

CITY VS CITIZENS

_angewandte _social design _2023 _GALA KUCKHOFF _RITA ANDRADE

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abstract

The structures provided by the city play a decisive role in “who” and “for what” the space can be used. Through the design of objects, materials and composition, certain actions are enabled and others prevented. These boundaries and behaviors were our starting point.

Taking Vienna as an example, “City vs Citizens” was triggered by our own privilege: how the access to private space affects the way we experience public space? As an exercise, we tried to be more intentional while walking in the city and notice what it is being said to us through Design. Based on the concepts of Hostile Design and Defensive Architecture, our project revolves around the design of public space and the permanent process of negotiation between who designs it and who uses it.

“Hostile Design” and “Defensive Architecture”, even if different, pursue the common goal of preventing certain actions and forms of use. In our theoretical research, we found helpful definitions and examples for these topics, but we also learnt how there is a big debate around their limits and what separates them. For the architect Gabu Heindl “hostile” is the most appropriate term for the practice of expulsion, “it is often called Defensive Architecture, but nothing is defended there, it is an aggressive act”¹.

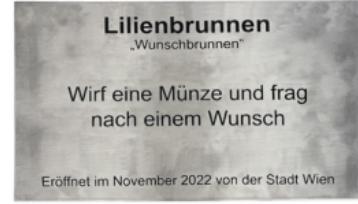
We also understand that a space that might feel hostile for some can be appealing to others and that safety questions are often raised in this context. And even if we actively tried to notice the limits that were being imposed, our social context and extent of knowledge doesn't allow us to build a strong opinion on how and if they should be changed. We felt reluctant to consider something “hostile”: From what perspective should we look at these spaces? And are entitled to speak for others?

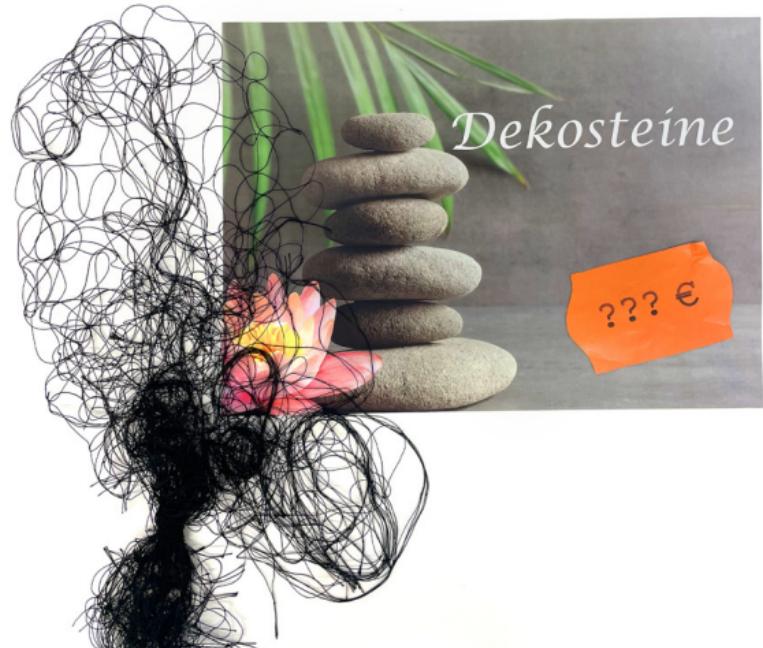
With these questions in mind, we naturally moved away from classifying designs as “hostile” or “defensive” and started working with more intuitive feelings, as “discomfort” and “restriction”.

As a product of that exercise and research, we selected five spaces. Their design, arrangement or placement were put in question in an exaggerated or partly ironic way. The project consists of five interventions in public space, where we used the same exact strategies that were used to create the boundaries in the first place: modifying, adding up or removing.

In context, the project critically, but playfully, works around the questions: Who decides what behavior is desirable in public space? How is the city budget spent? For whom is the public space for?

tools





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1/5

Location: Christian-Broda-Platz, 1060 Wien

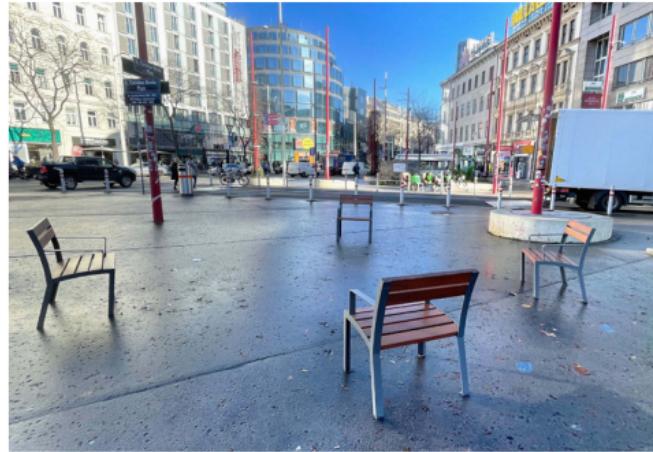
What: chairs

Focus: the distance between them

Method: removing















The sitting area formed by these chairs felt inadequate for both strangers and friends. Facing someone so directly, but simultaneously not being able to interact closely was inhibiting us, and (as far as we could observe) most people, from using the space.

After removing the screws and playing with the distance of the four chairs, we left them in the original position but facing the opposite direction. Shortly after, the chairs were used and left in different organic arrangements, which suggested a previous wish for control over the layout of this sitting area.

During the following weeks, we kept track of the settings created by people using the chairs until they were screwed back in by the city.

2/5

Location: Karl Lueger Platz, 1010 Wien

What: bench

Focus: armrests

Method: adding up















By adding extra armrests, the overall appearance of the bench was exaggerated. By reducing the size of the seat, new possibilities for movement were created.

[GER] "Breite Armlehnen zerschneiden die Sitzfläche. Liegen kann hier niemand, von schlafen gar nicht zu sprechen. Sich aneinanderlehnen ist nicht drin, die Tasche muss auf den Schoß. Was soll sie also, diese Bank? Eine Aufstehhilfe für ältere Menschen können die Lehnen sein. Aber eine Bank, die Gruppen von Menschen gegeneinander ausspielt, widerspricht doch sehr dem Ziel der öffentlichen Meublage". (Pühringer, 2023)¹

[ENG] "Wide armrests cut through the seat. No one can lie down here, not to mention sleep. Leaning against each other is not possible, the bag has to go on the lap. So what is it for, this bench? The backrests can be an aid for older people to get up. But a bench that plays groups of people off against each other contradicts the goal of public meublage". (Pühringer, 2023)

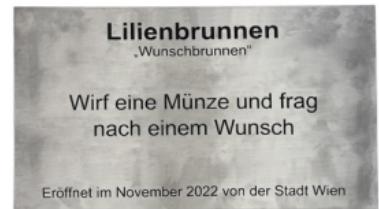
3/5

Location: Lilienbrunngasse 2-4, 1020 Wien

What: ventilation system of an apartment building

Focus: concrete structure

Method: adding up















By adding a small sign saying “Lilienbrunnen. Wirf eine Münze und frag nach einem Wunsch”, the concrete structure was temporarily transformed into a wishing well. The assumption that the fountain was erected by the City of Vienna sparked a debate about the design of public space.

[GER] „Dieser „Wunschbrunnen“ war Top -Thema bei den Wiener Twitter-Nutzerinnen und - Nutzern am vergangenen Wochenende. Manche nannten es „Wiens Fontana di Trevi“, mit Anspielung auf den weltbekannten Brunnen in Rom. Berechtigterweise stellen sich viele Fragen: Warum sieht es so aus? Wie viel hat es den Steuerzahler gekostet? Wozu ist dieses Bauwerk gut?“ Doch ist es wirklich ein „Wunschbrunnen“, oder ein Abluft- bzw. Zuluftschacht von einer Garage, wie ein Nutzer schreibt? Zuerst wusste es auch die Stadt Wien nicht. „Ähm, wir fragen da mal nach“, schreiben sie – jedoch: „Nur weil ein Taferl drauf ist, heißt es nicht automatisch = Stadt Wien“. Die Antwort hatte die Wiener Landtagsabgeordnete und Gemeinderätin Astrid Rompolt (SPÖ). Die Kommunikationsleiterin der MA 31 (Wiener Wasser) schreibt, dass es sich um die Druckbelüftungsanlage für den Gemeindebau daneben handelt: „Sie wurde im Zuge der Sanierung errichtet und wird im Brandfall aktiviert. Die Lüftungsgitter fehlen noch“. Dieses schicke Architektengold ist also noch nicht fertig. Und das

Brunnen-Schild wurde sicherlich nicht von der Stadt Wien draufklebt. „Sonst würde es eine feierliche Eröffnungszeremonie mit Bezirksvorstehung geben“, scherzt ein Nutzer. (MeinBezirk, 2022)²

[ENG] “This “wishing well” was the top topic among Viennese Twitter users last weekend. Some called it “Vienna’s Fontana di Trevi”, alluding to the world-famous fountain in Rome. Justifiably, many questions arise: Why does it look like that? How much did it cost the taxpayer? But is it really a “wishing well”, or an exhaust or supply air shaft from a garage, as one user writes? At first, the City of Vienna didn’t know either. “Um, we’ll ask about it,” they wrote - but: “Just because there’s a sign on it doesn’t automatically mean it’s the City of Vienna”. The answer came from Vienna’s Member of Parliament and local councillor Astrid Rompolt (SPÖ). The head of communications of MA 31 (Vienna Water) writes that it is the pressurised ventilation system for the municipal building next door: “It was built in the course of the renovation and is activated in case of fire. The ventilation grilles are still missing”. So this sheer architect’s gold is not yet finished. And the fountain sign was certainly not stuck on it by the City of Vienna. “Otherwise there would be a festive opening ceremony with district leaders,” jokes one user.” (MeinBezirk, 2022)

4/5

Location: Meiselmarkt, 1050 Wien

What: garage vent

Focus: fences around fences

Method: adding up















With this intervention, we tried to not only exaggerate the existing characteristics, but also create a visual representation of an idea we had: taking a fence and using it as a ladder. These two objects can be so similar visually but serve completely opposite purposes. And since our project was based on boundaries, we thought it would be interesting to try using a limit to overcome a limit.

This structure in the middle of a pedestrian street felt ideal to explore this metaphor. The double fence and walls created physical limits, but its oddness and dimension also felt restrictive and unwelcoming. We tried to add on to the absurdity of the construction, by creating a third fence.

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Location: Praterstern, 1020 Wien

What: stones as seatings

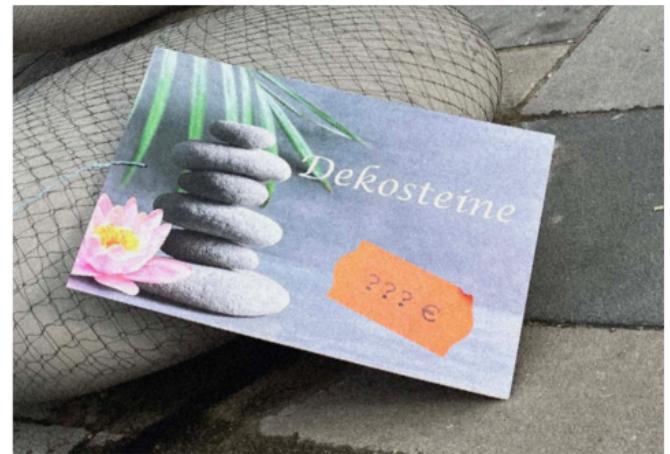
Focus: the shape

Method: adding up















Since the reopening of the Praterstern, the seating stones have sparked a heated debate about their usability. Some see them as hostile to homeless people, others as mere decoration, to play with that, we “packaged” them.

We added a huge net with a price tag that hints at the value of the stones and thus questions the transparency of the cost of new benches.

[GER] “Eine neue Lieferung an “Sitz-Bänken” sorgte nun für Aufregung – wir berichteten. Während so mancher über die kurios geformten “Eier” lacht, finden wieder andere die “Bänke” so gar nicht lustig. Von “obdachlosenfeindlich” und unpassend für Ältere und Menschen mit Behinderungen ist die Rede.” (Yvonne Brandstetter, 2022)³

[ENG]“A new delivery of “benches” has now caused a stir - we reported. While some people laugh about the curiously shaped “eggs”, others do not find the “benches” funny at all. There is talk of “anti-homeless” and unsuitable for the elderly and people with disabilities.” (Yvonne Brandstetter, 2022)

after

The five interventions started from the same thought and ended in the same publication, but in between took some different paths. Some of them translate our ideas in more efficient ways than others. We tried to work fast and intuitively around the selected spaces, which brought us to different processes and outcomes.

There was no intention to classify designs as “hostile” or even change them in a productive way. Our actions aimed to make certain characteristics of a space exaggerated and the existing limits more obvious for us and others.

Some interventions triggered interesting reactions that reassured us the intuitive feelings of “discomfort” and “restriction” that we relied on when choosing the spaces that were not exclusive to us.

In the first intervention, in the 6th district, unscrewing the chairs gave people the option to change the placement of the chairs and for the following weeks we saw an increase in use and various different layouts. The new positions of the chairs suggested interactions and comfort. It is also important to mention that even after we removed the screws, the chairs were not easy to move, which proved to us how intentional the new arrangements were and pointed to a previous wish for control.

Our third action, in the 2nd district, unexpectedly got the most attention. We initially asked ourselves if the structure would fit the project, since it didn't necessarily represent a boundary or limit to the users of the space. But the reactions to the intervention showed us that our questions and impressions about the space were valid.

Seeing previously existing concerns being brought to social media and thinking it was triggered by our small and absurd addition to the already absurd situation was a high point of our project.

The title “City vs Citizens” felt adequate to our actions: we were trying to play with the relationship between who designs the city and who uses it. During the process, our role in this dynamic was unclear and we were perceived as both “the city” and “the citizens”. This exercise was valuable for us and the process feels adaptable for future ideas and contexts.

links

¹ Der Standard, Julia Pühringer, 3. January 2023

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000142240790/wem-gehoeren-die-bankerl-in-der-stadt>

² MeinBezirk, 5. December 2022

https://www.meinbezirk.at/leopoldstadt/c-lokales/wunschbrunnen-der-stadt-wien-sorgte-fuer-lacher-im-netz_a5751202

³ Heute, Yvonne Brandstetter, 12. July 2022

<https://www.heute.at/s/ungemuetlich-wiens-sitz-eier-lassen-wogen-hochgehen-100216988>

“Wunschbrunnen” articles

<https://hostilevienna.wordpress.com/bildersammlung/>

<https://wien.orf.at/stories/3185203/>

<https://urlis.net/omkxnv6>

https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20221207/stadtrand/_07d4f97dec

<https://www.heute.at/s/heute-klaert-das-raetsel-um-wiener-wunschbrunnen-100242684>

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