



Improving detention, Vordernberg

The optimistic drive behind **Sue Architekten**'s centre for illegal immigrants has sparked surprising reactions to a highly sensitive European issue.

AUSTRIA — TEXT: ANNE ISOPP, PHOTOGRAPHY: HERTHA HURNAUS

Harald Höller, Christian Ambos and Michael Anhammer, the partners of Sue Architekten, are used to success. Their conversion of the Gmoakeller, a pub in Vienna, met with a great deal of praise, as did the new local authority building in Ottensheim. But they have received

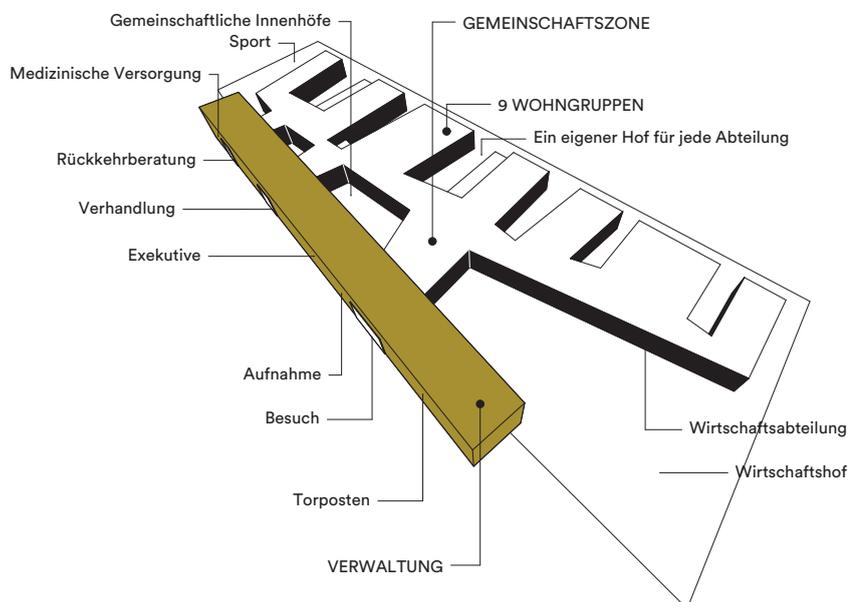
criticism for their latest structure, the detention centre in Vordernberg. 'We have been the subject of fierce attacks – nothing like this has happened to us before,' explains Anhammer. They were not attacked as a result of their architectural work, but due to the fact that they chose

to work on this type of structure in the first place. The Vordernberg detention centre is used to detain people who are present in Austria illegally, awaiting deportation to their home countries. These individuals have not committed any crimes; they simply have no visa.

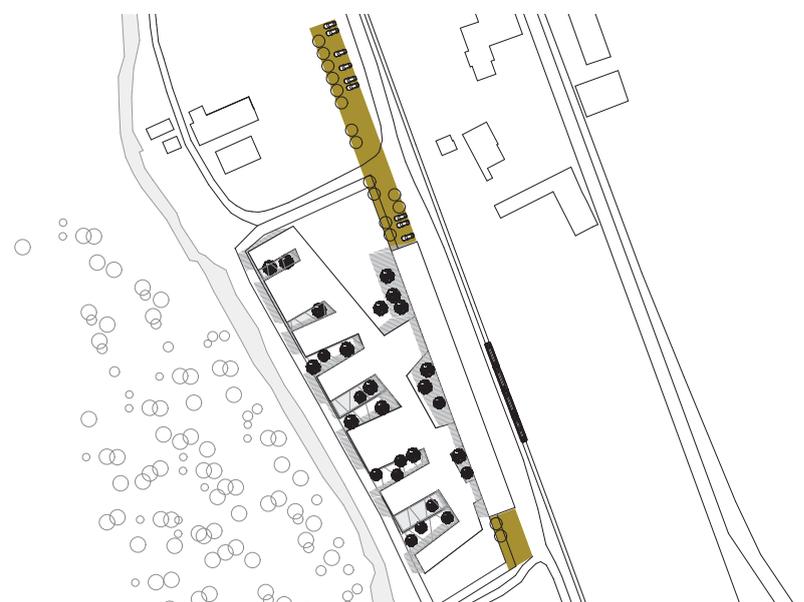
Everyone who participated in the competition had to ask themselves this question: Should we even build something like this? Isn't this making us part of a system that we perhaps do not endorse? From the outset, those at Sue Architekten were aware that there would be opposition in this respect. So why did they decide to work on such a politically sensitive structure, and what was their experience of the project?

Anhammer's reasoning goes back to 2011. At that time, many Viennese architecture firms, including Sue, spoke out against the planned construction of a reception centre for asylum seekers in

↓ Diagram of building functions



↓ Site plan





↑↓ The centre's picturesque setting does not detract from the fact that its function is to secure detainees.



Eberaudo to 'undemocratic and opaque decision-making and inhumane architecture similar to that of military barracks.' Ultimately, the reception centre was not built. Six months later, an announcement of a competition lay on the architects' table. It called for a detention centre where the spatial and functional programme had been approved by the *Menschenrechtsbeirat* (Austrian Human Rights Council). The architects wanted to show that things could be different in Vordernberg; to make a public point with their design. In doing so, they were aware that architecture cannot solve issues like how society deals with immigration, but

they believed that they could at least use architecture to make the detainees' stay as humane as possible.

The detention centre is located at the edge of the community, at the foot of a forest-covered ridge. It consists of a three-storey administrative wing and, attached to its rear, a two-storey, comb-like structure for detainees awaiting deportation. There are a total of nine shared apartments, with all the rooms and residential areas opening onto yards and with views of nature. Up to 200 people can be detained here. In order to create a homely atmosphere, the architects decided to use the most transparent architecture

possible, choosing high-quality materials and providing areas for privacy in the rooms, generous social spaces, and windows without bars.

In official language, the term *Schubhaft* (with emphasis on deportation) has not been used for some time; *Anhaltezentrum* (with emphasis on detention) is the correct term. The choice of words is intended to forge new realities. Official phrasing now speaks of residents rather than detainees, and of rooms rather than cells. Whether this makes any difference to the reality of the detainees is unclear. Undisputed is that Vordernberg offers significantly better conditions than other Austrian detention

centres, which have been frequently criticized by human rights experts.

In recent months, Sue Architekten has repeatedly been forced to vehemently defend the decision to build this detention centre, stating, 'As architects, we are not politically active, but we try to change things through discourse.' To date, there has been little international response to the new centre. Albert Grasel of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior does not expect reactions until the Austrian Ombudsman Board and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) have given their final assessments of the building. ▶

↓ Ground floor



FACTS & FIGURES

At Vordernberg, the personal space allocated to each applicant is 30 m². In Europe, this varies from 4 m² in Belgium and Greece to 15 m² in Sweden.

The number of applicants per staff member varies from 11–13 persons in Finland to 170 persons in Austria, whereas in Vordernberg it is roughly 2 persons.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) criticized the lack of medical attention and possibility of legal support in Austrian detention centres after the death of a detainee during a hunger strike in 2009.

Vordernberg has its own medical facility with doctors and 24-hour support.



↑ Lobby area ↓ Visiting room



↑ The lightness of materials opens up interior spaces. ↓ Common areas



(Improving detention, Vordernberg)

However, opponents of the centre certainly have responded. As Anhammer recounts, wherever the architects were invited to talk about it, activist opponents were also turned up, disrupting the events by throwing stink bombs and making noise.

When paint bombs and stones started to rain against the firm's office windows, they realized discussion was impossible.

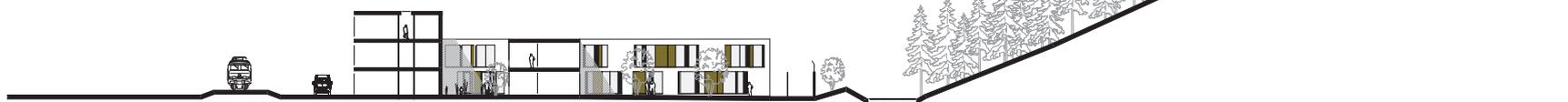
The completion of the detention centre establishes hard facts (based on applicable European laws, as we must not forget). However, it has also shed new

light on the issue of deportation practices, and should be taken as an opportunity to question these and engage in constructive discussion on the matter. As of mid-July, 25 people were detained in Vordernberg – capacity far exceeds current demand. ◀

DETENTION CENTRE, 2012–2014

Architect	Sue Architekten
Established	2006
Client	BIG Bundesimmobiliengesellschaft m.b.H.
Address	Hauptstrasse 162, 8794 Vordernberg
Info	www.sue-architekten.at

‘The architects wanted to show that things could be different; to make a public point with their design.’



↑↓ Sections



↑↓ Elevations

