busy again,' jokes Erwin.

YF Architekten was founded by Markus Bösch and Bernd Scheffknecht in 2007. The Centre of Justice in Eisenstadt is one of their recent projects on the table. Refugee centres and prisons? Is this a typical theme in Austria? 'Hell no, just the kind of public projects that are on offer by the government,' smiles Markus.

Harald Höller of Sue Architekten, lovingly called 'Harry' among the club's members, knows something about fighting since starting work on a detention centre in Vordernberg (see A10 #59) that caused a lot of debate. 'Architects can change the world because they can deal with real problems,' he claims. Since the office's inception in 2006, they have also won the competition for the Salzburg Court of Justice (2015), so this statement is not just coffee table small talk. 'The number of these types of projects fits the climate in Austria, which has the lowest acceptance rate of refugees in Europe. The fact that we are accommodating for this restrictive policy is awkward. Yet, it is also the reality of architecture in which we can at least provide a human environment.' No jokes this time.

That's when Irene Prieler and Michael Wildmann of grundstein step into the arena. The pair is not an office but a collective aiming 'to bring about relevant architecture discourse, ideas and visions'. Both architects, who also met a party, work on the interface between architecture, art and energy-efficient

design. One of their social projects is Bücherschrank Ottakring (in cooperation with artist Frank Gassner), where people can borrow and leave books at an open-air library in a small street in Vienna. Their energy and sustainability projects involve research and small building projects.

Likewise, Günter Mohr has also found different ways to approach architecture. 'First, I tried to do competitions, but I never won. We did a lot of small projects: apartments, small houses. In 2011, I started working with my wife, who is a traffic planner. Now we do stations and railway projects. We bring design into traffic problems. It's more than just numbers and functionalism. We prefer to see traffic as a lifestyle.'

Competitions are a vital element of building a portfolio in Austria. Public authorities are obliged to publish competitions. Private clients can do whatever they want. There are a lot of closed competitions that require participants to pre-qualify. Public competitions are usually open. But the game is changing.

Says Markus, 'When we started, competitions were our only reasonable chance to get work, as we had no connections. There used to be no entrance regulations to enter a competition. Now it's more strict. You need to pre-qualify and you need references, which is harder for starting practices. And it's not always anonymous.' What's also problematic is that competitions are the norm for big projects. According to Irene, 'A hundred schools at the same time, or five kindergartens at once.' Teaming up is a possibility, but 'teaming up doesn't really help in terms of pre-qualifying. We need bigger offices, or engineering offices, to add different qualities to the collaboration,' remarks Erwin.

Günter continues, 'Still, in Austria, we are quite okay. There are competitions and there are assignments. We discussed the architectural climate with Italian architects, for example, and they are way worse off than we are. We should be more positive.'

Harry is not in the mood for relativity: 'I am now on a jury for a school competition. You have to bring three references, one of ten million euros, the other of 80 million. That's too much for us. Isn't it strange that I can be judging competitions that I cannot enter?'

Markus is also in the mood for a riot: 'Why is it necessary to have built a school before at all? But





↑ Detention centre, Vordernberg (Sue Architekten)



↑ Justice centre, Eisenstadt (YF architekten)



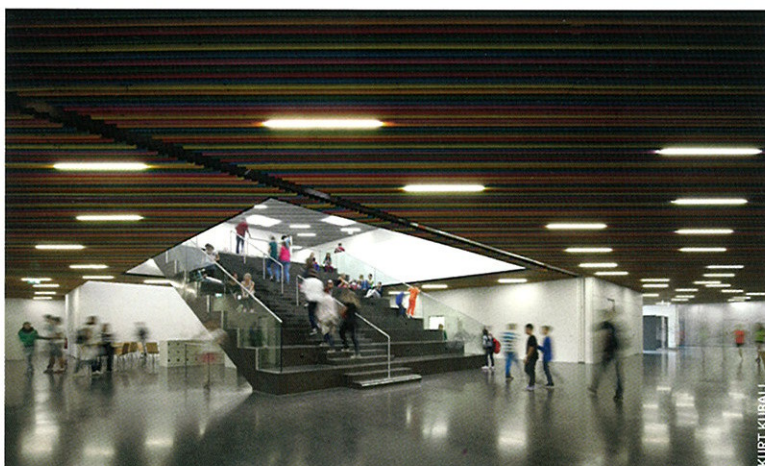
↑ House, Weissenbach (grundstein, bauchplan, AL1, Peter Kneidinger)



↑ Railway station, Korneuburg (Günter Mohr)



↑ Residential development, Salzburg (PLOV Architekten)



↑ Secondary school, Gainfarn (franz architekten)

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clients are usually jurists, not really interested in architecture.' And so the conversation continues. The architects' association should do more. The quality of the judges should be better. But all of that is not what they are actually discussing at the Fight Club.

Robert explains, 'We discuss projects; competitions that we want to participate in. There are three rules: it has to be about work in progress, it must be about a project that has been designed with the aim to be sold, and the comments have to be upfront and personal, hard and straight.' The aim is to build a network, but mostly to get some critique.

'We need conflict,' says Harry. 'We ask the group for advice and then work further.' For the last five years, they have been each other's most severe critics.

'One year ago, we had a competition. We had to finish it on Monday, and on the Friday before we had Fight Club,' says Erwin. 'We showed it, and then Markus said, 'No, you have to do it like this.' And he convinced us. On Saturday morning, we started to change the entire plan, we didn't sleep all weekend, and worked it out just like he had suggested.' He pauses for effect, then continues, 'Two weeks later, Sunday morning. I checked my email, and I couldn't believe it! We had won out of 150 entries!'

Irene steps in, saying, 'I met one of the judges later, and he said that it was not that often that the winner was so clear.' And it didn't even result in an awkward situation. 'It was their project, their drawings, their sleepless nights,' Markus adds.

'But it can be hard,' says Harry. 'A few weeks ago, we were sent home. They said the house we were doing was bad, to do it again. Which we did.'

Erwin, joking again: 'We are only architects, we have no place outside the office.' Half-seriously, Michael responds, 'We usually bring our students, so that we don't have to tell them what everybody said about the plans and can start working right away.'

When asked about international competitions, things again get serious. They have all entered competitions in the German-speaking countries. Says Markus, 'We did a competition in Germany. We got third place. The first three are invited, and then negotiations about money start. Then we withdrew. The jury only does this to get the price down. The first prize should win the project. We sent a letter to the jury, and also to the winner, so that they knew they didn't have us as an enemy; that he didn't need to bargain.'

Grundstein, on the other hand, is trying their luck abroad. 'The scene is becoming very conservative here at the moment. We are interested in energy design and we may have to go somewhere else. Austria has the image of sustainable architecture, but Austrian clients usually want conservative buildings. There is little room for experiment.'

Günter then adds, 'The tendency is going toward public-private partnerships. That might be bad for the profession, because there will be no market for the smaller practices any longer. Or, if it turns towards design and build, it's up to the contractor to choose the

architect. They are used to building for people who build the buildings, and not for people that use them. Architects are still on the ethical side of the game. We are not in it to make as much money as possible.'

What might they actually do to better the situation? Markus responds, 'We could be more involved with the Chamber of Architects. It's not too bad, but not very powerful, either, and it's the only institution that's active.'

According to Harry, 'We should open up more to the public. To explain the importance of architecture.' Irene continues, 'Some of us have been members of IG-architektur, an open network representing the interests of everybody involved within the creation of architecture that tries to open up decrepit structures. It's hard work, but with some engagement even small changes within the law have been possible within the last ten years.'

Günter interjects, 'We often disagree amongst ourselves. We should agree as a group first, before talking to other architects, or the outside world. We could make a stronger statement, if we could decide upon a consensus.'

But first and foremost, they can produce better projects – and help each other to do so, in the Fight Club. Interested? Everyone is invited, any time, to join in and get thrashed (next Fight Clubs: 31 Oct. and 28 Nov. 2014).

\* Marion Gruber and Christoph Leitner, who founded PLOV Architekten in 2009, were not present at the interview.