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# A Conversation with Angelika Hinterbrandner trans team



For *trans41*, we were looking for «Fire Women». They are building, burning and fighting a multitude of fires. Amongst them, Angelika. She has crossed our paths at different moments and places, always appearing with energy and rigour, while navigating her own path. We discussed power, impact and the importance to gather, in order to establish meaningful practices.

TT You are trained as an architect, but you don't define yourself as one. Nevertheless, you are actively taking position in the field. How do you define your practice? Where do you see the boundaries of an architectural practice?

AH The question if I am an architect, comes primarily from the outside. Not as an accusation, but with astonishment and confusion, especially from people that are not in the field. I can't explain what «my practice» exactly is. If I say I'm an «architect», it is not true according to the chamber guidelines in Germany and Austria. This is different in Switzerland. For me this discussion developed into a tool I reflect back into the field. How are the projects I am working on influencing it? Is it «design» to carve out a text that might turn into a policy that influences the built environment? How would the job description change if we stopped building? Taking out the narrowness of the term «architect» creates space to think about what kind of architect one wants to be. The expansion of profiles and business models opens new doors. The field is already more diverse than we might think: if I have it in mind correctly, 30% of the graduates from ETH start their first position outside of the classic profile. My intention in questioning the boundaries lies in encouraging students and young professionals to find their own way with determination. I am aware that many architects perceive their practices as limited. As an architect you are liable, responsible for the schedule and budget, and under constant pressure. There are harsh dependencies and little self-determination – unless one already has a big name and clients give free rein. Often «architecture as a service» is framed as the one and only problem. What I find worse, is the imbalance of dependencies, which leads to a lack of eye height. Other industries provide services as well but don't feel powerless. You can provide a service and still be valued. It's about your position in a power relationship.

TT How do you feel about the discussion that in an economically dominated world, the architectural profession may no longer be as relevant as it once was?

AH We experience a «Zeitenwende» on many levels at the moment. In times of crises societies reassess what is important and what is not. If architecture doesn't provide affordable housing, but only investment objects for the 1%, then the field might become irrelevant rightfully. This is not the fault of the architect alone, we are embedded in a system. But then: how about changing it? We can start with recognizing that the climate crisis is the problem of our time and affordable housing is an essential need. Providing more of it could help ease a lot of other hardships. Practicing architecture is not only about the ability to build a house, but also about the expertise to understand the framework we are acting within – and to intervene. There are many ways to «architect». Maybe it's taking care of the stock, or building new policy frameworks. Instead of drowning in depression over the fact that architecture might become irrelevant, get active where the relevance lies. I think about where I can have an impact and how to earn money. In Germany architecture is listed as a «free profession», providing a service of a «higher nature» in the interest of clients and the general public. Architects are freelancers. This is a rather bureaucratic fact but shows the entrepreneurial background the field is embedded in. Nevertheless, architecture as a business is not taught at most schools. One way to foster literacy is to talk more about money and working conditions. A lot of offices earn well. To question and critically reassess the honorary structures, could be a first step to develop new approaches considering business models and resource use.

If education doesn't provide any tools that enable to create businesses that are viable today, the professional associations should do so. An entire generation is struggling with the questions of honorarium, working conditions, and how to work in times of the climate crisis. The challenge to build companies according to new structural models and values that were never tested before is huge. Our generation won't achieve such a shift alone. I see duty with everyone that is in decision making positions right now – if you don't want to help, take a step back at least.

- TT Do you perceive Switzerland as being more open to diverse forms of practice?
- AH The valuation of «Baukultur» and the amount of money people and the public hand are willing to spend on good architecture is still higher here than in other countries. This does not necessarily lead to more diverse forms of practices, rather the opposite. Looking at the global fractures and frictions in the building sector, more diversity is what we need or should rather prepare for. Due to the Corona Crisis and Russia's invasion in Ukraine, supply chains are disrupted, prices are skyrocketing with the arising energy crisis, building projects are stopped. We should think about what other skills we have aside from constructing new buildings and how we can take care of what already exists. Making these aspects «productive» means to adhere to capitalist logics. Real estate and property are important parts of the economy that led to some of the crises we are experiencing. From the housing crises to rising inequality: architecture as a business is involved in all of it. The power relations that come due to capitalist logics, are often the starting point of the imbalances architects are struggling with when pursuing a building project. Transformation processes are difficult, long and hard. At the same time, I see the momentum we have with actors such as Architects4Future, countdown2030 and others to push for change together. There are many approaches that haven't been formulated yet.
- TT Many architecture firms are structured hierarchically. Have you liberated yourself from these hierarchies with your self-determined practice?
- AH I interact and communicate a lot, so of course I encounter hierarchies. However, I'm acting in diverse, fluid work forms. Depending on the context of the project, I find myself in a multipolar sphere of action. Sometimes I lead the project, sometimes I run a small part of a task or I work on my own. I don't think hierarchy is bad per se. My situation is of course specific. I am based in Berlin, where another reality of freelancing dominates. Many people are working in precarious situations involuntarily. They are «pseudo self-employed», and only work for one «client». Employers thus save the social security contribution of the wage, which is high in Germany. Through the discussions on Kontextur concerning money and working conditions, I became aware of how pressing these issues are for my generation. I am still shocked by what is common and the fact that it isn't questioned more. The fundament for bearing with this structures is lied in architecture education, that roots back to the super hirarchical Masterclass system. When talking about working conditions, there are more dimensions that need to be considered through an intersectional lens, such as: age, race, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, sexual orientation – as much as the socio-economic status or class of a person. Who can afford to study architecture and take on unpaid internships? Who can start her:his own practice?
- TT We're interested in what you're like as a woman. You're loud and not afraid of confrontation. Do you feel like you've changed over the past years?
- AH (laughs) I find it funny that people perceive me as loud. I am not afraid to speak up and argue, that's true. But if I were a man, would you call me loud? Annabelle von Reutern, a very inspiring woman, and Head of Business Development at Concular, who I met recently, put it like this: «You're also an angry woman.» It took me a while to find my voice and I developed the ability to set boundaries. I hope I changed over the past years but how I am as a person has more to do with my upbringing. I come from a tiny Bavarian village. My mother is very resolute. She always told me «Just go for it. You are capable of doing this.» That had and still has a tremendous influence on me. She taught me to be independent and find my own way. Growing up, I never had the feeling that I was treated differently because I was a girl. For most men, «Just do it.» is the normal modus operandi – this is hardly true for women. Socialization, the internalized norms and ideologies of society, play an important role especially when it comes to the question of what you are confident to do. During my studies the gender balance was equal, I never had the feeling that I was inferior on a professional level. When I started to work towards an «alternative path», there were neither proper role models, nor stereotypes. That freed me from the pressure of «steps to be taken». This freedom is not easy, but what I want. Of course, I am overwhelmed. But thanks to the people that surround me and my network, I trust myself to have the ability to initiate things by myself and together with others. For me, the question of what I can't do because I am a woman doesn't arise. I try to pull others along and give them space to do things under their own conditions, without having to be «loud». But if they want, I will support them to start their project with a bang. There is enough space for everyone – find your allies and build new networks that enable you to strive.
- TT What do you think of the term «girl boss» or «Powerfrau» in German? Does one reproduce



certain stereotypes and hierarchies? How can we break through these?

AH I find these framings problematic. There is no male equivalent. «Girl boss» implies that it needs additional abilities to make it to the same level men reach «naturally». Such terms manifest the supposed adjustment you need to make as a woman to patriarchal logics to be considered successful. The social environments we are navigating within are crucial for the reproduction or confrontation of stereotypes. Sometimes the external system is so strong that only if you play by its rules, you are able to survive. But that women are just better human beings, and that the world would be a better place if women were running it, is as much a stereotype. A lot of women want to be in power positions and play by the rules of the patriarchal system – not only because they need to, but purposefully. To put it bluntly, that's the core idea of liberal feminism: push yourself to the top just like men do. I don't believe in this. If we want to change power relations on a more fundamental level, we need to develop new systems of collaboration. Due to my character and experiences I function well in alpha-male dominated power environments. For this reason, I try to check in with myself and question how I deal with power myself. How would I like to work with others? How do I communicate and share responsibility? What are the needs of the team I work with? Currently, I am learning to be more patient with myself and everyone I work with. Understanding and breaking through the patterns I grew up with and cultivated is a life-long process.

TT Through @kntxtr, the project you run together with Katharina Benjamin and Patrick Martin, but also your own Instagram @ahinterbrandner, you have a large reach. You open a discourse and produce content. Who do you reach? For whom do you produce content?

AH For Kontextur, the target audience is my own generation, young professionals between 25 to 35, mostly working in the architectural field. Katharina and Alen Linnemann started the project in 2017 by addressing topics that they were interested in during their studies in Weimar. The project, its audience and our outlets grew. We are aware that with ninety thousand followers and an active community from all over the world we are one of the biggest architecture-accounts in the D-A-CH region. This reach creates responsibility. I am still surprised what impact we have. My

own account is more spontaneous. I don't have an editorial plan, I don't write for a target audience, I don't look at who reads my content. I see my account as an outlet of what moves me. You find a wild mix: from the politics of housing, over techno playlists, to personal and professional thoughts. Even if I get a growing amount of professional feedback through the account, I want to keep freedom. When I started to study architecture I did not have a network, my parents don't have any connections in the field, I am the first person to study in my family. Through many factors but also through the power of social media I can work on what I am primarily interested in, because people perceive the topics I talk about – I understand this as a huge privilege. At the same time activity and reach on social media goes hand in hand with a certain resentment. I have been told that what I do on my personal account is self-centered promotion. My answer to that is: If I have a topic I want to talk about, and people are willing to read and exchange their thoughts on it, so what? Do you want me to shut up because I am a young woman who takes some space? This line of argumentation boils down to a misogynistic pattern used to silence women. The freedom of picking what I spend my time with is essential to me, therefore, I focus on what I am interested in rather than on what others might think I should do next.

TT What is coming in the future?

AH Well (laughs), I am getting this question a lot at the moment. I want to change something, even if that sounds naive. The idea of pushing for change might be my – unhealthy – coping mechanism to deal with the multiple crises we see in the world. Looking at the projects I worked on in the past years and reflecting on where I want to go next, I realized that one of my skills is setting the initial moment and energy to bring people together – and to motivate them. I believe in cooperation and consistency. I will continue to work on a multitude of projects that are connected content-wise. The core topics I work on can be framed under: housing as a political practice, working conditions in architecture, communicating and teaching complexity, and the climate crisis. One new project, which embodies the aspects I described before best is spaceforfuture.org. We are a multidisciplinary team of architects, researchers, communicators who decided to build up a framework together to find approaches across borders, disciplines, and backgrounds to address the European housing crisis on a political level.

Angelika Hinterbrandner, born 1992, studied architecture at the Graz University of Technology and architecture and urbanism at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She works as an independent practitioner with research focus on the political, economic, and legislative framework of housing. In the past, she has worked inter alia with «ARCH+» and Brandlhuber+/bplus.xyz. Since 2019 she is part of Kontextur. From 2021 to 2022 she was part of station+ professorship Arno Brandlhuber at ETH Zurich.