



Katharina Urbanek: User emancipation is essential for architecture

With the unsustainable real estate situation in Slovenia, accompanied by a chronic housing shortage and astronomical prices that few can afford, the importance of considering social sustainability is increasingly anchored in our discourse. For examples of good practice, we can already look to neighbouring Austria (especially Vienna), where there are various alternative housing models that promote and enable social sustainability, solidarity and community living. I had an in-depth discussion about this with the Viennese architect Katharina Urbanek (1981), the author of numerous projects, including two residential neighbourhoods based precisely on community living. Katharina Urbanek was part of studio uek between 2008 and 2018 and has been running her own practice studio urbanek since 2018. Her work focuses on researching and designing public and private spaces that are best able to interpret and activate the potential of the existing and offer a variety of possibilities for everyday use, which in turn emancipate the user.

It seems to me that your work has a lot to do with a participatory aspect of architecture. How would you describe your work?

I used to work in a group of three architects and now I have my own small office and cooperate with other offices a lot. Besides, I do some research and teaching at TU Wien. I would say that on one hand, I am interested in large scale visions – both social and spatial – as they are formulated in urban planning. And on the other hand I am fascinated by the very small scale of everyday architecture – how life is articulated in space. I am really curious about the relationship between these two scales: how ideas are translated into town planning regulations, and how these urban regulations turn into something physical, into our lifespaces. But at the same time, how our use of space is influencing and changing it. In this aspect of participation you are asking about, I would call it an involvement of the user, even an emancipation of the user in a sense. I think architecture should provide a certain robustness that allows further adaptation and change while at the same time survive and keep its architectural qualities.

It seems that for you, the user is always the priority – even if the project is not a participatory project per se, you always think about how to build such houses that would engage and emancipate him or her.

Yes. It is very important to me to think of how architecture can be open and receptive for future changes, needs and life situations. In Baugruppen projects the user is known in advance so his or her involvement is happening directly and already in the planning phase. This allows for different answers to directly questions that appear during planning. In any case – whether the user is known in advance or not – allowing short-term and long-term adaptability is crucial to my practice.

How would you describe a situation of 21st century architecture? Do you believe that architecture has a relevant position in reshaping the existing or is it just another form of making profit, following capitalist reality?

In a way, it is both. On the one hand, architecture is a big business with a lot of money, actors and profit interest involved. Thus, we are definitely expected to create an added market value. However, I really think that architecture betters the world – though I don't think we should take our profession too serious, especially because people from the outside often don't recognize the self-proclaimed importance of architects as shapers of the world. The most important decisions we as architects have to make are about what we do and what we don't do. I want to do things that I think make sense on a bigger scope and I try to be as independent as possible so that I don't have to accept commissions only for the money. I am of course talking from a privileged position, because in Austria, we still have strong public clients and commissions. There is a big tradition of public housing that is still very much alive (especially in Vienna) but there are also other competitions with demand for social responsibility. There are lots of possibilities for architecture that is based on something other than profit. But I am of course well aware that the situation in many other countries, where the public sector has shrunk, is very different and many architects cannot choose which projects they would like to do and which not.

What I would underline is, that as architects, we have a strong interest in something like a strong public sector. Not just as our client but also as a security for quality, responsibility and discussion. I consider my work very much within the framework of society while at the same time adding a certain quality, a position to the society as it is. Thus, the best position you can sometimes have, is not to do anything, not to accept the project. I always ask myself: "Can I argue for the good solution?" Our land is being sold in order to build shopping malls and these are the situations in which we should ask ourselves: "Can I really add any value to this project if it is inherently wrong?". In the end it is almost always a compromise but there are definitely projects I would not do.



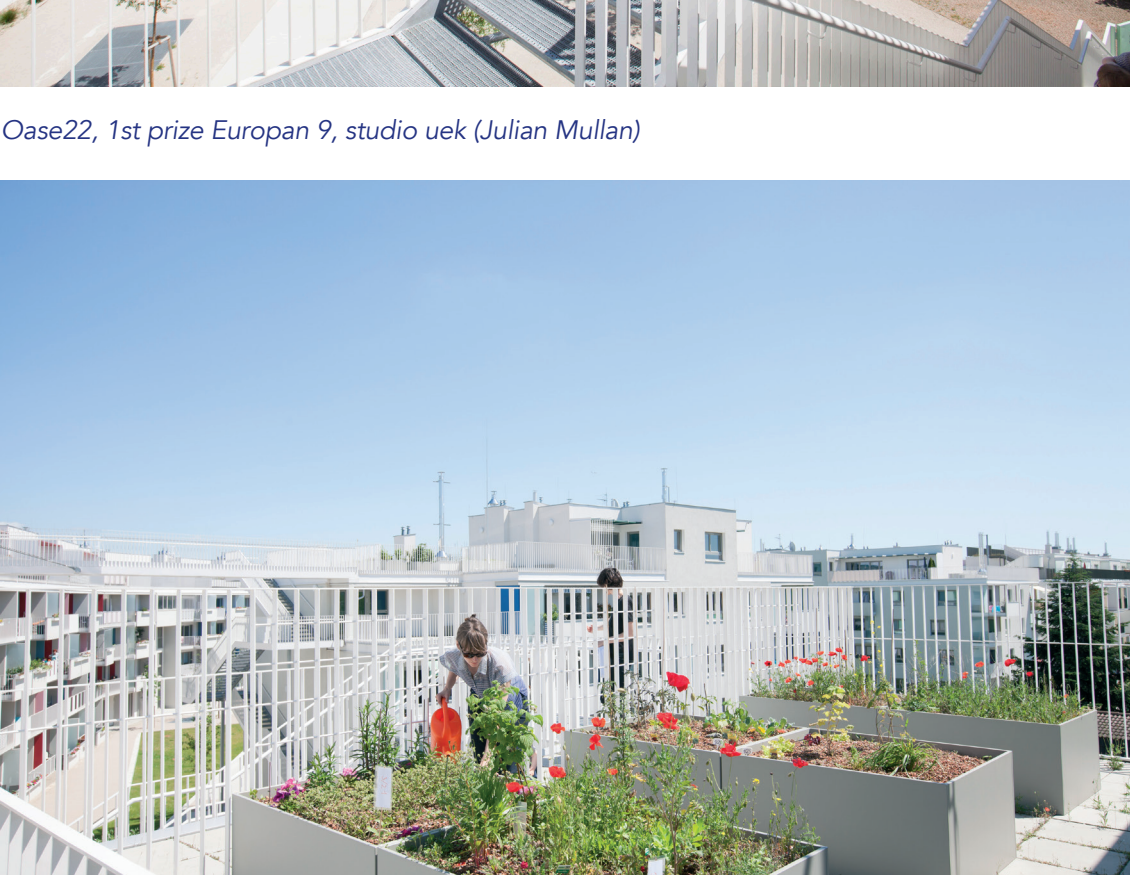
Pre/Fabric, historic view of settlement Trnopol (United Nations: Skopje Resurgent)



Pre/Fabric, historic view of Mexican prefabricated houses (Komitet za Obnovu. Januar-Juni 1965)

You published a very interesting book about Skopje's prefabricated houses that were sent as humanitarian aid after the catastrophic earthquake in 1963. Prefabricated houses were imported from all around the world: USA, Mexico, Finland ... Why did you become interested in this topic in the first place?

This book is a product of a longer interest in and research on the city of Skopje. I share this interest with my partner Milan Mijalkovic who is originally from Skopje. Our first book (Skopje – The World's Bastard. Architecture of the Divided City) was published in 2011. This was a study of a series of different urban phenomena taking place in Skopje. Around 2010 there was this whole idea of nationalist revitalization of the city of Skopje, which aimed at transforming the city center into a neo-classic heart of a clearly European city – which it has never been. The theme of prefabricated houses was already visible from this book. What we discovered was that all the debates were only focusing on the city centre, the representative part of the city, as did the transformation project Skopje 2014 or Kenzo Tange's masterplan after the earthquake. We consciously wanted to shift the focus to the urban fabric outside the center – the everyday places where people live. A great part of this fabric is a result of an incredibly fast, only a few weeks lasting process of urban planning that the city was forced to make after the earthquake. The first prefabricated houses arrived in Skopje only ten days after the catastrophe! After 60 years the inhabitants still identify strongly with these quarters and houses. They say "I'm from the Finnish house" or "I grew up on Mexico Street." Nonetheless, these houses were never researched. Even though they are so embedded in the consciousness of the people, no one had taken an interest in this topic before. After the book was published in 2018, we also had an exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje. We showed the stories of six exemplary houses that explained how people lived there, how the families grew and how the standardized houses were transformed and tailored to the needs of each family. The theme of the exhibition touched many people on a personal level.



Pre/Fabric, adapted backside terrace of Mexican prefabricated house (Goran Dimov)



Pre/Fabric, interior of Mexican prefabricated house (Goran Dimov)



Pre/Fabric, interview with resident of Mexican prefab (archive studio urbanek)

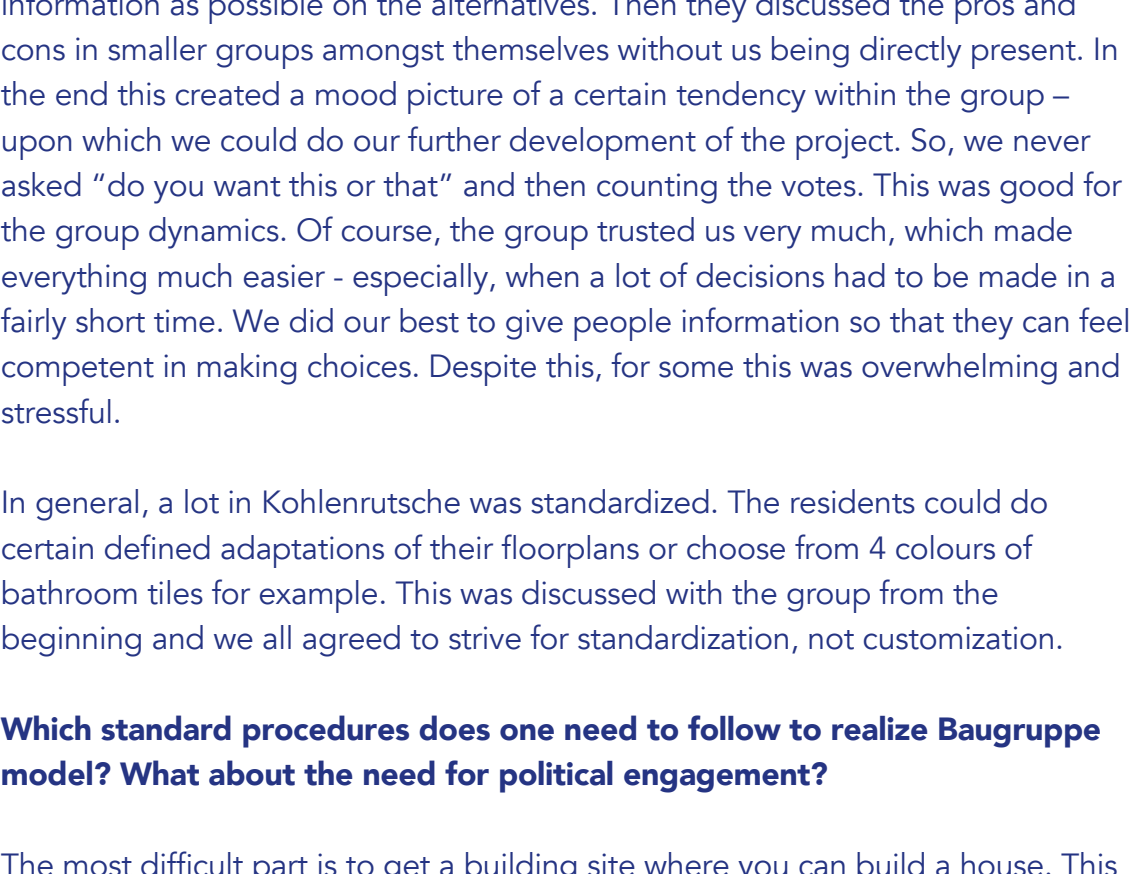
Is there anything relevant and useful we could learn from this prefab housing project today?

The humanitarian project shows nicely how the two scales I was referring to earlier – the large visions and the everyday – come together. There was this strong idea of international solidarity. The earthquake happened in the middle of the cold war when everyone was afraid of nuclear destruction and despite – or because of – this, the East and the West came together to help. This was not really an architectural act, it was an act of global solidarity, but I think it is relevant that by this act you can create a change, something positive of which architecture is a part. This is relevant now and will be even more relevant in the future: climate change will affect some countries more than others, so there will be a huge need for international solidarity.

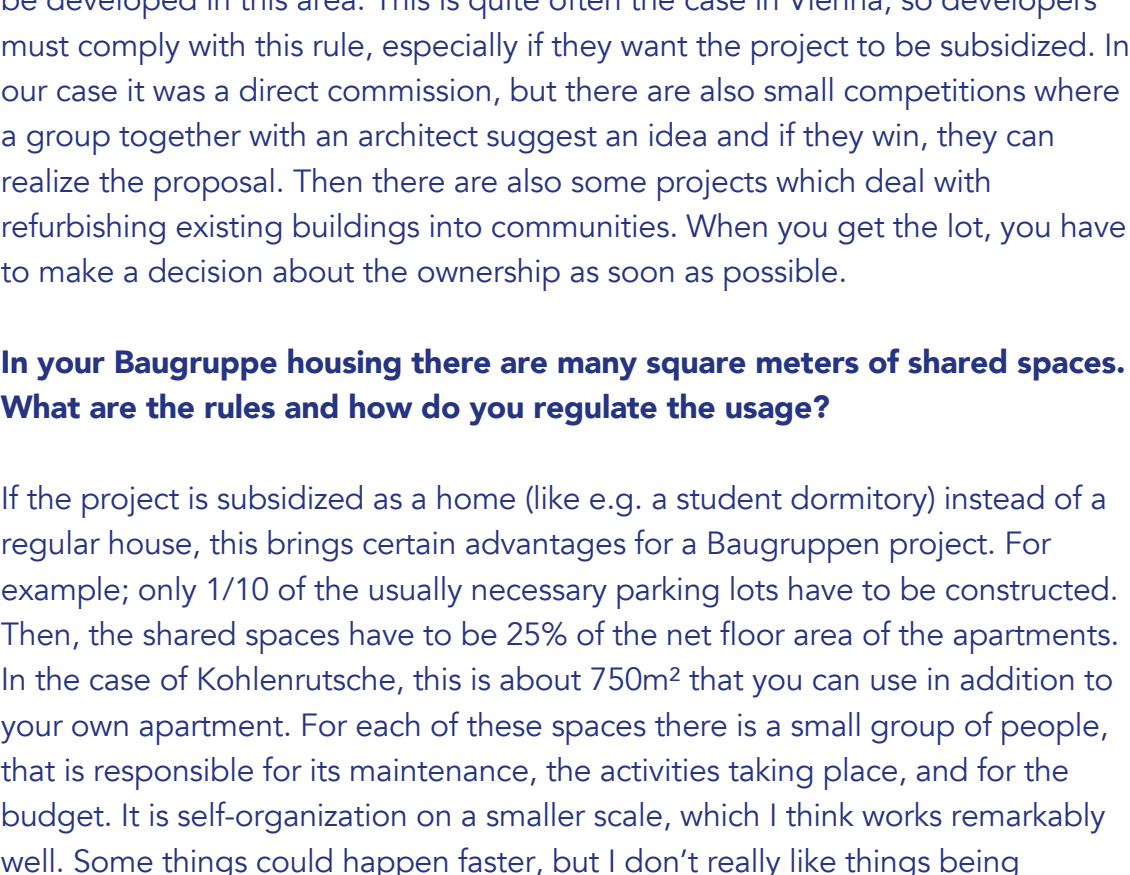
On the level of architecture, this project reflects the classic modern belief in the universality of needs and industrial production – and how the outcome of this belief is interpreted and individualized by the users. What was interesting for us to understand was that, when doing all these necessary adaptations, the residents have – consciously or unconsciously – reacted to the existing architecture. They repeated and interpreted shapes, material, colours etc. We could also see that the houses with higher architectural quality are at the same time the best preserved ones. One of the houses we researched was designed by the famous Mexican architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. When we did the interview with the lady who lives there, we could feel the respect she has for this house; all the adaptations were subtle and she maintained the house very well, even teaching her daughter how to take care of it. What we can learn from this is that architecture needs a certain robustness to allow for adaptation – but that robustness doesn't mean only good materials or details but also beauty.



Oase22, 1st prize European 9, studio uek (Julian Mullan)



Oase22, common roof with raised vegetable beds (Julian Mullan)



Oase22, flexible common space, used as children's play room (Julian Mullan)

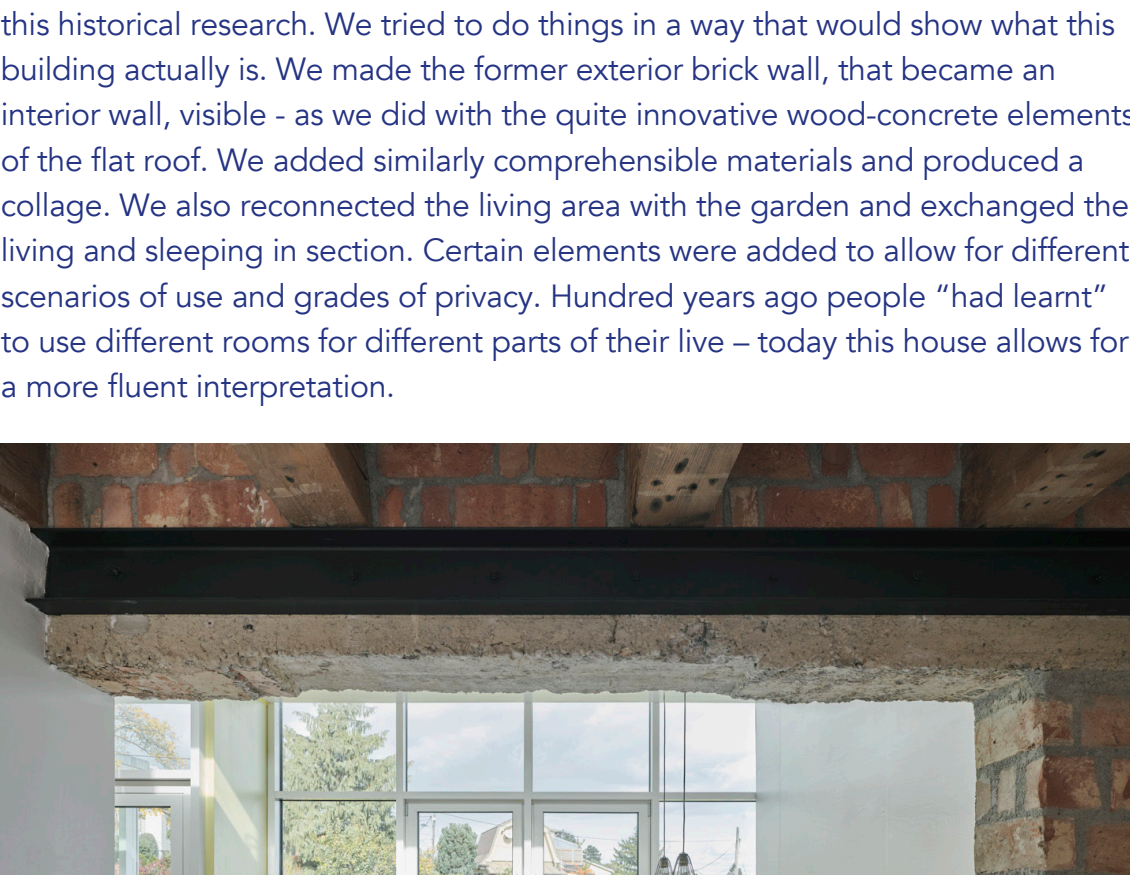
Two of your housing projects – Kohlenrutsche and Oase22 follow Baugruppen model. This model is a great example of participation. How is this model different from cooperative housing? What are its advantages in comparison to the latter?

Oase22 – which started as a European project in 2008 – was different because we didn't know the users in advance. In this sense, this is not a Baugruppen project, but it has a strong focus on living together – collective living. Oase22 was advertised in that way and targeted people who were interested in living in a community with other people. The social process began after the residents moved in. We provided a large number of common spaces – indoor and outdoor – that were not defined in advance so that the residents could define what they wanted to use them for. This process of negotiation, appropriation and equipping was supported by a team of social workers who had a small office there for the first two years. Oase22 was kind of a pilot project for the city of Vienna. Back in 2008, social sustainability was not yet a criterion for social housing but since 2009 all housing projects subsidized by the city of Vienna have to provide a certain program for social sustainability.

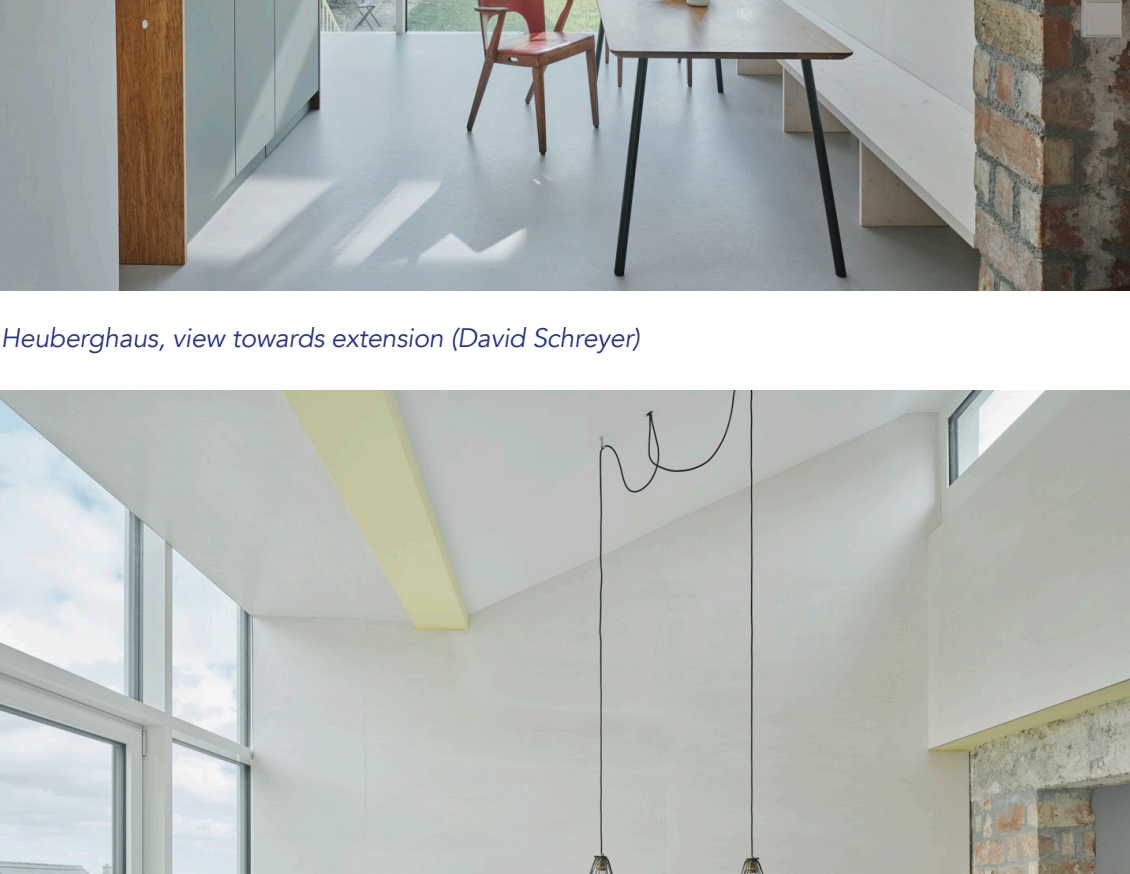
Kohlenrutsche, completed in 2019, is a typical example of Baugruppen project. There are a number of different models of Baugruppen, also here in Vienna. The main idea is that living in a Baugruppen project means living in a community, sharing certain spaces and activities. The main difference from cooperative housing is that there is a group of people who want to live together, and this group already exists during the planning and construction process. A group – just by joining forces – has an incredible amount of resources and capacities. This also allows for support of individuals with less personal resources – be it because of their family situation, health condition or social background. A Baugruppen project can thus become a certain vehicle of tailored solidarity. As an architect, you have a special role, working with the residents throughout the process, which is interesting. You have to find ways to involve the group as a whole and the households as individuals in certain decisions.

How is ownership organized in Baugruppen model? Can residents sell their apartment at market price or is the price regulated in some way?

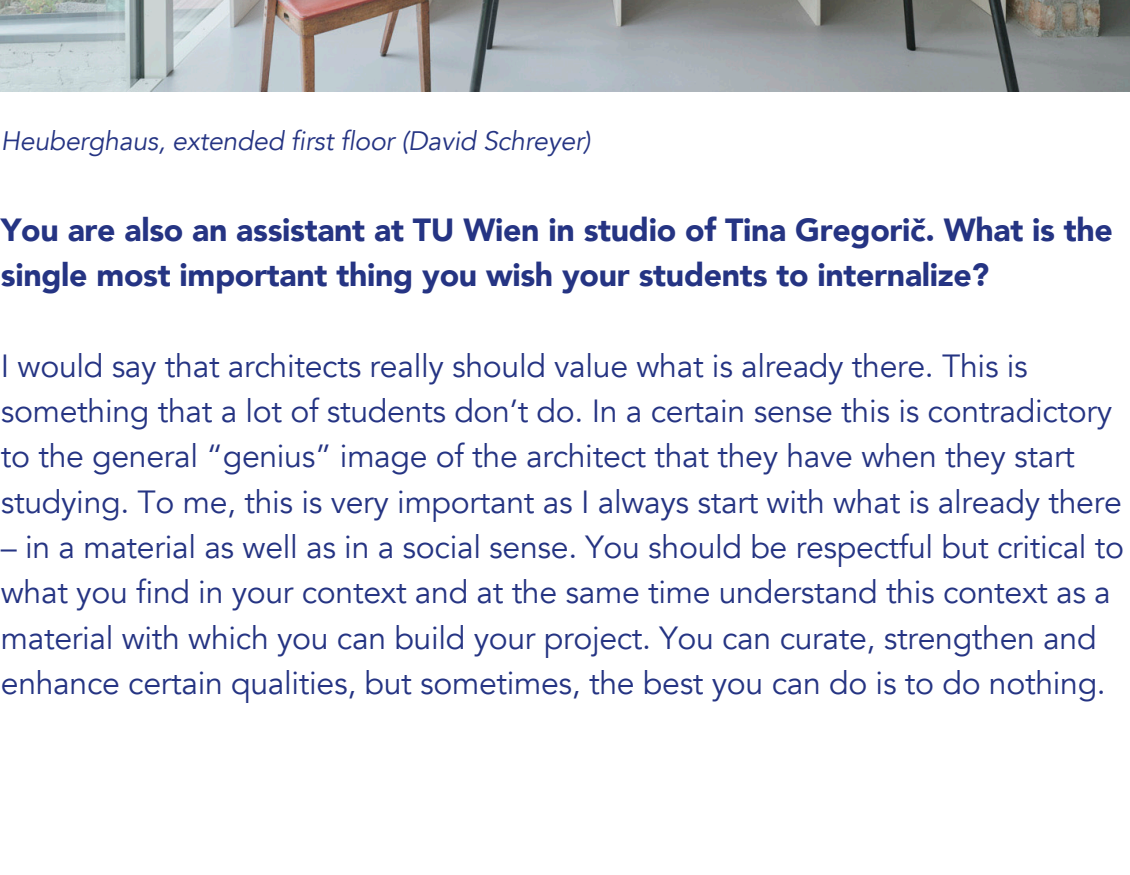
There are different modes of ownership within Baugruppen – from classic individual ownership of single apartments to solidary collectives that span over several housing projects. The model of ownership depends on what the group wants. In Berlin for example, there are lots of Baugruppen where residents own their apartment and their children inherit it. They build to create a property. Here, it is a bit different. In the case of Kohlenrutsche, where I also live, building was subsidized by the City of Vienna and was developed by a housing cooperation. All residents are forming an association which rents the whole house from the developer for a long time. We will never own the apartments individually but also probably never as a group, we will always rent. This makes the house cheaper for us but at the same time gives a lot of control because we are deciding the whole house as a big group. We self-organize almost everything. We rented how we would divide the rent. If someone is moving out, we find new residents. We have complete autonomy of choosing with whom we want to live, because we also carry the financial risk if apartments remain empty. We organize a lot of the facility management as for example the cleaning of the house.



Kohlenrutsche, studio uek (Julian Mullan)



Kohlenrutsche, ground floor common spaces - children's playground, kitchen, multifunctional space (Julian Mullan)



Kohlenrutsche, standard floor plan before defined adaptations

What are the challenges of participation? How do you manage to include everyone's wishes?

The goal never actually is to include everyone's wishes – I don't see this as the aim of participation. It is more about generating a common idea of the house, of enabling a certain understanding of and identification with it. In Kohlenrutsche, this was made very clear from the beginning, from the first meeting. We all agreed that we as architects will propose certain design steps and sometimes several variants of solutions – and that we would discuss major topics very seriously. For instance the question, how circulation should be organized: interior hallways or two balconies? As architects, we gave the residents as much information as possible on the alternatives. Then they discussed the pros and cons in smaller groups amongst themselves without us being directly present. In the end this created a mood picture of a certain tendency within the group – upon which we could do our further development of the project. So, we never asked "do you want this or that" and then counting the votes. This was good for the group dynamics. Of course, the group trusted us very much, which made everything much easier – especially, when a lot of decisions had to be made in a fairly short time. We did our best to give people information so that they can feel competent in making choices. Despite this, for some this was overwhelming and stressful.

In general, a lot in Kohlenrutsche was standardized. The residents could do certain defined adaptations of their floorplans or choose from 4 colours of bathroom tiles for example. This was discussed with the group from the beginning and we all agreed to strive for standardization, not customization.

Which standard procedures does one need to follow to realize Baugruppe model? What about the need for political engagement?

The most difficult part is to get a building site where you can build a house. This is the biggest as well as the first step you have to make. For the past years, the city of Vienna has been offering certain options of creating a construction lot. In our case, the urban planning defined that at least one Baugruppe project must be developed in this area. This is quite often the case in Vienna, so developers must comply with this rule, especially if they want the project to be subsidized. In our case it was a direct commission, but there are also small competitions where a group together with an architect suggest an idea and if they win, they can realize the proposal. Then there are also some projects which deal with refurbishing existing buildings into communities. When you get the lot, you have to make a decision about the ownership as soon as possible.

In your Baugruppe housing there are many square meters of shared spaces. What are the rules and how do you regulate the usage?

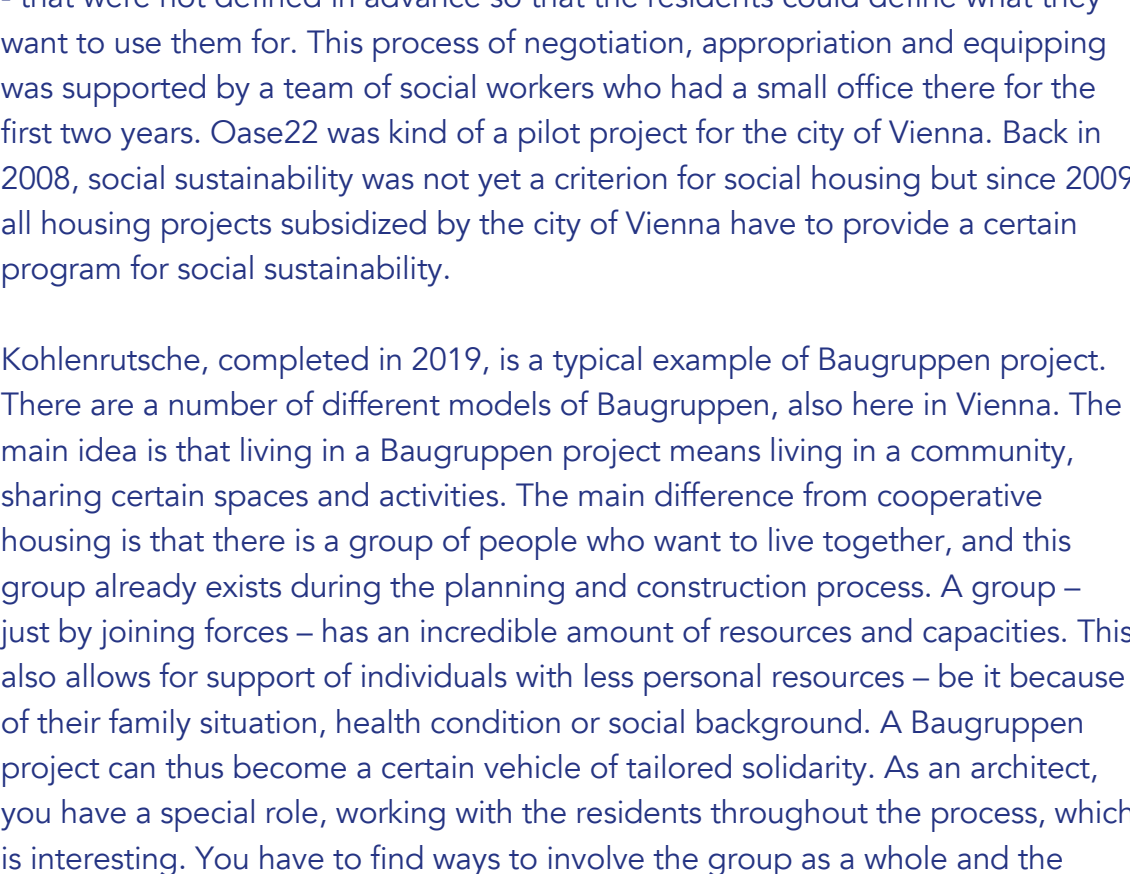
If the project is subsidized as a home (like e.g. a student dormitory) instead of a regular house, this brings certain advantages for a Baugruppen project. For example: only 1/10 of the usually necessary parking lots have to be constructed. Then, the shared spaces have to be 25% of the net floor area of the apartments. In the case of Kohlenrutsche, this is about 750m² that you can use in addition to your own apartment. For each of these spaces there is a small group of people, that is responsible for its maintenance, the activities taking place, and for the budget. It is self-organization on a smaller scale, which I think works remarkably well. Some things could happen faster, but I don't really like things being completely finished anyway. I think unfinished aspects can make a building even better.

Looking back, are there some things about the process or overall design you would reconsider or approach differently?

I think, Kohlenrutsche functions the way we imagined and has this quality that I am looking for, being robust and beautiful at the same time. It allows for appropriation, which in my opinion strengthens its architectural qualities even more. The common spaces are used pretty much as they were intended to, and this is definitely due to the users' involvement in the planning phase. Because I also live here, I can comment on living quality, with which I am very satisfied; I can use the whole house, all the shared spaces, which is incredible and entirely different from other apartment buildings. It makes me feel free. But there are of course things that could be done better. Certain moments in the process are crucial – such as the decision for a certain mix of apartments or the system of their allocation to the group members – and should be treated with highest awareness.



Heuberghaus (David Schreyer)

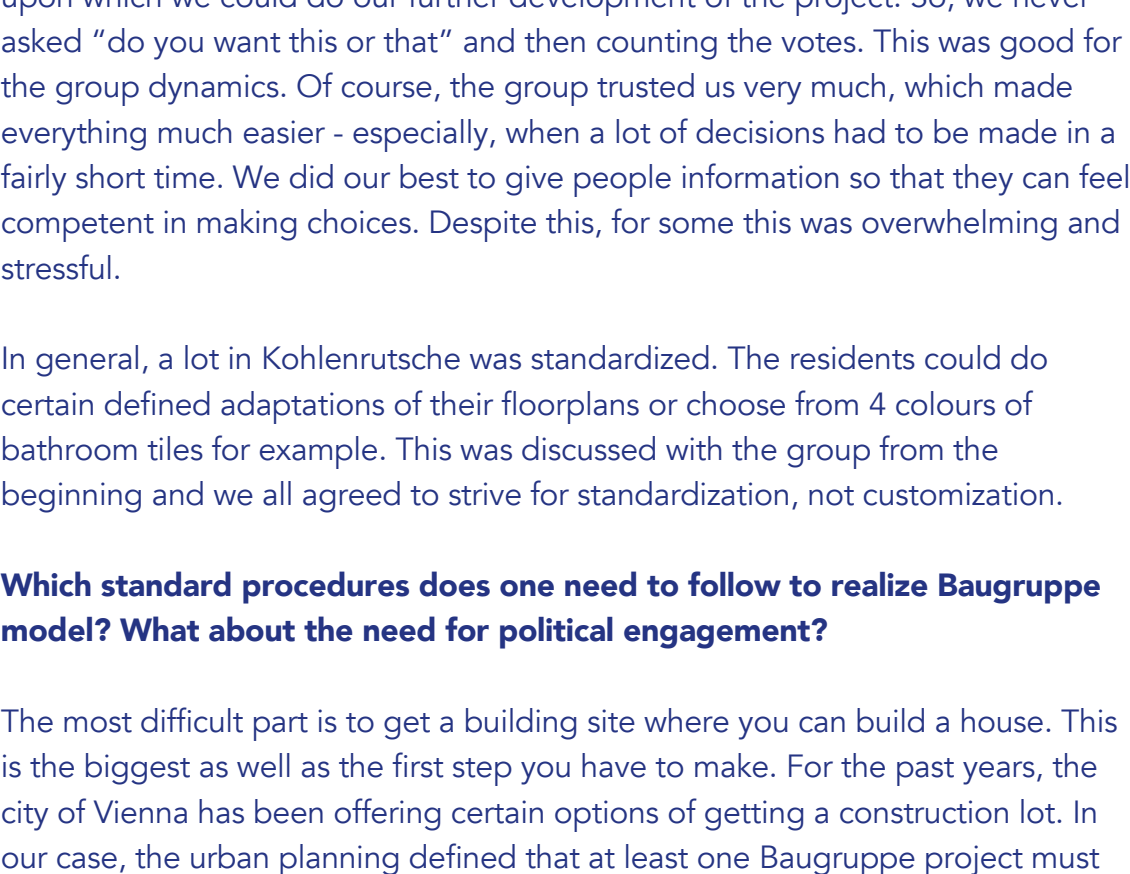


Heuberghaus in the row (David Schreyer)

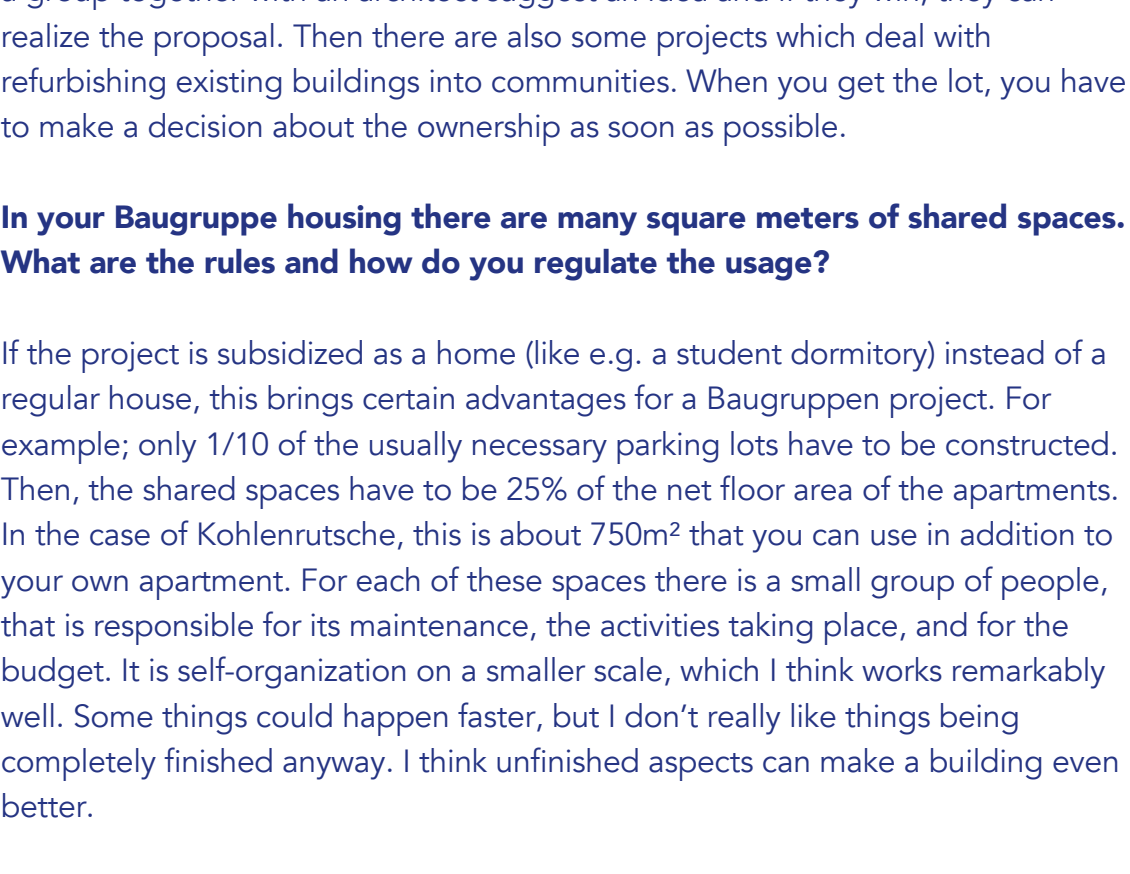
Heuberghaus is a bit different, because it is an extension to a single family row house. It is simple but substantially improves the quality of living. You were actually dealing with a quite similar question: how to improve a certain living standard.

This is a very interesting project to me, because the existing house is the simplest structure you can imagine, but at the same it is also a historic monument. Heuberghaus was one of the first neighbourhoods done by the Settlers Movement, that is quite relevant for Vienna. The movement began after WWI as a self-organized action of many poor, homeless and unemployed people who took land to be able to survive. In the 1920s this movement was supported and formalized by Vienna's social-democratic government. Adolf Loos, who had become the head of the settlement department, was doing the master plan for Heuberghaus – with Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky being his collaborator. Besides planning some housing types themselves, a number of other architects were invited to contribute their designs. The houses had to be very cheap: the material is cheap, the construction is done with as little material as possible, which means that there is always air in between for all layers of bricks, the ceiling height is low ... But it made a huge difference for all those people. They had to work 3000 hours to help build the houses, so it was kind of a self-building project, but you didn't know in advance which house you'll be getting. The houses had a long and narrow garden in their back, where the settlers could grow their vegetables and fruits.

What is also interesting is that it is still owned by the cooperative – you cannot own these row houses. The house I was working on has been inhabited by the same family from the beginning – the great-grand parents of the actual residents contributed to the settlement with their own hands. It was interesting to observe what people have been doing to this architecture over the decades. The attitude to the garden has changed radically, for instance. Part of the project was to do this historical research. We tried to do things in a way that would show what this building actually is. We made the former exterior brick wall, that became an interior wall, visible – as we did with the quite innovative wood-concrete elements of the flat roof. We added similarly comprehensible materials and produced a collage. We also reconnected the living area with the garden and exchanged the living and sleeping in section. Certain elements were added to allow for different scenarios of use and grades of privacy. Hundred years ago people "had learnt" to use different rooms for different parts of their life – today this house allows for a more fluent interpretation.



Heuberghaus, view towards extension (David Schreyer)



Heuberghaus, extended first floor (David Schreyer)

You are also an assistant at TU Wien in studio of Tina Gregorič. What is the single most important thing you wish your students to internalize?

I would say that architects really should value what is already there. This is something that a lot of students don't do. In a certain sense this is contradictory to the general "genius" image of the architect that they have when they start studying. To me, this is very important as I always start with what is already there – in a material as well as in a social sense. You should be respectful but critical to what you find in your context and at the same time understand this context as a material with which you can build your project. You can curate, strengthen and enhance certain qualities, but sometimes, the best you can do is to do nothing.

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