

# The return to nature in the Austrian radical thinking: the case of Gunther Domenig

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the inclusion of nature in the utopian vision of the radical movements of the 60s and 70s. In particular, it presents the Austrian radicals as the first and main supporters towards the aforementioned tendency. The introduction of nature in the built environment is a feature of Austrian radicalism since its first generation which includes authors such as Raimund Abraham, Walter Pichler, Hans Hollein and Gunther Domenig. The latter is taken here presented as the main representative of this current on the architectonic scale. Three of his works are described in the text to represent three different declinations of this trend towards biomimicry.

**Keywords:** Radicals, architecture, domening

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## Introduction to Austrian Radicals

The present text intends to focus on Gunther Domenig's idea of reuniting nature and architecture, considered here to represent the larger phenomenon of radicalism in the 60s and 70s. The novelty of the present text is the acknowledgment of the foundational role of Gunther Domenig, within the phenomenon of Austrian radicalism. Although this role is recognized by its protagonists as Coop Himmelblau, it has been rather neglected by critics until today. However, to better understand the position of Domenig's work it is necessary to take a step back and briefly describe how the Austrian radicals fits into the broader context of new utopias.

During the second half of the 20th century, growing from, and in response to, post-war trends, several architectural paradigms assumed positions in opposition to what was commonly held to be the sterility of modernism. They often forged alliances with technology and futurism, or with traditions and context. *Radical design*, as defined by the Italian architectural critic Germano Celant, entered archi-

tectural discourse as the twentieth century's version of historical utopias.<sup>1</sup> Although Celant is credited with coining the term *Radical design*, Gianni Pettena's seminal text on the Radicals recognized Radicalism as a historical phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The Radicals were mostly promoted in Italy by the journals *Casabella*, *Domus* and *Controspazio* and exhibitions, such as *Utopia e/o rivoluzione*, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and problems of Italian Design"<sup>3</sup> and "Living cities". While the relation of the Radicals' visionary focus to future technology is widely acknowledged<sup>4</sup> the same cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> G. Celant, Senza titolo [Without a title], in: *Argomenti E Immagini Di Design* 3. 1971, 76–81.

id., *Radical architecture*, in: *Italy: The new domestic landscape*, 1972, 380–387.

<sup>2</sup> G. Pettena, *Radicals: Architettura e design 1960/75* [Radicals: Architecture and design 1960/75], Venezia 1996.

<sup>3</sup> E. Ambasz, *Italy: The new domestic landscape: Achievements and problems of Italian design*, New York 1972.

<sup>4</sup> L. Benevolo, *Storia dell'architettura moderna* [History of modern architecture], Bari 1996. *Storia dell'architettura moderna* [History of modern architecture], Torino 1992.

said, until recently (Melis, Davis, & Balaara, 2017), for the connections their work have to notions such as history and the nature (Melis, 2018). This condition at the limit between nature and artifice is therefore a significant research to better understand the Austrian radicalism, and especially that of Gunther Domenig, as a representative of the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> His work stresses, in fact, the importance of the aforementioned notions as anti-modernist tools and a source of inspiration and leads to the following research question: how has Gunther Domenig used nature as a means to contrast the functionalism of the modernists, and to embrace a broader understanding of architecture as a link between artifice and nature?

To answer this question, it is first necessary to outline the role of Domenig as an exponent of the first generation of Austrian radical architects, which also includes Raimund Abraham, Walter Pichler and Hans Hollein. *Elementary Architecture*<sup>6</sup> is one of the foundational work of this phase, because here Abraham virtually returns to nature, represented by his native land, the Tyrol, through a series of photographs of primordial dwellings integrated into the nature. His research also offers points of comparison with the experience of the return to nature and isolation that characterizes the career of two other Austrian *lonesome warriors*, Walter Pichler, and Gunther Domenig, our protagonist. Abraham's research on the archetypes as tectonic elements of the landscape, continued with his study of the notion of the *Arche*,<sup>7</sup> the zero-degree architecture,<sup>8</sup> the underground dwellings, and the series on the geological cities.<sup>9</sup> It is also a common ground: Domenig's

Steinhaus, as we shall see, fits perfectly into the category of Austrian architectures emerging from the subsoil as metamorphosed igneous rocks. Frequent analogies can also be read between Domenig's and Hollein's work. Also, in this case the Steinhaus shares the same humus of the megalithic concretions represented by Hollein in his photomontages.<sup>10</sup> The work of Hollein, perhaps the most prominent protagonist of Radicalism tout court,<sup>11</sup> has been interpreted through his paradoxical collages, which will influence both the successive generations of the radicals, especially Haus Rucker Co, Archizoom and Superstudio.<sup>12</sup>

### Nature and Architecture: the solitary and anticipatory path of Gunther Domenig

As mentioned before, the present text mainly focuses on the figure of Gunther Domenig, as a representative of the Austrian Radicals research on architecture and nature. However, although he belongs by right to the first generation of Austrian radicals, due to the extraordinary nature of his architectural inventions, his work has often been neglected by the critics who dealt with the radicals. This depends on the fact that Domenig is a solitary architect who spends most of his professional and academic career in Graz. This condition is also a consequence of the fact that his architectures were so far ahead of their

<sup>5</sup> J. Porsch, *The Austrian Phenomenon: [Architektur Avantgarde Österreich 1956–1973 = architecture avantgarde Austria 1956–1973]*, Basel–Wien 2009.

<sup>6</sup> R. Abraham, *Elementare architektur [Elementar architecture]*, Salzburg 1963.

<sup>7</sup> A. Melis, *Serial invocation of the ancient in radical thought*, in: *Architecture & Series*. 2011, 33–35.

<sup>8</sup> R. Barthes, *Writing degree zero*, London 1967.

<sup>9</sup> R. Abraham, et al., *Wiener Museumsgesprache: Uber den Umgang mit Kunst und Museen [Wiener Museumsgesprache: On dealing with art and museums]*, Wien 1988.

R. Abraham/A. Wien, *Manhattan Austria: die Architektur des österreichischen Kulturinstitutes von Raimund Abraham*, Salzburg 1999.

R. Abraham/N. Miller/J. Hejduk/B. Groihofer, Raimund Abraham: *[Un] built (2nd, rev. and enl. ed.)*, Wien–New York 2011.

A. Natalini, *Le Dream Houses di Raimund Abraham [The dream houses by Raimund Abraham]*, in: *Domus* 40. 1971, 37–43.

P. Noever/W. D. Prix, *In the absence of Raimund Abraham*. Ostfildern 2011.

<sup>10</sup> H. Hollein, *Technik [Technology]*, in: *Bau* 2, 1965, 40–54.

<sup>11</sup> G. Pettena, Hans Hollein. Viareggio 1998.

W. D. Prix, *All is architecture! In Memoriam of Hans Hollein*, Opening speech, Exhibition at the Galerie Ulysses, Vienna—Originally intended and planned for the occasion of his 80th birthday, Designboom, Interview to Wolf Prix 2012, 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.designboom.com/interviews/interview-with-wolf-d-prix-of-coop-himmelblau/>.

H. U. Obrist, *In Conversation with Hans Hollein*, in: *E-Flux* 66. 2015. Retrieved from [http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article\\_9002819.pdf](http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_9002819.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> R. Gargiani, *Archizoom Associati 1966–1974, dall'ondapop alla superficie neutra [Archizoom Associati 1966–1974, from the pop wave to the neutral surface]*, Milan 2007.

R. Gargiani/B. Lampariello, *Superstudio*. Roma-Bari 2010.

P. Martinez Capdevila, *An Italian querelle: Radical vs. Tendenza*, in: *Log. Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City* 40. 2017.



time that they remained suspended outside of history, thus, outside of manuals and criticism. It could even be said that Domenig is the most underestimated among the great post-war architects.

Domenig's research can be summarized as an attempt to reconnect with nature and artifice through innovative design methods. Domenig makes this attempt by following the principles of what today, reductively, is called Biomimicry. Not only Domenig is therefore a forerunner of Biomimicry, but he is probably the pioneer of forms of still unexplored association architecture-nature. Three buildings are described in this text to represent Domenig's peculiar position.

The first and most important chapter of this untold story is undoubtedly the Z-Bank of Vienna. Through this building, Domenig explores the relationship between biology and artifice through a cell system, in the façade, and an interior characterized by botanical excrescences that overlap with the structural and mechanical systems (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Z-Bank of Vienna (Ninanuri, 2007)

Former Zentralsparkassenfiliale Favoritenstrasse in Vienna, District Favoriten. [Digital image]. Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Ninanuri#/media/File:Zentralsparkassenfiliale\\_favoritenstrasse.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Ninanuri#/media/File:Zentralsparkassenfiliale_favoritenstrasse.JPG)

Completed in 1974, it is such an avant-garde work that it is also the reason for a profound crisis that will bring Domenig to the isolation of Graz. The building is a bank, in which the client has expressed the desire to build a complex that does not represent the function of the banking institution, but rather it hosts community functions (the last floors are intended for municipal use). Therefore, Domenig's work is placed in a precise historical period in which it tries to react to the criticisms of the "single-purpose nature of the banks".<sup>13</sup> In the late 70s and early 80s of the last century, the season of neo-corporatism and social exchange ended in conjunction with the transformations of the productive organization and the consolidation of the process of globalization. As a result, even the capacity of the neo-corporate model to respond to new challenges has been questioned.

Once inflation was brought under control, the focus shifts to the ability to innovate companies and this makes it possible to make macro-political studies interact with those linked to the transformations of micro-level Fordism. Thus, the focus is on the role of institutional factors and particularly, on the conditions that favor the innovation of companies. In this regard, there are two ideal-typical models, firstly the *coordinated market economies* and secondly the *uncoordinated market economies*. The first model, which includes Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, is characterized by a regulatory system that sees the prevalence of the state, the associations and the community while the latter, within which they can be made in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia converge, presenting a broader market-related regulation.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the Zentralsparkasse wanted to show its interest in contemporary culture not through the usual purchase of works of art, but through a building that was a real contribution to contemporary architecture.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, Günther Domenig, in collaboration with Emanuel Anders, Volker Giencke and Wolfgang

<sup>13</sup> B. Viennese, Ricordando Günther Domenig, 1980. Retrieved from <https://www.domusweb.it/it/dall-archivio/2012/06/23/ricordando-gunther-domenig.html>.

<sup>14</sup> M. Betti, La costruzione sociale della finanziarizzazione: verso la convergenza dei sistemi bancari?, (PhD Dissertation). Retrieved from Università degli Studi di Firenze 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Viennese, Ricordando Günther Domenig (see note 13).

Bauer, creates an unprecedented and innovative building both on a technological level (where concrete and steel are the dominant materials) and architectural composition, in which the *insectoid* armour steel. The latter representing the function of defense which protects the contents of the bank, dialoguing with the internal organs that can be moved from one level to another, becoming permeable to users. A building / plant that is a living urban organism: we are nevertheless facing a sort of "landscape of the interior of the body".<sup>16</sup>

The project received a very extreme response from the inhabitants of the area and architectural criticism - "a ward for the neighbourhood", "a cage for monkeys", "a super building", "a great idea", "finally something different".<sup>17</sup> Incomprehensible to most, when it was built, this bank has been rediscovered today as the first experiment of biological architecture, much earlier than the works of the 90s that will bring to the fore figures such as Greg Lynn, Kas Oosterhuis and others of that generation. Z-Bank also anticipated contemporary parametric digital design. Its facade is in fact the repetition of a cell that changes configuration depending on its position and its function. Today it is surprising to think that the consistency of the approach has been obtained exclusively through analogical techniques. Approaching the façade, we can see the deep welds that unite the steel pieces of what Wolf Prix called the first three-dimensional façade in the history of architecture, well before, evidently of the Monchengladbach museum in Hollein, and the Disney Concert Hall / Guggenheim of Gehry. However, observing the Z-Bank in Vienna it can be seen the influence of the Einsteinurm architecture from the German architect Erich Mendelsohn, inaugurated 50 years earlier in Potsdam in Germany, defined at the time as "a monument to a new world",<sup>18</sup> as in any case it was Domenig's work in his day.

The second project taken into consideration is the Steinhaus (Figure 2). As the name implies, in this case the link between artifice and nature occurs through the simulation of the displacement of tec-

tonic faults that arise directly from the geology of the territory. Unlike the Z-Bank, this building is isolated in a natural landscape, far from the city, and full of memories of its author's childhood. If the Z-bank anticipates biomimicry, Steinhaus anticipates the theme of geomimicry, which constitutes an aesthetic thread also quite frequent among the architects of deconstructivism. Also, in this case, paradoxically, Domenig does not appear in the category of deconstructivism, despite Wolf Prix, one of the masters of deconstructivism, actually recognizes in him a leadership.

Since the 70s of the last century, Günther Domenig has always been involved with this place, closely linked to the history of his childhood. The Steinhaus, located on an area of approximately 4,000.00 square meters overlooking to the Lake Ossiach in Austria, is still an unfinished project. The architect designs a complex able to relate to the particular landscape configurations of the mountains by using robust and geometrically rigorous bodies, cast in concrete and partly fragmented by cavities. The house is conceived as a sort of top of a hill, with rocks that burst without vegetation that reveal their true nature. This project as a manifestation of a very personal approach to architecture, became a cardinal point of Domenig's work: "I have reached the border in every respect, here I will show what I can do in architecture".<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 2.** The Steinhaus (H.P. Schaefer, 2005)  
Guenther Domenig, austrian architect, 'Steinhaus', Steindorf/Oesterreich (Austria). [Digital image]. Retrieved from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Domenig\\_guenther\\_steindorf\\_ossiacher\\_see\\_8.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Domenig_guenther_steindorf_ossiacher_see_8.jpg)

<sup>16</sup> G. Bartoli, "L'uomo e il suo paesaggio. Corrispondenze lessicali, qualità strutturali e valenze di significato.", in: PSICOART n. 5. 2015. Retrived from <https://psicoart.unibo.it/article/view/4666>.

<sup>17</sup> Viennese, Ricordando Günther Domenig (see note 13).

<sup>18</sup> B. Zevi, Erich Mendelsohn, Opera completa: architettura e immagini architettoniche, con note biografiche di Louise Mendelsohn, Torino 1997.

<sup>19</sup> A. Steindorf, Steinhaus, 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.nextroom.at/building.php?id=2377>.



The third building taken into consideration is the Mensa der Schulschwestern (Figure 3). The table inserted diagonally in the inner courtyard of the convent is a peculiar feature of the architectural landscape of Graz. The organic structure solidified in a flowing formation process consists of an outer shell, bent and convex, interrupted by the skylights and the main access generated by concave openings and from the interior, which takes on a cave-like appearance. Ventilation and lighting are integrated. The complex built between 1973 and 1977 originally consisted of an outer skin similar to the interior, appearing almost a *naked building*. Due to problems related to the waterproofing of the surface, a subsequent coating in zinc plate signed by Eilfried Huth (1989) was added, resulting in the lose the original smooth skin.<sup>20</sup> In this case the biomimicry approach takes the form of zoomorphism. Once again, it is a trend considered avant-garde today, as it anticipates the work of architects like Will Alsop and Renzo Piano, among others. In fact, the building appears as a kind of living organism with several points of contact with Peter Cook's Kunsthau, also built in Graz. Again, similarly to what was done for Z-Bank, the casing is entirely made of metal, and folded according to a cellular logic. The particularity of the building is then enhanced by its location, inside a courtyard surrounded by conventional buildings.



**Figure 3.** Google Earth, Mensa der Schulschwestern, Austria. 47°04'33"N 15°23'48"E  
<https://earth.google.com/web/@47.07599887,15.39635554,385.73841665a,69.41215867d,35y,167.07707681h,59.99978144t,-0r> [31st July 2018]

## Conclusions

The aims of this paper were to illustrate the hybridization between disciplines exercised by the Austrian Radicals in order to recreate the relationship between nature and artifice, interrupted, according to the radical vision, due to of the functionalist drift of the modern movement. To do so the text focuses on the radical position of Gunther Domenig, presented as emblematic of the Austrians interest in nature. Aligned to cross disciplinary intents of radicalism, Domenig's work is perfectly consistent with "Alles ist architektur", the Hollein manifesto published in the first issue of Bau. As said in the text, the aesthetic of nature, well embraced in Domenig's architecture, represented by the architecture elements declined through biomimicry, in botanical, zoomorphic, and geomorphic forms. The three works that best represent this trend and interest in nature are the Z-bank, the Mensa of Graz and the Steinhaus. The present paper also stressed that these projects are also seminal works, introducing trends that will prove to be very successful between the 90s and 2000s.

In conclusion, it can be said that Domenig's practice deserves to be rediscovered not only to restore the primogeniture of important architectural phenomena, but also because in a period of environmental crisis, like the current one, the interdisciplinary nature of the visionary architecture is a need. The rediscovery of Domenig's work can therefore contribute to renewing the architectural practice in an environmental key.

<sup>20</sup> G. Domenig/ E. Huth, Schulschwestern Multi-purpose hall. Retrieved from <https://www.archiweb.cz/en/b/menza-skoly-radovych-sester-frantiskanek-mensa-der-schulschwestern>, (2018, March 13).

