

**Zeitschrift:** Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Herausgeber:** Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Band:** - (2023)

**Heft:** 43

**Artikel:** This is not an academic conversation

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051779>

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*«We, the Mittelbau, the central yet constantly shifting block of our shaky academic building hold it from toppling over through our embodied precarity and trauma. We are an infrastructure, the hidden cogs that keep engines of the academic machinery running. We enter and exit the department's academic system in silence, often in complete obscurity.»*

# THIS IS NOT AN ACADEMIC CONVERSATION

## Nitin Bathla

Nitin Bathla, born 1986, is a lecturer and postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich, where he coordinates the doctoral program at the Institute of Landscape and Urban Studies. He lectures on urban studies and political ecology, and his current research focuses on agrarian questions under the planetary age. In his academic practice, Nitin actively combines research with artistic practices of filmmaking, and socially engaged art. His 2020 film «Not Just Roads» with Klearjos E. Papanicolaou premiered at several important film festivals and won the SAH Film Award 2022.

Over the last year, I have had to say some really difficult goodbyes to many of my brilliant friends and colleagues from the Mittelbau at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich. I will refer to these colleagues in the plural they/them for the remainder of this piece to protect their identities rather than seeking to further depersonalize them. They have had to leave the department for a variety of reasons: For some the professors or the chairs that they were associated with retired or closed down, some colleagues simply ran past their maximum allotted 12 years at the ETH, and for some their yearly contracts were not renewed. For me, not only were the goodbyes very difficult, but so was dealing with the trauma, anxieties, exhaustion, and depression of my colleagues who have had to face constant precarity and nomadism that academia forces upon them. Several friends had to enter unemployment, some went into depression, another moved in with their parents, another colleague had to take their young children out of school for a year until they figure out where to move next, another broke up with their partner because their relationship could not handle the pressures of a nomadic lifestyle. My office often turns into a counselling room for my colleagues as I console them while being aware that the same fate awaits me in probably a year from now.

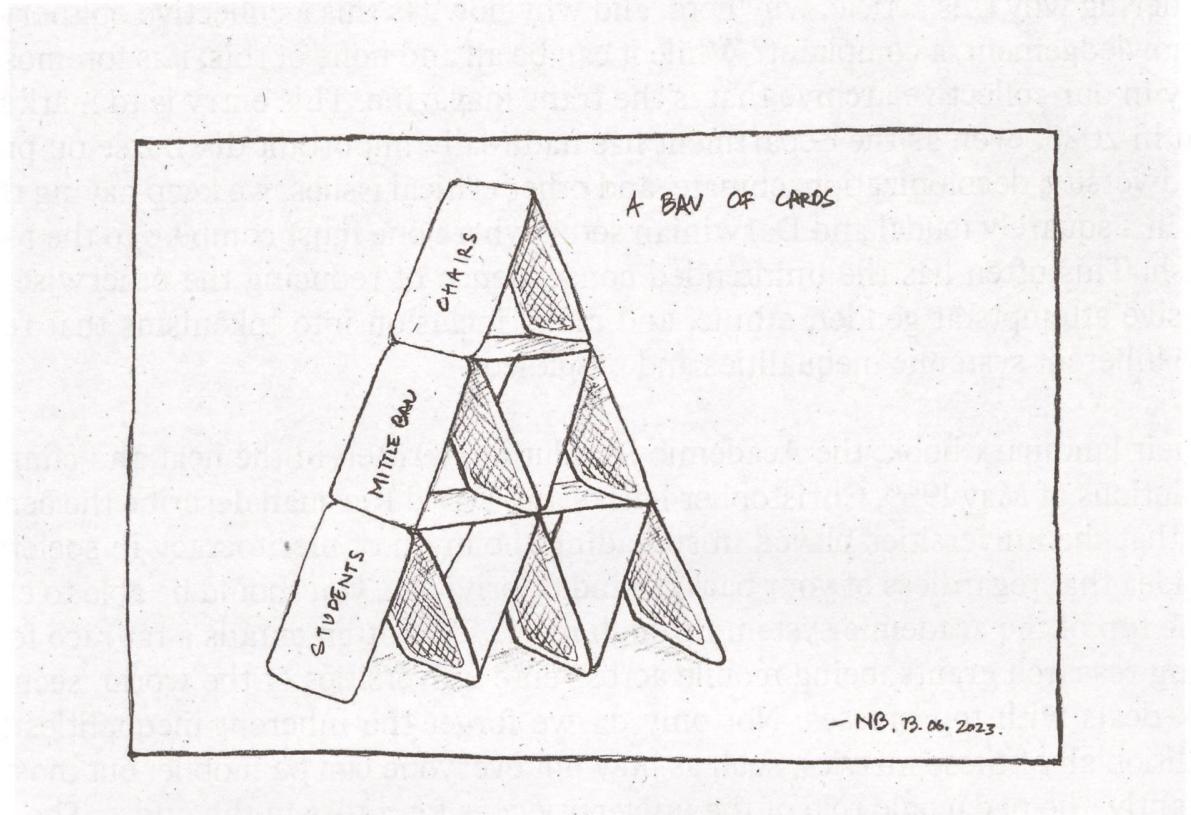
We, the Mittelbau, the central yet constantly shifting block of our shaky academic building hold it from toppling over through our embodied precarity and trauma.

We are an infrastructure, the hidden cogs that keep engines of the academic machinery running.

We enter and exit the department's academic system in silence, often in complete obscurity.(1)

Mittelbau, a colloquial German academic term translates most closely to mid-level staff in English. It refers to a middle position in the academic hierarchy. Most dictionaries and glossaries define it as a temporary, non-permanent, non-professorial teaching staff. In the imaginary of the academic system as a building, the Mittelbau forms the chunky central/middle building block that is key to the stability of the building. In contradiction to the root of the word, the central building block, the continuous precarity of the mid-level academic staff is a recipe for a rather shaky building – a «Bau» of cards (fig. a).

While several important legacy professors from a bygone generation also retired during the same time as my Mittelbau colleagues, the professors were treated to elaborate farewell lectures and aperos where we all gathered to bid our good-byes. Whereas my Mittelbau friends and colleagues, while investing equally if not more into teaching as well, vanished into complete obscurity. At this point, you must be



(fig. a) A «Bau» of cards. Image: by the author, 2023.



(fig. b) 2018 UK higher education placards at the University of Edinburgh.  
Image: Stinglehammer, Wikicommons

wondering why this article, why here, and why now? Is this a collective obituary, an acknowledgement, a complaint? While it can be all and none of this, it is foremost an entry in our collective archive that is the trans magazine. This entry is to mark how even in 2023, even as the department has had really important discourse on parity and diversity, decolonization, climate, and other critical issues, we keep having them within a squarely feudal and Darwinian setup where one must compete to the top or perish. This often has the unintended consequence of reducing the otherwise progressive attempts at gender, ethnic, and racial inclusion into tokenisms that reproduce inherent systemic inequalities and prejudices.

In their landmark book, the Academic Revolution, written in the heat and churn of revolutions of May 1969, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman describe the central role that the universities played in spreading the myth of meritocracy in society (2). The idea that regardless of your background or privilege, you should be able to climb to the top of the academic system through merit. This often entails a rat race for securing research grants, being mobile across elite universities of the world, securing book deals with top presses. Not only do we forget the inherent inequalities that condition all of these metrics, such as how not everyone can be mobile, but most importantly, the pedagogic role of the university goes for a toss in the midst. The elite university modelled after the eighteenth-century «Men of Letters» is designed to exclude, which no amount of reform can fix. The university needs a rethink.

When is the final seminar that you will run another student asked me just the other day, isn't your old man up for retirement soon?

We will miss you, and we don't know if they will be able to replace your seminar. Your seminar really empowered me to think of new ways of practicing.

We are facing critical gaps because so many of you from the Mittelbau are leaving all the time. (3)

In order to plug in the teaching gaps, the department usually hires guest lecturers on short contracts. These lecturers start empowering the students, and the students start empowering them. The ability of these lecturers to continue, however, is contingent on individual petitions from student bodies such as the architektura. There can only be so many petitions, though, some shy away from them, others feel exhausted by them — the system is broken, and individual petitions are a temporary fix at best. The shaky and silent Mittelbau of our department not only conditions a precarious workforce, but also conditions an unsafe environment for students, the supposed primary clients of the university system. The verticality of the chair system means that lecturers often take over the primary teaching roles, devise innovative and pedagogical

courses all in silence. Their teaching performances, grants, publications, are all inherited and absorbed by the chairs. Although the well-intentioned curriculum revision at the department is beginning to address this, the structural discrepancies relating to employment at the different teaching levels at the department prevent these intentions from translating into reality. The incorporation of the Mittelbau in this vertical system and their constant coming and going means that the teaching is always contingent and under the risk of disruption, thus disrupting the academic continuity of the students. At this point I must acknowledge that being at the university in any shape and form even with its inherent precarities still entails privilege. I feel anxious but still privileged with the access to brilliant colleagues, resources, and networks that I have, but a change of the status quo is much needed. The university and society are pretty entangled with each other and the values and ideas we foster at the university have a ripple effect and can perhaps challenge meritocracy and privilege beyond its ivory towers.

Now the big question, is there a way forward, can we rethink the academic structure of our department to solve some of this precarity and restitute the contributions of the Mittelbau? In recent years we have seen our brethren from across the UK universities unite forming picket lines at their workplaces in protest against the neoliberalisation and precarization of academic work. There has been an active debate on academic precarity at the German universities leading to calls for reform and a rethink of the university itself.<sup>(4)</sup> Recently, the University of Zurich, a university which is less than a kilometer away from our campus up the hill, made some important steps towards this in response to similar challenges of precarity felt by students and the Mittelbau. The University introduced the so-called University Next Generation program to induce a change in academic culture inducting permanent lecturers that could subsist outside the chair system. This cultivates stability among the Mittelbau dissuading a rat race to the top, and importantly shifts the onus of constant change and renewal of the university from the Mittelbau. One might raise arguments against an independent Mittelbau at our department, suggesting that we have different guidelines and values, we are an elite institution, and we foster excellence. However, excellence for whom and what even is excellence? We forget that guidelines are guidelines and not rules, and that rules are there to be broken in any case, and can't we just be ordinary instead of elite and disassociate ourselves from the problematic colonial legacies that the wretched elite system inherits. Let's unsilence all of this and act in solidarity and take steps towards empowering an independent Mittelbau ending their precarity — Let's reimagine a University of the 21st century.