



[ fig 1 Around Donauinsel 1994 (c) T.Folkerts ]

*Always, Islands are places of longing.<sup>1</sup>*

*Paul Good*

Thilo Folkerts

## **A Proposal for Donauinsel**

A slightly grey cast to all the colors. Dry, dusty streets. No trees. The freshest green on the streets is the simple lettuce salad served in large bowls, even for the small, improvised seating on the narrow sidewalks. My memory of that late summer tells me that there was relentless heat.

I had been welcomed as a guest in a shared flat in Schiffamtsgasse for three weeks, and someone had lent me a rusty bicycle to get around the city. I was hardly ever in that flat. I would leave early in the morning and return very late at night. I was in Vienna to learn and work. Three weeks of buzzing excitement and puzzled frustration, new discoveries and harrowing uncertainties. The Architekturzentrum Wien, specifically Dietmar Steiner, founder and then director of the center, and the City of Vienna had launched an ambitious series of annual international workshops on architecture, the Viennese Seminars on Architecture. Six teams of some twenty students and young architects each, led by a selection of internationally renowned practitioners in architecture and landscape architecture, were asked and enabled to dedicate an entire three weeks of their

time and effort to studying current questions of architecture and the city. The fifth workshop in 1994 (Architecture of the Empty Space – Landscape Architecture) and the one in the following year (THE Public Space) stood out for being dedicated to the questions of empty space and public space. Urban open space was an urgent issue in the professional debate at the time. A few years before, Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)<sup>2</sup> had proclaimed the pivotal role of urban open space in their project for Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart in the periphery of the Metropolitan Region of Paris (1987). Barcelona and Lyon were the urbanists' pilgrimage sites in those years – public space was on the agenda of architecture, urbanism and culture. Public art projects abounded.<sup>3</sup> The “empty space” of the 1994 Vienna workshop addressed the open spaces of the city that have been forgotten, lack context and meaning, and generally remain below their potential. How could such open spaces be brought back into urban life? How could this be negotiated between design and nature?<sup>4</sup> Six teams were assigned different problematic project areas in the periphery of the city.

The site visit to Vienna-Stadlau had left our team cautiously hopeless. A modernist linear housing estate (Zeilenbausiedlung), featuring abundant green, but undifferentiated and underused, if not unusable open spaces, as is quite typical. In the middle of this structure of intermediate distance spaces was the breach of a route for a highway that was never built (if I remember correctly). This open space was of course not a breach in the Haussmannian sense of breaking through a structure in order to create urban space (and control), but rather a conceptual and continuous breach into the future of the residents' and the quarter's lives. The rigid, unimaginative urban structure was matched by the forlorn condition of the surrounding spaces. I remember young ruderal vegetation peeking out over high, closed wooden board fences. Somehow in front of these fences were large advertisement billboards that incongruously promised one life improvement or another – for sale.

1 “Immer sind Inseln Orte der Sehnsucht.”

2 In cooperation with the landscape architect Yves Brunier

3 At least in Germany they did. See Plagemann, 1989, Köttering, Nachtigäller 1997, and the pivotal Skulpturprojekte Münster (since 1977)

4 “The intention of the 5th Viennese Seminar on Architecture is to draw attention to the problem of ‘empty spaces’ and to develop ideas and proposals on an international level. Urban and peripheral open spaces are part of the ‘landscape’ of a city. Designed and designable spaces that are not to be dealt with solely according to functional criteria. There is a constant exchange, a constant overlapping between artistic spaces and natural spaces. Different typologies and concepts for ‘Viennese open spaces’ are to be developed.”, [www.azw.at/de/termin/5-wiener-architekturseminar/](http://www.azw.at/de/termin/5-wiener-architekturseminar/) [05.06.2022], translated by the author.

[fig 2. Stadlau 1994 (c) T.Folkerts]



Nevertheless, we set out to “fill” this empty space with new life, new form, new architecture. Had we not come to develop a concept? A zig-zag architectural form was thus to create and make a difference in this barrack-like pattern of the Zeilenbauten. As a “strange attractor”<sup>5</sup>, this architecture was to make a difference, come what may. There was something exciting in the possibility of free form, something promising in otherness. The flash of architecture felt liberating in a situation where things seemed to have come to an absolute halt, the lawns of the distance spaces neatly clipped to the effect of freezing time. For most of the three-week workshop, we toiled away at variants of such a strange attractor, aiming to get a grip on the spaces and compose more architectural flashes. Yet, our team leader Luc Deleu – and we with him – grew increasingly dissatisfied. None of these architectures promised a solution<sup>6</sup> or generated any kind of real interest in anybody. We ourselves had not yet reached the point where we were convinced of our concept.

There was a crisis meeting that was to change things dramatically. Luc Deleu questioned the relative value of an architectural structure we had just worked on so diligently. The strange attractor at Stadlau – without any clear functional content – would merely cheer up the residents for a short period of time. This, Deleu asserted, could just as easily be accomplished by installing a very small mechanical bird sculpture, like those his Belgian artist friend Panamarenko was interested in and made at the time. When people went past it, a sensor would activate the bird to make an improbable and funny, cheering gesture to the passers-by. For Deleu, what was at stake in questioning the failure or under-used potential of empty spaces on the city’s periphery, such as here in Stadlau, was a more universal way of thinking about the future of the city of Vienna.<sup>7</sup>

We shall build on Donauinsel!

Initially, Luc Deleu and his assistants from Flanders had come to the workshop prepared with a larger scheme as a scenario for the further development of the northeast of Vienna. This was based on Le Corbusier’s grid plan developed for Bogotá, implemented in Chandigarh, the new capital of Punjab, which Deleu had recently visited. This larger arc of urbanistic thinking had initially not taken hold of our team. But what did enthuse us was the idea of turning the work around and developing a proposal for a city of 150,000 to 300,000 inhabitants on Donauinsel (corresponding to the growth in population projected for the next 15 to 30 years). Concentrat-



[fig 3. Strange attractor for Stadlau, model 1994. Photo (c) T.Folkerts]



[fig 4. Panamarenko, Archaeopterix Lithografica, 1993 source <https://middelheimmuseum.be/en/page/panamarenko-belgium> ]

5 A term, frequently used by Jan Verheyden, part of Luc Deleu’s assistant team.

6 A term that Luc Deleu, however, fiercely contested, referring to Marcel Duchamp’s “There is no solution because there is no problem.”

7 Ever expanding scales, Deleu had worked for years on an Urbanistic Manifesto, taking the issue of the city (urbis) to a global scale (orbis terrarum).





[Fig 5: Development model for the north of Vienna. Luc Deleu / T.O.P. office, 1994. Published in black and white in ArchitekturZentrumWien 1996]

ing the structural development of the coming decades on an island might spare the landscape around Vienna further peripheral development of the type we had seen in Stadlau. The character of the island would also lead to a much more condensed building structure, thus saving space there and elsewhere. Luc Deleu later developed the workshop proposal further into the project Usiebenpole (1994-1996), clarifying the central role of public transport and replacing the varieties of urban schemes we had produced in the workshop with a series of Corbusian Unités d'habitation orthogonally pierced by the elevated new metro line U7 (which was to connect Donauinsel directly to the airport). The project for Donauinsel was "to prove that it is possible to build new cities."<sup>8</sup> A new city, nota bene, conceived not by just filling up empty or available space, but rather by creating links and considering the larger metropolitan area for its quality of urban life.

The roughly twenty-two kilometers of Donauinsel proper were built from 1972 through 1989.<sup>9</sup> The Usiebenpole has not been built, and I have not been back to Donauinsel since the workshop. What was then a very recent hydrotechnical element of Vienna's urban landscape has certainly developed considerably since then. Most of the 1.8 million trees planted will have grown, and the more natural parts at the ends of the island will have developed into a haven for a great variety of plants and animals. Development will also have taken place in the central parts of the island, and a good number of inhabitants of the city seeking entertainment and recrea-

tion will be present throughout the year. On our visits in 1994, we hardly saw anyone on the island. Has Donauinsel become an essential part of Vienna in the meantime? And has it become an essentially urban part of the city? Has it also influenced what the city looks like on its edges?

I have asked myself, as a landscape architect, how the experience of this workshop can be contextualized over a long time span. The seminar's abstract from 1994 called for the qualification (while simultaneously criticizing the existence) of mere green spaces, forgotten (wasteland) spaces, and spaces functionally occupied below their potential.<sup>10</sup> The formulation of the critique of empty spaces as “not being in use”, “without any reference to the surrounding buildings”, or “wastelands, which hope for better times” would now even be used to favorably describe a site. Thirty years ago, a more orderly and controlled idea of space was sought-after; a designed, maybe we could say “architectural” properness was expected. Maybe it is no accident that two of the team leaders of the workshop, Martha Schwartz and Adriaan Geuze, were then – and have since remained – pivotal figures internationally in positing a strongly design-driven landscape architecture. The joint publication on the 5th and 6th seminars asserted the futurity of the seminars' participants.<sup>11, 12</sup> But the foresightedness of the seminars has proven to lie more generally in having brought together practitioners from different fields, from architecture and landscape design, from the arts and writing (as in the case of Ippolito Pizzetti). In focusing on urban open space, the 5th Viennese Seminar on Architecture coincided with the beginning of a new way of collaborating in conceiving and building the city. From the 1990s on, landscape architecture and architecture, but also art (sculpture), began to collaborate regularly, structurally, intently. In the meantime, the interdisciplinary team approach to urbanistic work has come to be regarded – in Central Europe – as a prime quality and a necessity.

Wouldn't it be a worthwhile experiment to overlay an updated notion of Usiebenpole on the island's existing landscape – with the prospect of enhanced trans- and interdisciplinary collaboration? Is this path closed? What was a rather schematically modernistic and diagrammatic idea of benignly neutral nature or landscape that continues its existence almost untouched by buildings and infrastructure<sup>13</sup> in the original proposal may, upon renewed consideration, become a model for the recognition and im-

8 Luc Deleu in Swinnen, p.187

9 Project design by landscape architects Gottfried and Anton Hansjakob, 1976

10 “Nevertheless, let's assume that empty spaces are all spaces that are not built and not architecturally conceived.

– Green spaces that are simply designated as green spaces on a plan, without anything happening – the untouched meadow.

– Green spaces that are designed, by gardeners and ecologists, usually without any reference to the surrounding buildings – the designed park.

– Forgotten spaces, urban wastelands, which hope for better times, to be built on or designed.

– Forgotten spaces, urban wastelands, which are used both invisibly and vividly.

– Occupied empty spaces, streets and squares, traffic areas, determined by primary uses and effectiveness, yet furnished and designed.

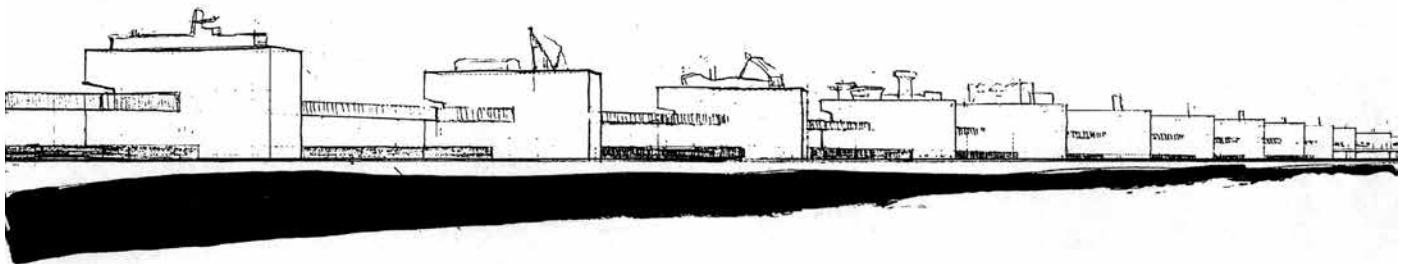
– Occupied empty spaces that can be carriers of additional meanings.”

www.azw.at/de/termin/5-wiener-architekturseminar/ [05.06.2022], translated by the author.

11 “The book is a document on contemporary, or rather future architecture by the next generation of young architects.” Advertisement text of *The Empty Space 94 / The Public Space 95*, Architekturzentrum Wien, 1996.

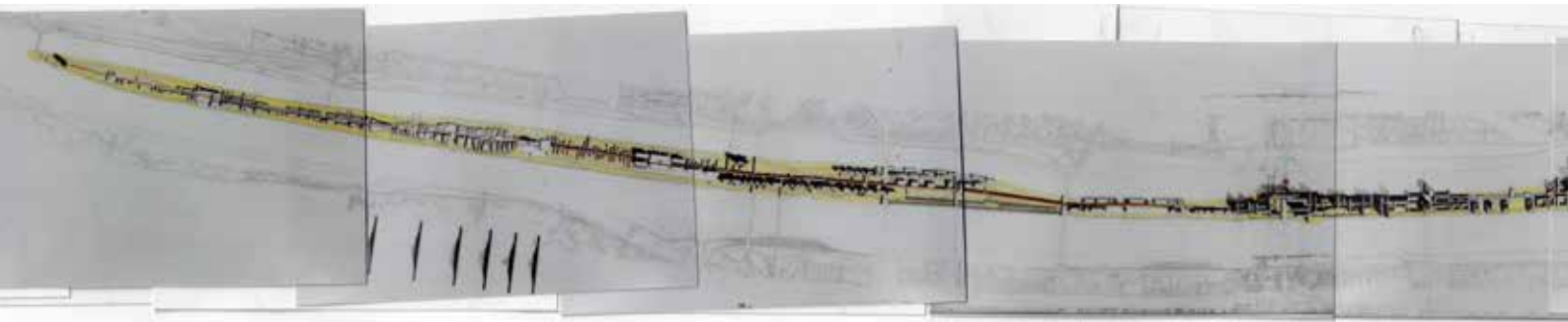
12 The Viennese Seminars on Architecture were suspended after their 7th edition in 1996.

13 “The ground surface remains free and serves as recreational landscape for all inhabitants of Vienna.” C. Geldof in Swinnen (2021), p. 186



USIERENPOOL . DONAU INSEL 24 BEZIRK

[fig 6. Usiebenpole. Luc Deleu / T.O.P. office, 1994-1996.  
(c) Luc Deleu / T.O.P. office]



[fig 7. City attractor Donauinsel, workshop drawing 1994. Photo (c) T.Folkerts ]

provement of what is already a reality in our cities, but is not yet considered in its fullest potential: urban nature. Such reconsideration would call for a structural and conscious relationship between all elements of urban nature – including people and buildings. Such a proposal would call for the qualification of empty space as part of the intrinsic landscape of the city, as originally called for in the seminar abstract: “All spaces of a city are ‘designed’ [...] – and be it by the absence of attention. All the spaces of a city together again form a ‘landscape.’”<sup>14</sup>

The urbanistic project on Donauinsel would be interesting because it expands the city into a place beyond convention. By combining the density (and potentially new typology) of the proposed buildings and infrastructures with the strangely thin, linear insularity of Donauinsel, a new idea of the city could emerge. A city where nature and culture, architecture and landscape are not diagrammatic, nor potentially opposed or mutually exclusive. An urban society that responsibly sustains the idea of ecology and landscape design, which – in the widest sense of cohabitation – includes inhabitants and urban culture. A project on Donauinsel would be interesting in that it confronts a challenging and confined territory, and thus (in all likelihood) carries in itself the reflection of its own limitations. In a short text on a possible reading of the spaces of Museum Insel Hombroich (Germany), the Swiss philosopher Paul Good reasons that the idea of Hermetics, derived from the idea of the island<sup>15</sup>, and – related to it – differential thinking<sup>16</sup> may be at the core of artistic thinking that transcends art and nature. Such an idea of the existence of difference and individuality at the same time goes beyond categorization and thus is capable of “multiplicity instead of unity, of identity instead of characteristics, of intensities instead of extensions, of becoming instead of being [...]” It is “affirmative thinking whose instrument is disjunction instead of dialectics and a thinking of diversity – of dispersed and nomadic multiplicity that is not limited and summarized by any forces of itself.”<sup>17</sup>

PS: Recapitulating this personal episode, I verified the past weather: day temperatures during the workshop in 1994 maxed out between 20°C and 30°C, with night temperatures dropping only once from the normal minimum of 16°C to 13°C.

14 „Alle Räume einer Stadt sind ‚gestaltet‘ [...] – und sei es durch die Abwesenheit von Aufmerksamkeit. Alle Räume einer Stadt bilden zusammen wieder eine ‚Landschaft‘.“, [www.azw.at/de/termin/5-wiener-architekturseminar/](http://www.azw.at/de/termin/5-wiener-architekturseminar/) [05.06.2022]

15 ... and invoking the figure of the Greek god Hermes, who (among other things) was able to move from one realm to another.

16 cf. Gilles Deleuze

17 Here, Paul Good references Michel Foucault, *Theatrum philosophicum*, in: Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault: *Der Faden ist gerissen*, Berlin, 1977, pp. 21-58, here: p. 43.



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5th Viennese Seminar on Architecture  
**“Architecture of the Empty Space - Landscape Architecture”**  
 (“Architektur des leeren Raumes - Landschaft Wien”)

20.08. – 11.09.1994 StadtRaum Remise, Vienna  
project groups with: Luc Deleu (Antwerp), Adriaan Geuze (Rotterdam), Pepe  
Llinàs Carmona (Barcelona), Mark Mack (Los Angeles), Ippolito Pizzetti (Rom),  
Martha Schwartz (Boston)

<https://www.azw.at/en/event/5th-viennese-seminar-on-architecture/>

The Wiener Architekturseminar was discontinued after its 7th edition in 1996.

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