

**THIS FIRST TITLE IN
THE AA CURRENT
PRACTICES SERIES
EXPLORES RECENT
DEVELOPMENTS
IN AUSTRIAN
ARCHITECTURE
THROUGH PROJECTS
BY ARTEC, ADOLF
KRISCHANITZ,
PAUHOF AND
RIEGLER RIEWE**

Beyond the Minimal

ARTEC / Adolf Krischanitz / PAUHOF / Riegler Riewe

AA Exhibition Gallery 24 February – 1 April 1998

Ingerid Helsing Almaas

What's in a name? Minimal. Minimalism. A name given to an architectural style, a word denoting a by now familiar trend in architecture, whether 'trend' be understood as a clearly defined direction or as a mere fashion. The theoretical boundaries of minimalism may be vague, but most of us are at least equipped with an identikit image that enables us to recognize those pared-down details, those large plain surfaces and material abstractions, as minimalist space. But *beyond* the minimal?

Those of us who hoped that the presentations of the work of these four contemporary Austrian architectural practices would illuminate new paths and point towards what might lie

beyond minimalism were disappointed. The exhibition, the conference, and the ensuing publication proved to be less straightforward in their direction than the title seems to suggest. They could have been presented simply as 'the work of four Austrian practices', thereby avoiding the suggestion that their common ground is anywhere near as clearly defined as to warrant giving it a name. As it is, the absence of a clearly defined theoretical or architectonic territory is the most dissatisfying, but perhaps also the most intriguing, aspect of all three elements of the presentation. Though the exhibition survived this lack of an explicit context, the publication, and the conference as presented within it, is a more confusing document.

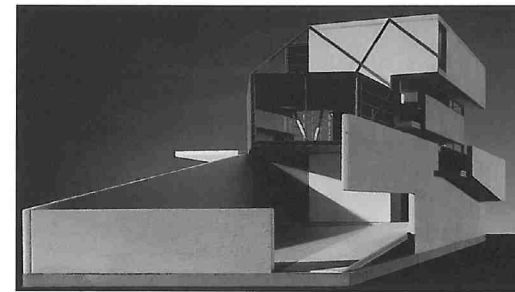
The exhibition showed the work of the relatively young Austrian architects Bettina Götz and Richard Manahl (ARTEC), Michael Hofstätter and Wolfgang Pauzenberger (PAUHOF), Florian Riegler and Roger Riewe, together with the veteran Adolf Krischanitz. The projects were conventionally represented by scale models, drawings and photographs. No grand gestures, no experimental media, nothing extraordinary. However, the details of the display succeeded in transforming the exhibition from mere representation into a new event, chiefly because of the models. Finely assembled from metal and glass, aluminium, steel mesh and perspex, as well as the more familiar cardboard and timber, their exquisite detail made them not simply scaled approximations of buildings but somehow ambassadors of an unknown materiality – things in themselves, with a presence in their own right. Set amidst more familiar forms of urban or suburban contexts blocked out in white card, these shining little constructions appeared not so much as

abstractions of reality, but as condensed images of a process of architectural decision-making, surprising but clearly legible. Many of the projects have never got beyond the drawing board or the model-maker's workshop, which may explain why they seemed so convincing in this, their only incarnation.

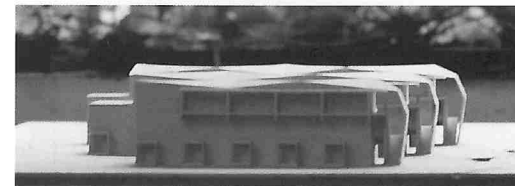
The arrangement of irregular clusters of drawings and photographs of finished buildings on the walls of the exhibition gallery gave the impression that these decision-making devices had at some point actually exploded, leaving a trail of startling structures spread across the suburbs and countryside of Austria. The shots themselves, extended across two or three separate frames, or framed in such a way as to imply that the image continued beyond the given format, suggested accidental images or incomplete fragments of reality, as if glimpsed through a window. The size and proportions of the frames, whether by accident or design, corresponded with those of the Georgian sash windows of the gallery, connecting these views of places in Austria with a view of London – meaning was being created here, by exactly this constellation of frames and openings. In fact, the work that appeared the most abstract within the context of the exhibition was that of Adolf Krischanitz, who paradoxically is the architect who has realized the most buildings. Perhaps this is the reason why his posters, with his name spelled out in big letters and text in Japanese, appeared so out of place: the action had already happened elsewhere, we were not necessary for the creation of its meaning.

The texts identifying the various exhibits gave no hint of any common ground between the different works, and certainly never once mentioned the word minimalism, let alone anything beyond it: 'the purpose of the building is to bring together, for public

ARTEC



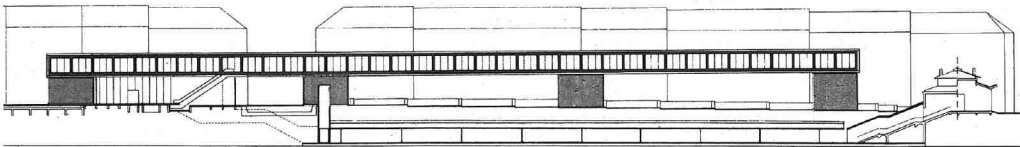
House in Grinzing, Vienna, 1995. Model showing parking court, and plan of the main living areas.



Social housing, Bärnbach, Styria, 1992-8. Model, long section, and view of the southern façade.



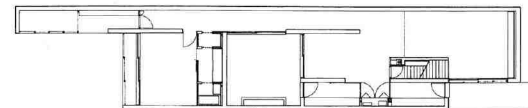
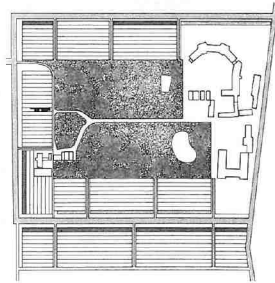
View of the installation in the AA Exhibition Gallery showing, in the foreground, the model of social housing by ARTEC (see opposite page) and, on the wall, photographs of House P by PAUHOF (see p. 60).



Wolkenspange Youth Centre, Vienna, 1995. Computer image of proposed scheme (situated above Otto Wagner's Burggasse Station), and drawing showing section and the station.



MARGHERITA SPILUTTINI



Sperl House, Friedrichshof, Burgenland, 1996. View of entrance façade, site plan showing position of houses around a central open space, and ground-floor plan.

convenience, the various dental services that are available in Graz' – short statements such as this one, giving no hint of formal intention and offering no interpretation of the work. This may be one of the reasons why the exhibition was so successful: it was not referential and did not generalize, leaving such efforts to the accompanying publication.

Rather than complementing the exhibition, the accompanying publication* describes a rather different territory. It is not an exhibition catalogue – though it presents the same four architectural practices and the same projects – and it makes no direct reference to the exhibition. Almost half of the book is occupied by the introductory articles, leaving each practice only about a dozen pages in which to present their work. Eight pages at the end of the book are devoted to papers presented at the conference. This puts the relative emphasis of the publication on the theoretical contributions, leading us to expect a thorough mapping-out of the current state of the minimalist project, and a detailed account of how the work of the four practices goes beyond this, as the title suggests. But the articles reveal nothing new. They move in curiously limited and repeating circles, each one listing the achievements and characteristics of each of the four practices in turn, describing the work in a slightly different way, each making a few tentative references to other contexts but committing to no clear readings or new interpretations.

Mohsen Mostafavi comes closest to the mark, in his short introduction, in articulating the curious lack of a clear definition of minimalism. He describes it, not as a negation or absence, but as a general backdrop which subsumes differences, an elastic concept rather than a precise abstraction, a frame

flexible enough to contain the work of four very different practices. This non-definition may be an accurate representation of how these practices, pursuing diverse tactics of abstraction and simplification, came to be lumped together and made 'relevant' by a convenient contemporary label. But it brings us no closer to a precise definition which might provoke a genuine discussion of the current uses of abstraction and reduction as tools of architectural practice.

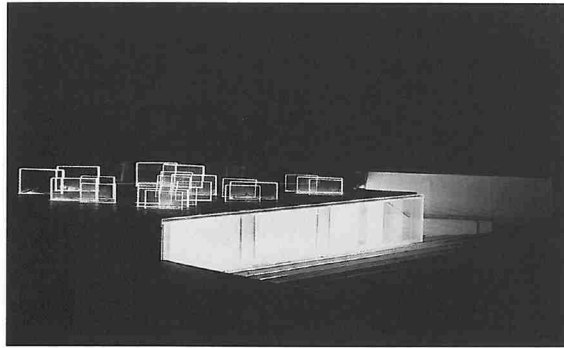
Both Peter Allison and Otto Kapfinger make a brief attempt at defining minimalism in their essays, Allison describing it as architecture which is 'abstract in conception and responsive to the needs and expectations of different situations', Kapfinger as an 'attempt to go beyond semantic and morphological constructs', a criticism of 'the visual, expressive representation of architecture'. But neither definition reaches the point of concise debate: Allison's is too general and Kapfinger, though his concentrated text weaves the work of the four practices into a dense web of connections and similarities in relation to

general criticism and their specific Austrian context, limits his discussion of minimalism to its origins in art. Ernst Hubeli offers a poignant reminder of the climate surrounding current architectural production: the lack of distinct positions in architectural criticism, and the role of the media and of global culture in our relation to the image. He too refers to the minimal art of the 1960s, reminding us that architecture has other responsibilities and pursues the investigations of art at its peril: 'Architecture was not created simply in order to be perceived.' He praises the provincial sensibility which has helped to root Austrian architects in the specificities of their local situation and has enabled them to avoid some of the more formal exercises recently indulged in by Swiss architects, for example. All three introductory articles point to the pragmatic side of the Austrian brand of minimalism. But the 'function' and 'pragmatic utility' which characterizes the work of the four practices, as described by Kapfinger, Allison and Hubeli, are still the familiar concepts which lie at the

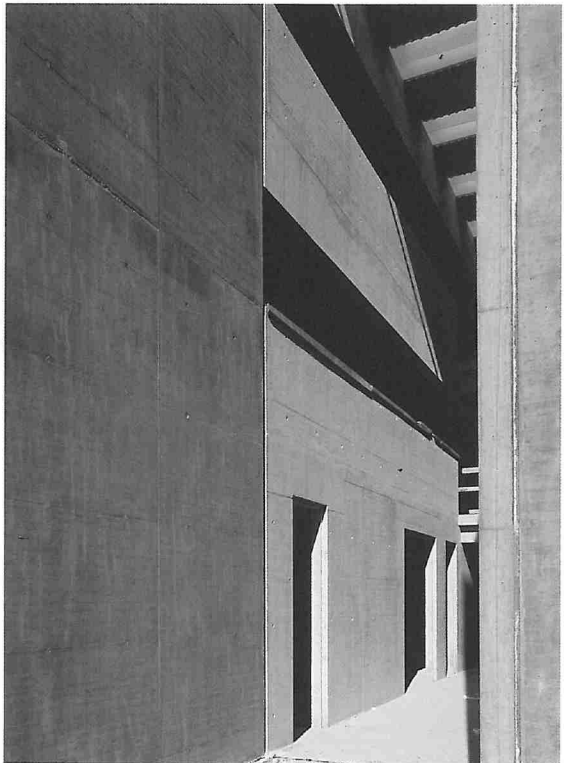
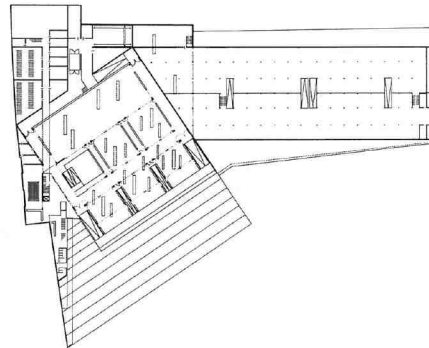


SUSAN BAKER

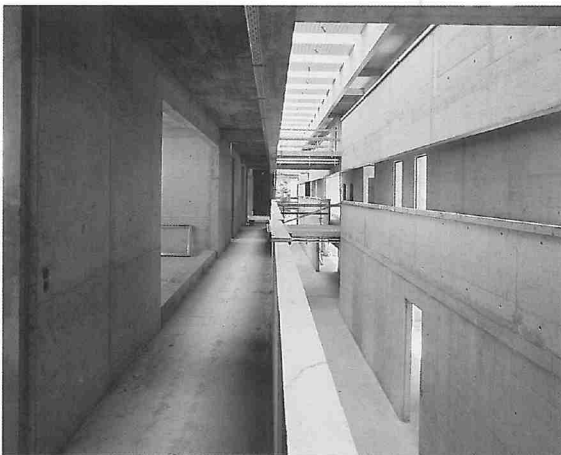
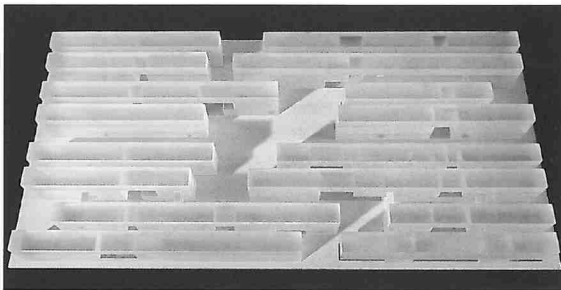
View of the exhibition installation showing, front left, the model of a vocational school by PAUHOF (see p. 60), and behind it a model of the Neue Welt School in Vienna by Adolf Krischanitz, 1992-4.



Trigon Museum, Graz, 1988. View of model showing front of main gallery, and plan.



Information Technology and Electronics Institutes, Technical University, Graz, 1993-9 (Phase I). Model of the overall scheme, which consists of a series of teaching and research institutes, and views of the building under construction showing, on the left, concrete with and without added pigment and, on the right, internal access to office and teaching areas.



General view of the exhibition installation with the model of PAUHOF's redevelopment of a textile factory in Linz, 1991, in the foreground.

centre of the project of traditional modernism: our understanding of function or utility – that is, the practical relationship between a building and its inhabitants – has not changed, nor has our understanding of context as the immediate physical surroundings. If anything, the conclusion to be extracted from the articles is that, far from being new, minimalism is simply an extension of some aspects of modernism, but free of social ideology, and more extreme in its formal abstractions.

This point is elaborated on by Brett Steele in his contribution to the conference, entitled 'Minimal Returns: Modernism in Drag', included in the book. In fact the conference contri-

butions come closest to stating positions that might initiate discussion. Steele argues that minimalism is in essence curatorial, serving as a neutralized backdrop for objects on display, architecture's contribution to the lifestyle industry. In a brief discussion of the shifting relation between the avant-garde and its flip side, kitsch, he claims that the space between the two is inhabited by bad fashion, by camp. Just as the drag queen is 'a living testimony to what women used to want to be', minimalism is modernism in drag, keeping alive an idealized image of what modernism aspired to.

In a dense conference paper on created and assumed space, project and projection, Andrew Benjamin argues that complexity is irreducible, and that negating or denying it, as minimalism does by insisting on simplification, on a basic axiom, is in itself a complex activity, only one of many possible negotiations of complexity.

The work of the four practices is only briefly described in the book, the emphasis being on quantity rather than in-depth presentation. Though the layout of mostly tiny drawings and photographs suspended on an expansive white background does produce some intriguing and concentrated effects, the numerous competition projects in particular do not benefit from such a superficial presentation. The layout seems biased towards built work, as a photograph, however small, can still convey the myriad details that anchor a building in the world – sunlight and shadow, textures, dust, leaves, flecks of snow, passers-by. But in the scaleless world of photographs the beautiful models from the exhibition lack the immediacy they had as physical objects. While a reduced working drawing may supply enough information to be interesting even in the absence of any explanation or reference, a schematic section produced for a competition entry does

not. There is a certain degree of variation in the layout and a handful of full-page photographs, but overall it seems strange that, as three of the four practices have built relatively little, an effort was not made in the design of the publication to make their many unrealized visions seem more vivid.

Whatever the limitations of the theoretical side of the publication, however, and whatever the shortcomings of its design, these do not detract from the achievements of the architects whose work was presented. As is so often the case in published representations of architecture, the images and drawings of buildings carry most of the burden of communicating architectural meaning. The accompanying words offer little challenge to extend or change our understanding of those images, to problematize or shed a different light on that reality. A roof remains a roof, a wall remains a wall, glass remains transparent, concrete opaque. The words act as polite and intelligent commentary, incidental rather than pivotal to the architectonic action. Precisely because the exhibition took place in London, without comment, it succeeded in conveying a meaning which, though it referred to a different reality, appears authentic. The publication, despite its ambition to the contrary, remains a picture book. Once again, built reality has triumphed over architectural description. Once again, architecture walks away, unscathed, from a tryst with words.

* Current Practices 1: *Beyond the Minimal – ARTEC / Adolf Krischanitz / PAUHOF / Riegler Riewe*. Contributions by Peter Allison, Andrew Benjamin, Michael Hofstätter, Ernst Hubeli, Otto Kapfinger, Mohsen Mostafavi, Brett Steele. 104 pp., duotone illus., 250 × 320 mm. £25.00. ISBN 1-870890-83-3.