

Free Your Mind and the Buildings Will Follow

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‘What do you mean I can’t bring it on the plane?’

‘Sorry sir, but that box is too big.’

‘But I had it with me on the same plane, with the same crew, last night...’

The architect’s nightmare: trying to combine business with pleasure. Here I was, standing at the check-in at Sarajevo airport with a model of my housing project in Vienna, which I had already worked on for three years, tucked under my arm. The box had come with me the previous day, on a trip to attend my cousin’s wedding in Bosnia taking the usual route via Vienna. The cunning plan was to stop off in Vienna on the way back to meet with clients and try to sell them my vision. The model was crucial as it portrayed the newest iteration of project, being the last in a series of previously rejected ones.

Sarajevo airport isn’t big, the plane was standing there right in front of me, with the crew lazing about by the departure gate. My professional life was now entirely

dependent on this chain-smoking gate attendant. It was 2008, and smoking indoors was still allowed in Bosnia.

The following story is a testimony about making of a large housing project in Vienna. As a young architect in his formative years, living in Oslo, I acted as a main protagonist. Realising this project over the ensuing twelve years was a marathon, a continuous struggle on a multitude of levels, from decisions on major issues to getting down to the nitty-gritty; from initial discussions about the overall volumetric to negotiations about what colour the doors should be. The saga ended in October 2017, when the then President of the Austrian Parliament, Doris Bures, officially opened the housing complex during the days leading up to Austria's parliamentary elections.¹

In 2005, I had returned to Norway after finishing my MA at Columbia University in New York. As a Fulbright

¹ The developer *Wien-Süd* is an acknowledged supporter of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*. Since the interwar period and the grand residential development program, *The Red Vienna* housing production has been one of the party's priority issues.

scholar with a burning ambition to enter the ‘European’ Competition, my self-confidence was at an all-time high. The European is a biennial competition for architects under 40, with a brief to design innovative housing schemes for sites across Europe. I planned to enter the competition with two good friends of mine, former students of Trondheim’s NTNU University.² The competition encourages architects to address urban socio-economic change, and offers the architects and site developers many opportunities for cross-cultural learning and networking. Out of over seventy-five possible European locations, a single one would be chosen.

Being children of the 90s, seduced by concepts such as *metropolitan condition*, *bigness* and *the generic city*, influenced our selection criteria: the site had to be in a big city and involve a wide variety of different terrain types and challenges. We chose Liesing, a 300 m x 50 m site in the 23rd district of Vienna (a city that combined all that). Facing one of the longer sides was a railway line

² The competition team was a collaboration between architects Mirza Mujezinovic, Sinisa Lecic and Bendik Aursand.

and container site. Opposite the other stood a seven-storey, 250-meter-long housing block. This ‘ground zero’ was brutal, to say the least: it had a total absence of readability and obvious qualities; it offered ‘something completely different’.

A few months later, we became the first Norwegian team to win European outside Norway. (Prior to that, young Norwegian architects had only won it at home, not abroad.) The dice was thereby thrown.

Back to the Roots

The competition rules stipulated a land use of 200%, with a building volume of 30,000 square meters, divided into 75% housing and 25% other facilities (shops, district library, youth centre, etc.). In addition to being a challenging spot, the site featured a planned walkway over the railway on the southern end. From the very first moment it was crystal clear that we could not submit to a ‘traditional’ typological approach. The expected density was high and the plot was hemmed in by the surrounding

structures, despite its significant size. Taking advantage of the existing context did not lead anywhere. The writings of renowned urban theorists like Krier, Rowe and Gehl sat idle on the bookshelf like unused ammunition.

In order to solve the brief, we had to return to the beginning, go back to the roots as it were, to the source of modernism itself. All our architectural inspirations (and preferences) were taken from there anyway. The inner logic of the amenities themselves, as well as their interrelationships, created the framework for the project. Access to the pedestrian bridge became a core structural element. We formulated a 250-meter-long street with courtyard housing on each side, creating a new topography on the site: a continuous residential landscape culminating in a roof terrace with 360-degree views of Vienna. Below the inclined plane of the courtyard houses lay all other amenities, such as a local library, shops, youth club, etc.

After an uplifting summer came a stagnant autumn. The project halted in anticipation of a new developer and the re-zoning process became even more crucial. And on a

personal level, the competition team – or ‘winning team’ – never materialized. ‘We’ was reduced to ‘I’.³

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Two years later, the project was taken over by the development company Wien-Süd, one of the city’s heavyweights, which had existed since 1913. The company’s slogan, *Wir gestalten Lebensraum*, underlined that the focus was exclusively on housing construction. Architects in their portfolio were established offices, among them Coop Himmelblau and Harry Glück. The latter was a key figure in the large-scale residential building apparatus in the city. With Wien-Süd came new premises: the construction was to be converted into a residential complex alone, and the walkway over the railway was dropped.⁴

³ The only thing that survived the collaboration was the office's name: MALARCHITECTURE, although it was an abbreviation of Mujezinovic-Aursand-Lecic. The reason why I kept the name was mainly its self-ironic connotations: Mal in Norwegian is ‘template’, Mal in Latin refers to ‘error’, Mal in Bosnian means ‘small’.

⁴ In Vienna, housing subsidies are a common way of financing developments. About 25% of all new homes in the city are built through such a scheme. Here a flat is rented for 10-15 years, the tenant makes a deposit of 15,000 euros (which is refunded on departure), monthly rent of a three-room apartment (about 75 sqm) is around 450 euros, access to pool, gym, laundry and parking is included.

The big question now was to what extent the initial competition proposal corresponded to the new reality. The project could work well either with or without the intended walkway. Its role was what in the movies is called a MacGuffin, a tool that triggers the action, a ‘bridge’, so to speak. However, changing the concept – which was initially multi-functional – to a purely mono-functional housing program was more problematic, both from an urban and an architectural perspective. Should you squeeze the housing program and bastardize the original project out of existence, or should you propose a whole new project? Still fresh in the memory was OMA’s wonderful project for the new library complex in Oslo.⁵ Due to various political bargains and fierce opposition from the local landmark commission, the library project gradually altered, and with it, its initial urban ambitions. The project was slowly drained of its initial verve. In Austria, I preferred to avoid being part of a similar slow-motion car crash, thank you very much. So I ‘killed my darlings’ and started from scratch. As

⁵ In the early 2000s OMA / Space Group won the competition to design the new central library adjacent to the famous City Hall. The project fused the library with a proposed hotel, office complex and the existing Nobel Peace Center.

Monty Python put it: And Now For Something Completely Different!⁶

From Karl Marx Hof to Malahof

To start a new project in the ruins of the old, the initial competition proposal had to be surgically dissected – carefully selecting which ideas to pursue, and which to cut out, like cancerous tissue. Urban development models from Norway were already way too out of date to employ here. Norwegian urban design ‘shtick’ is based on a clunky combination of the ‘square-street-*karree*’ and a clichéd fragmentation of building structure. As I’ve already said, my preference was for modernism, or to be more precise, its more dynamic subgenre ‘structuralism’, which blurs the distinctions between ‘city’ and ‘architecture’. For example, projects such as Corbusier's *Unité d’Habitation*, Candilis-Josic-Woods’ *Berlin Free University* and the Japanese metabolist Tange’s plan for the Bay of Tokyo all had a remarkable belief in

⁶ On the opening day, I asked the project manager from *Wien-Süd* what would have happened if I had doubled down on the original project. With a strong German accent, *Inglorious Basterds* style, he replied: ‘Mister Muezzinovitz, you would be on the first flight back to Schweden!’

architecture extending beyond the scope of one single building. This macroscopic philosophy had an overall mission to reinvent *habitus* itself, to suggest new ways of living in the city. Parallel to these majestic ideas, another contradictory but equally ‘utopian gone dystopian’ reference was central: the Italian radical rascals of the 1960s, especially the *No-Stop City* paper project by *Archizoom*. These avant-gardist’s complete denial of architecture, rather than urbanization, offered a fascinating conceptual and formal iconography.

Through this liberating mashing-up of both my faith in and mistrust in architecture, dialectically speaking, the new project began to find its shape. ‘Free your mind, and the architecture will follow!’ became my mantra.

Further, it had to be an autonomous object, confrontational in its form in contrast to the existing city. Thinking on a big scale would both challenge ways of living and also encourage the ‘social glue’ in the new residential complex itself. In this way it paid homage to the local housing tradition born during the inter-war period through the *Rotes Wien* housing policy program,

whose key project was the heroic *Karl Marx Hof* complex.

Play it Again, Sam!

If the framework of the project came from an abstract world of ideas, my guidelines for the ongoing process were rooted in reality and in what I had learned from Norwegian urban development. Understandably, any project tends to develop in phases – from zoning, through planning application, to the detailed proposal, where zoning alone defines 90% of potential real estate value. In this preliminary phase, vague typological and organizational decisions are often made. These are difficult to implement in a satisfactory way later, due to the fact that zoning is regarded in the abstract, removed from its final physical incarnation. Take the process with Oslo's *Regjeringskvartalet* (Government Quarter) as an example: a misguided (if not actually false) premise is clearly visible in the way the key government buildings have been handled after Norway's 22/7 terrorist attack.⁷

⁷ On 22 July 2011, a terrorist attack by a lone far-right nationalist assaulted government buildings in Oslo and a Labor Party youth camp at Utøya.

The zoning plan, produced by one of the largest architecture corporations in Norway, acrobatically collaged the initial studies into an abstract, ungraspable reality. First, after the results of the final architectural competition were unveiled, it became clear that the zoning plan had defined a governmental complex with an all-time-high areal density, translated into an ambiguous urban form.⁸ Rather, in my project, I was convinced that zoning is architecture, precisely because it a priori presupposes a certain tangible, three-dimensional reality.

Therefore, the project goal was to enforce a specific, although flexible, 1:500 volumetric, which addressed the typological and organizational questions with ingenuity. The layout of the apartments was important, but even more essential was the overall notion of what a residential unit could be within a larger structure. Part of this intricate interaction also included conceptualization of the social space: the common areas both indoors and outdoors. The project followed two archetypal leads: a

⁸ The client (the Norwegian government) has recently urged the planning team to reduce the size of its future complex.

horizontal housing ‘carpet’ and a vertical apartment ‘slab’ with depths of 48 and 24 meters, respectively. These proposed depths were deliberately set too deep, to avoid ending up with a conventional traditional solution. Zoned volume depths explicitly presuppose specific typological and organizational solutions, but when a traditional shape is radically scaled up, it yields a totally new set of freedoms and constraints.

The residential carpet would offer an internalised way of living, conceptualized around an atrium house with an adjacent system of downplayed common areas. The slab was the opposite: a Corbusier-style ‘living machine’ that would maximize the apartments’ outdoor areas – balconies and loggia.⁹ In addition, it offered an eight-storey public interior space that connected the street level to the roofscape, bridging different urban situations. If the street suffered from a suburban mediocrity, the roof offered an extraordinary urban experience: a space for urban agriculture, a 25-meter swimming pool, gym with

⁹ The slab has 182 apartments, of which 68 two-room units (50-55 sqm), 110 three-room units (70-75 sqm) and four four-room units (90-95 sqm). The carpet has 68 atrium houses of 100-125 sqm, with four units organized around an inner courtyard.

sauna, and a magnificent 360-degree view of the Viennese metropolis.

Vienna or Bust

Piquing the developer's curiosity was relatively easy – it happened instantly when I finally transported the box of models to Vienna after sweet-talking the ground staff at Sarajevo airport. The big entrepreneurs had their own tried and tested ways of doing things,¹⁰ and capturing their attention was a challenge.¹¹ In addition, the economic crisis was sweeping across Europe in 2008, just after the project had restarted. The rules relating to housing subsidy construction loans were radically rewritten: 'Smart' apartments were introduced, 10% smaller than the regular ones, and they were supposed to comprise 30% of the overall quantity.

¹⁰ *Wien-Süd* lease land long-term (for 100 years) from a municipal property company. This is common practice in Vienna where housing developers get access to cheap plots in exchange for building affordable homes. After the rental period expires, the property is returned with the building to the original landowner. The housing developer is legally obliged to keep the property in good condition until the handover. Therefore, the building must be robust to minimize ongoing maintenance costs.

¹¹ To paraphrase Monsieur Candy's 'Gentlemen: 'You had my curiosity, now you have my attention.' From the movie *Django Unchained*.

The conditions were complicated, but the assignment presented too much of a great opportunity: these 250 apartments would provide homes to 800 people. There was no time for play, Howard Roark! The dirty reality of the project had to be dealt with, and not with an antagonistic attitude, but as a structural tool that could enable some quality design and architecture. On the one hand, I accumulated knowledge independently of the project team, precisely to gain advantages over the developer. For example, designing repetitive atrium houses was a science in itself, as this type was difficult to realize within the subsidy system, due to the mismatch between unit's net floor area and the gross exterior wall area. Through a dialog with a local architect with no affiliation to the project, I got inside information about gross net area ratio – illustrated, explained and subsequently signed on a scrap of napkin in a bar.

As a young architect with an address on the other side of the European continent – ‘where the metal frame enters the globe’, so to speak – and with a limited office infrastructure, I knew I was in a vulnerable position. I had to persuade the big developer and my co-working

company in Vienna to fully get on board with the project.¹² Any architectural proposal should be executed without the youthful bravado that often taints young and promising talents. Oslo designed, Vienna calculated. My imperative was to maintain conceptual clarity and an understanding of the overall project, as seen from the perspective of different resolutions, from 1:500, to 1:100, to 1:1. The project was re-drawn three times and I knew exactly where its weak points were. Practice makes perfect, no matter how sado-masochistic that may sound! Attention was paid when the slab's characteristic zigzag façade was presented, the atrium houses were resolved, and the net/gross area ratio was in accordance with the expected real estate rationale.

In the aftermath, it was fun to see how the developer had cut-and-pasted much of the atrium house design into their later projects, although they were strongly against this type in the first place. From there I was fully responsible for the project until the building permit, including project documentation presented to the subsidy

¹² The local cooperation office, which, in addition, the developer had a short-travelled, long-term relationships with, was *Atelier 4 Architekten*.

jury, *Grundstücksbeirat*, consisting of architects, economists and engineers. It received a standing ovation, and the project was guaranteed funding, which rarely happens on the first attempt. Architectural details were drawn in Oslo, while work drawings, *Polierpläne*, were made in Vienna. There was a lot of correspondence, and, although I say it myself, the decisions often played out in my favor. Twelve years of hard labor were finally compiled into a 2000-page book!

Learning from Malahof

It was a happy ending. Unlike newly constructed housing projects in the neighborhood, the apartments in the complex were quickly leased out, a situation the developer had seldom experienced in its 100-year history. I also continue to receive many greetings from satisfied and committed residents through the housing cooperative's Facebook page. Perhaps one of the most touching responses took place at the day of opening when an older lady had told me that she got a new energy in her life due to experience of living in the zig-zag part

of the slab. It may be a placebo, but I choose to believe architecture does matter.

In the past years one has witnessed the rise of social consciousness and activism in relation to space production processes. Among others, notions of participation and social sustainability have given a rise of an interdisciplinary context within which architecture is made secondary to other disciplines and professions partaking. But, the making of Malahof assumed another path. Its underlying thinking rested on a clear architectural approach defined by a structural logic, supported by a conceptual attitude towards the housing program. My irrational fascination for 'big scale' functioned as a departure point. Looking back at the process has made me think that the discipline of architecture is absolutely fundamental in keeping the architect relevant within the overall space production processes. I see Malahof primarily as an architectural response to the reality of real estate capital, which today, by the way, is becoming increasingly complex, demanding and unfair. I believe that one needs to go

beyond the well-known generic narratives of ‘soft’, ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’, in order to re-imagine housing production. An intrinsic part of this discussion is to question modes of living and their potential architectural translations. This is my great lesson from Vienna, recently voted the world’s most liveable city.