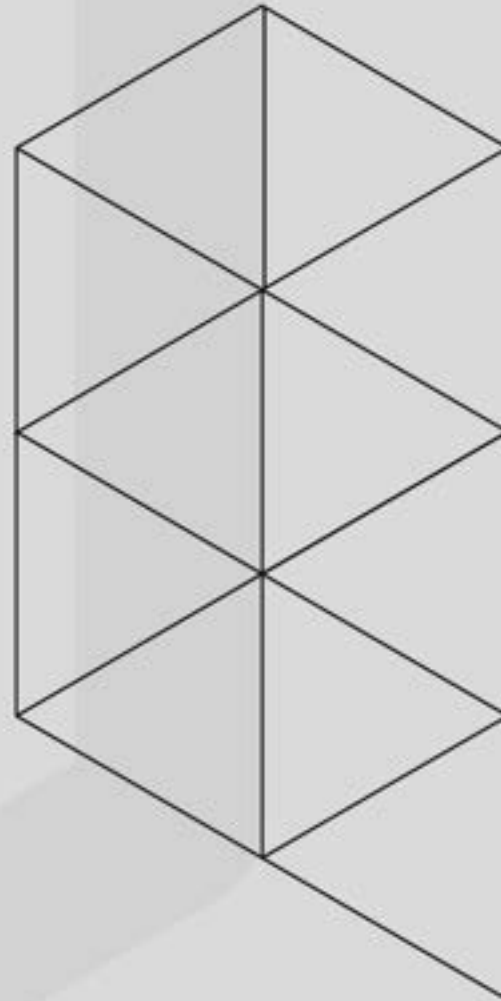


# What is normal

SPACEX Deliverable, Work Package 5 (D5.6, D18)



# What is normal

Barbara Holub, transparadiso

## Abstract

---

The text discusses the role of art engaging in current urban issues, and how critical spatial practice and artistic-urbanistic strategies can contribute as durational involvement (see Paul O'Neill) to direct urbanism – for promoting a more just society by a socially engaged urban planning and development. The two projects 'NORMAL' and 'Harbour for Cultures' presented in this text address questions of what is considered 'normal' in our current society – which is characterized by the unplannable and increasing fears fueled by right wing demagoguery. Rather than resigning in helplessness or fear – on the contrary, transparadiso considers this a unique chance to question dominant values of society driven by neo-liberal economics for re-introducing shared values of living together as social beings, for creating new, inclusive communities beyond cultural borders and thus counteracting the increasing isolation based on fear. Both projects exemplify participatory strategies like the 'production of desires' for producing programs beyond the functional, enhancing also poetic moments as non-recognized value in urban planning, and discuss how dialogues (see 'dialogical art', Grant Kester) can be created between conflicting interests. At the same time the projects make use of the 'autonomy of art' as inherent quality of approaching burning issues of society from an angle of the non-functional, the non-efficient – thus counteracting the dominant claims of decision making in our contemporary globalized society

KEYWORDS: Silent activism, Socially engaged art, Critical participatory practices, Direct urbanism, Role of art in society, Dialogue and polylogue, Production of desires, Anticipatory fiction, Macro-utopia

## What is normal

The term 'normal' is casually used in our daily conversations in all fields of society – most of the time without reflecting or questioning what definition of normal we refer to, or who defines that mysterious term 'normal', which implies manifold assumptions based on personal interpretation. It seems as if there is a silent, common agreement of what is normal. However, the unreflected use of this term immediately signifies a judgement, a distinction between 'normal' and 'not normal' or even 'abnormal'.

What is normal is particularly defined by the feedback of our fellow human beings, according to different cultural and political contexts. But whom do we ask for an assessment? Whose opinion do we consider relevant? What is perceived as normal has always been in motion: it differs according to the social and cultural contexts of society in various geographical areas and changes over time. In order to establish a new normal, the strength and initiative of people are needed – those who stand up against prevailing norms and usual behaviour and question conventions and rules.

Due to the current situation it is vital to critically investigate what is considered 'normal', since within the context of a global pandemic in the form of a COVID-19 it addresses everybody worldwide. The hope to return to the former 'normal' seems to be the driving common interest – of politicians as well as of citizens – whereas many artists, leftist thinkers and intellectuals have been hoping that this 'state of exemption' (which will probably not go back to the previous normal), that does not exempt privileged classes, would finally offer an explicit chance to reconsider the neo-liberal economic system, the unjust distribution of resources, ecological issues, migration. If planning has already become increasingly difficult in the globalized economy, in the current situation the fact that there are no more predictions of the future possible has arrived in the centre of society – yet without signs of a fundamental change being a topic of discussion.

But even though now everybody is confronted with the 'unplannable', it does not mean to resign in helplessness or fear – on the contrary, we consider this a unique chance to question dominant values of society driven by neo-liberal economics for re-introducing shared values of living together as social beings, counteracting the increasing isolation based on fear. It is even more important to set out for visions and fictions, how to confront the current challenges of unclear perspectives by developing concrete projects for specific contexts. Here the underestimated value of art engaging in societal issues can regain and reclaim a new significance for society, especially counteracting the dominant politics of fear. Artists have learned to encounter fear. We are not afraid of 'what we dare to wish',<sup>1</sup> on the contrary: we insist in pursuing the impossible – beyond what seems to be doable. We, as artists,

What is normal

are used to transgressing borders, our personal borders, borders of apprehension, anxiety, frustration, failure and misunderstanding.

Here I will present two projects by transparadiso in Graz and Trieste (which are partner cities), *NORMAL – Direct Urbanism x 4* (Graz/ A, 2019–21) and *Harbour for Cultures* (Trieste/ I, 2016–present). Graz is currently the fastest growing city in Austria, whereas Trieste has just recently started to regain a momentum after having been in a state of neglect for decades. In 2019 (i.e. about 100 years after the end of the Austrian–Hungarian monarchy which marked *the* flourishing period of Trieste and its harbour) China signed a contract with the Italian government to use the new harbour as entry point of the New Silk Road to Europe from the sea. This investment will trigger unforeseeable consequences not only for Trieste, but for the whole of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Graz has already been facing drastic changes of urban transformation, which are especially visible at the borders of the city.

In both projects the artist group transparadiso questions what is considered normal in the logic of neo-liberal urban planning and addresses current urban issues by employing artistic–urbanistic strategies, like the production of desires or anticipatory fiction, for a socially engaged and process-oriented urbanism – for direct urbanism.

## Harbour for Cultures

In Europe, what is currently considered ‘normal’ means to concentrate on nation states, on their individual interests, drawing new borders which disrupt the idea and vision of a common Europe, which we have believed in for decades. This new normal we are currently facing is based on fear – fear of losing, fear of being left behind. But we want to counteract these dominating fears, which are propelled by right wing politicians across Europe. Therefore transparadiso together with Giuliana Carbi/ trieste contemporanea and Elisabetta Porro initiated *Harbour for Cultures* (H/C) in Trieste in 2016, for instigating a collective production of space based on shared social and humanistic values across cultures and aiming at establishing the Harbour for Cultures Center at the Porto Vecchio (Old Harbour) in Trieste.

*H/C* re-interprets the usual functions of a harbour based on economic interests (exchange of goods, commercial profit, insurance issues) and its interim state between arriving and temporary belonging and leaving. *H/C* diverts these functions to challenge a macro-utopia – a vision to create a (near) future society beyond geographical and mental borders, a heterotopia, as Foucault noted in ‘Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias’, highlighting the role of the ship: ‘The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates’ (Foucault

What is normal

1984: 9).<sup>3</sup> 'Harbour' is a synonym for 'arriving', at a final destination, for being at 'home' – as a promise or hope, even though this might be temporary: we have been witnessing the tragedies of refugee movements across the Mediterranean in recent years – many of them never arriving on dry land, but even if they manage to arrive on land, rarely do they arrive in our societies.

Even though the point of departure for *H/C* is Trieste and her unresolved situation of the Porto Vecchio, which has remained unused and in a state of decay for decades, this project transgresses a real physical location. *H/C* aims at shaping an image of a 'new port' where people freely exchange their own cultures, while assuring their core values, so that new profits (benefits of art and culture) are earned by the many.

These sociocultural values have gained even greater importance, since –as already mentioned – in 2019 the New Harbour of Trieste was officially declared the final destination of the New Silk Road, triggering unprecedented investments in Trieste by the Chinese and unforeseeable consequences, not only for Trieste but across Europe.

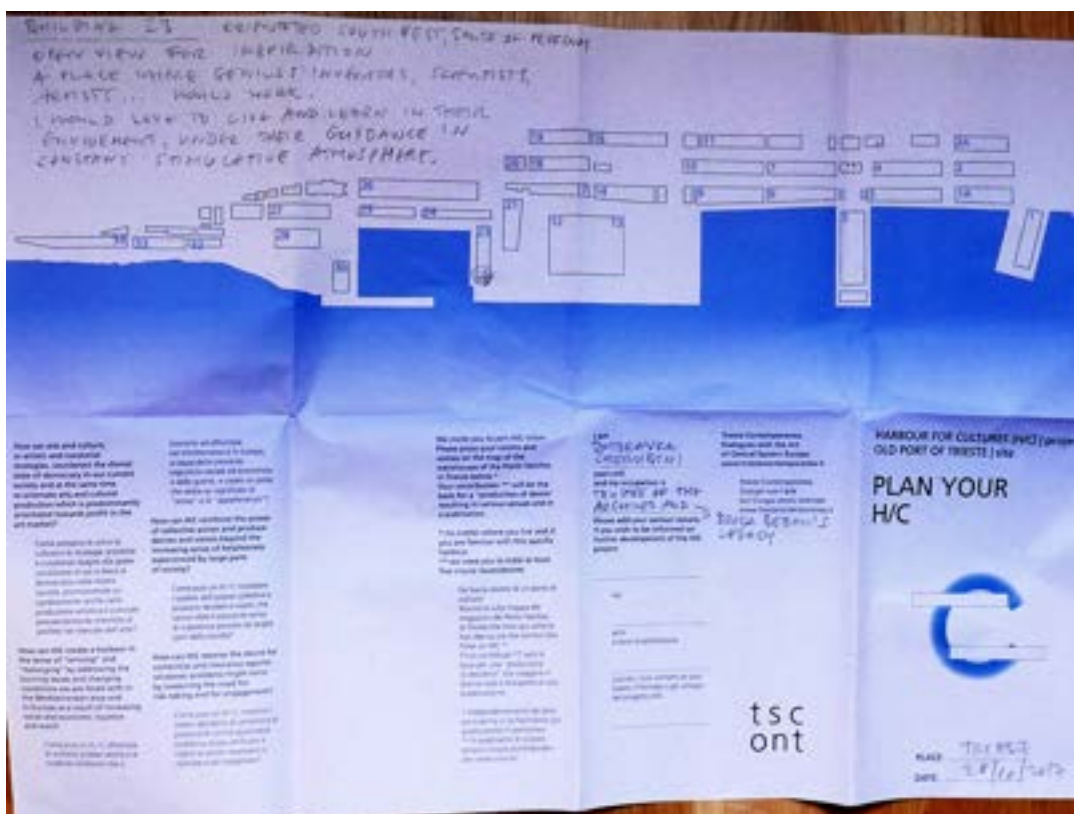


Figure 1: For the collective 'production of desires for *H/C*' we produced a map, which was filled out in many events: The CEI Forum in Venice (curated by Giuliana Carbi/ trieste contemporanea, 2017), the workshop 'Shared Values, Ambulant Gardens, and Other Spaces' at Porto Vecchio (directed by transparadiso, 2017) and many

What is normal

'Carte Blanche' meetings at trieste contemporanea (directed by Elisabetta Porro), and others. Photo: trasparadiso.

Since Porto Vecchio, a former ex-territorial area (free port), is located right in the centre of the city covering an area of about 66 hectares. The urbanistic programming of this area will have a major impact on the future urban development of the whole city and far beyond also because of its symbolic character. Therefore we started a participatory process for 'direct urbanism' – based on a collective 'production of desire'. In manifold events, international symposia, exhibitions and workshops on site at Porto Vecchio a multitude of desires ranging from poetic, functional to visionary were collected. For the workshop *Shared Values, Ambulant Gardens, and Other Spaces* at Porto Vecchio (2017) trasparadiso provided carpets for the participants to be placed on their selected sites to pronounce a desire. The carpet is the synonym of a garden in ancient culture, as Michel Foucault outlined:

As for carpets, they originally set out to reproduce gardens, since the garden was a carpet where the world in its entirety achieved symbolic perfection, and the carpet is a sort of movable garden in space. The garden is the smallest fragment of the world and, at the same time, represents its totality, forming right from the remotest times a sort of felicitous and universal heterotopia (from which are derived our own zoological gardens).  
(Foucault 1984: 6)



Figure 2: Workshop 'Shared Values, Ambulant Gardens, and Other Spaces' at Porto Vecchio/ Trieste, trasparadiso, 2017. Photo: Christine Hohenbüchler.

What is normal

This production of desires is meant to serve as a basis for urbanistic programmes enhancing common, social and cultural values for a future living together in a visionary way, and counteracting the development of Porto Vecchio possibly driven by pure economic interests.

Currently *H/C* is entering a new phase, since we aim at transforming one of the delapidated buildings at Porto Vecchio into a permanent Centre of Harbour for Cultures – serving as a base of exchange and lab for the first desires of the ‘collection of desires’ to be realized, a cultural centre, as a signifier for the next desire to come.

Whereas *H/C* focuses on reimagining a future vision for a common Europe, possibly encompassing the Mediterranean and its neighbour countries based in Trieste as a city with a complex history in Central Europe, *NORMAL* engages in four districts on the edge of the city of Graz which have been undergoing major processes of transformation. Austria is infamous for the highest amount of soil sealing and land consumption in Europe. What impact do these processes have on ecological issues, the urban framework and community life, between former rural and new ‘peri-urban’ areas at the periphery?

## NORMAL – Direct Urbanism x 4 in Graz<sup>4</sup>

### The normality of the unspectacular at the edges of the city

Under the motto ‘Culture creates the future of urban living’, the Graz Year of Culture 2020 offers the opportunity to participate in a social design process and to critically (self-)question how we wish to live (together) in the future. In view of the complexity of the world and the dependencies of our everyday realities, the Graz Year of Culture 2020 encourages the development of visionary ideas and designs’.<sup>5</sup> transparadiso took the ambitious goals of the call for proposals literally and has developed the project *NORMAL – Direct Urbanism x 4*, which aims to initiate a durational process on the outskirts of the city and to introduce the results of *NORMAL* in the urban planning process of Graz beyond the project phase of the Culture Year 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Through the method of direct urbanism, transparadiso considers the Graz Year of Culture 2020 as an extraordinary opportunity to address neglected issues of urban development in Graz that are also relevant for other growing cities in Europe. In many cities, growth has resulted in unimpeded neo-liberal urban development characterized by circumstantial rezoning and maximum land use, which mainly affects the outskirts as there are hardly any open spaces left in the inner city and the

What is normal

possibilities for re-densification are limited. Excessive land consumption in the rural and agricultural peripheries of Graz were turned into urban areas and are now characterized by supermarkets, shopping malls and in many cases by privately financed housing construction. This development erases existing social structures (such as district centres), which were important meeting places for the population.<sup>7</sup> Due to a lack of urban development concepts, the production of new public spaces and newly established qualities for the common good is lacking.



Figure 3a: 100 Desires for Harbour for Cultures were selected from the contributions as basis for socially and societally engaged urban programs for Porto Vecchio. transparadiso, 2018. Photo: TR/E/S/T/E, catalogue (ed. by Michael Petrowitsch, House of Architecture Graz, 2018).

## How normal is NORMAL?

Growing cities like Graz are facing rising rents, displacement, traffic and infrastructure problems, and above all, high real estate investments and speculation. As a result, for the lives of the many who do not have the appropriate financial resources, it is becoming increasingly difficult to cope. This is the current normality of our urban society. Furthermore, our society is characterized by increasing standardization, which hardly allows room for the individual to manoeuvre – for non-standardized behaviour, for deviations from what is considered normal. However, it



What is normal

is precisely these deviations that characterize the visions of artists and artistic action.

Normality from the perspective of artists and urban practitioners<sup>8</sup> (Holub 2015: 28) can mean something quite different from what it means for those parts of the population marked by increasing fear of career disadvantages due to deviant behaviour or simply resentment or envy from their neighbours. When these different normalities collide, they can be given space through special artistic settings, thus creating a productive force that breaks up the dominant form of normality.



Figure 3b: A Promise for Harbour of Cultures, 2 January 2018. Meanwhile this area was fenced off and is not accessible anymore. transparadiso, 2018.

What is normal



Figure 4: NORMAL creates a dialogue between the periphery and the centre, between the urban interventions and the art and architecture institutions House of Architecture and Forum Stadtpark. transparadiso, 2020.

Georg Winter (NORMAL 2020: 125) has observed that it seems to be normal not to grow any useful plants or herbs in the gardens on the outskirts of Wetzelsdorf, while in the city centre, the use of even small residual areas such as tree discs for urban gardening is very popular. The context therefore also plays a major role in determining what is considered normal and what is not.

NORMAL propagates a co-existence of the many different notions of normality and opens up a space for discussion and the active and direct confrontation of diverging interests. With NORMAL, transparadiso and international teams of artists and architects will create situations in four peri-urban districts of Graz that give space to new solidarities and visions of a different normality oriented towards the common good.

NORMAL concentrates on life on the fringes, on peri-urban spaces<sup>9</sup>, which – although the majority of the population lives in such spaces – are seldom in the interest of planning and are also not in demand for artistic projects. Artists and urban

## What is normal

practitioners are often invited to address issues in socially deprived areas where they are supposed to act as problem solvers or short-term activists in order to revive deadlocked situations. Instead, transparadiso wants to create situations that actually stimulate new urban planning processes by means of direct urbanism. Direct urbanism (transparadiso 2013: 168) is a method that transparadiso has developed and continuously refined in order to respond to current social challenges of city and urban planning since long-term planning is no longer possible due to constant changing parameters in our globalized society. Although many new artistic-urban strategies (performative urbanism, instant urbanism, ambulant urbanism, etc.) have developed since the 1990s, they rarely find their way into urban planning to date. NORMAL is a chance to show these other urbanisms in practice and to address relevant issues of urban development on the outskirts of Graz.

In recent years peri-urban areas in Graz have been transformed by unrestrained building activity, without being embedded in a master plan. As a result, (public) spaces and spaces of random encounter that create specific identities are missing – except for those of the unspectacular and of boredom, because these random neighbourhoods happen by chance through a patchwork of new housing estates, still existing farm houses, super markets, shopping malls, sex-business, industry, car centres, remaining rural fragments and landscape spaces. One can imagine that at times these random situations based on ‘non-planning’ and maximum profit of land use could also create unforeseen or absurd qualities, when disparate elements are confronted with each other, but this is hardly the case, since the key ‘missing things’ in these recently radically transformed peri-urban areas are spaces for ‘centrality’, as Henri Lefebvre calls places for encounter and exchange:



What is normal

Figure 5 PLATZEN - School for Civic Action at the Main Square Andritz by public works. First event in October 2020. Photo: transparadiso.



Figure 6: The Third World Congress of the Missing Things at the Parish St.Paul in Waltendorf by transparadiso: First Event in October 2020. Photo: transparadiso.

Among these rights in the making features the right to the city (not to the ancient city, but to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places, etc.

(Lefebvre 1996: 179)

When looking at these unspectacular situations, with their often-exchangeable character, which is the normal, the main question is, how can we enhance these moments Lefebvre mentions? How can we create situations which further encounters and interaction and sharing of activities – apart from consumption? And how can we engage citizens in taking responsibility for the common wellbeing, the community, and not only their personal interests? These questions derive from the key issues of the Graz 2020 call for proposals 'How can art and science reduce social inequality and contribute to sustainable integration? What new forms of direct democracy and participation do we want? What do they look like and what are their implications?'.

What quality of NORMAL do we want to produce? To address this question transparadiso invited three international teams of artists/architects to realize projects with their specific methods in four peripheral districts in Graz. transparadiso is

What is normal

working in the fourth district itself and provided in-depth research of current topics in the districts– which will be discussed also in relationship to the whole city, e.g. the UK-based artist group, public works raise the question about the role that the Main Square in the Andritz district plays, in comparison to the Main Square in Graz itself. In cooperation with institutions, local residents and organizations in the districts, participatory and artistic-urbanistic strategies will be employed in the specific context and involve the community for appropriating public spaces and creating new spaces for encounter and urban/ public life beyond consumption. The selected four districts, despite their common peri-urban locations, are characterized by different structural and social contexts and are distributed according to the cardinal points North (Andritz), South (Liebenau), East (Waltendorf) and West (Wetzelsdorf).

Public works will realize the School for Civic Action in Andritz. Based on the School for Civic Action, which public works carried out in Roskilde (DK) in 2018, the method of temporary commons and instant city-making will now be applied anew for re-imagining Andritz's main square.

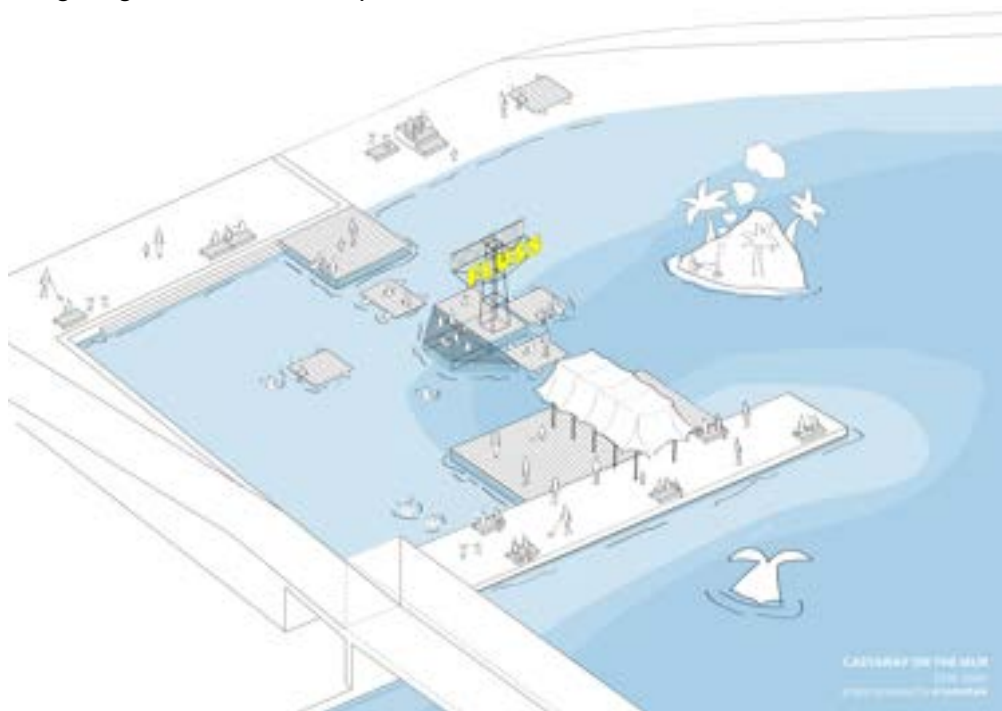


Figure 7: FLUSSFLUSS– Castaway on the Mur, design concept by orizontale for the new beach at Grünanger in Liebenau, October 2020. Photo: orizontale.

What is normal



Figure 8: DancePlantPlan by Georg Winter / AG DancePlantPlan. Workshop in August 2020. Photo: transparadiso.

Orizzontale (Rome) is planning *FlussFluss* – Castaway on the Mur as Commons archipelago in Liebenau – as the first Commons on the water (in the area of the new landscape space created due to the Mur power plant).<sup>12</sup> Referring to ‘Castaway on the Moon’ (a movie by Lee Hae-Jun, South Korea, 2009) the small islands of *FlussFluss* will also address current issues of withdrawal and isolation and explore how a floating archipelago can create a new real space for community instead.

Georg Winter (Stuttgart/ Völklingen, D) has been working with AG AST13 in Wetzelsdorf to implement the DancePlantPlan in the transition zone between agriculture, landscape and housing to transform a 1000-m<sup>2</sup> area of cultivable land on the threshold, transition and liminal space between urban and rural landscapes into a space for planting and dancing. This serves as a testing field to implement crop plants in adjacent and future residential areas.

NORMAL is characterized by a continuous exchange between the edges and the centre, between the sites of intervention and art institutions. The projects and their artistic–urbanistic practices, experiences and also possible problems will be made visible in the cumulation and discussed in comparison – also in their differences. An introductory event and exhibition at the HDA/ House of Architecture in January 2021 will present the projects, which will be realized between March and July 2021. On two weekends in August 2021 four hikes on the outskirts will link the four districts and propose a new hike-trail bringing a new perception of the outskirts to the attention of the city public. The hikes will be accompanied by the Indikator mobil, an

What is normal

urban emergency vehicle transparadiso has been reactivating for NORMAL. In September 2021 a final exhibition at Forum Stadtpark will present the results of the projects. Bringing them back to the art and urbanism discourse will contribute to the possibility for them to be integrated into an overarching urbanistic concept and creating an impact beyond the Graz Year of Culture 2020.

## What we envision as the ‘new normal’

Activist artistic strategies based on confrontation do not seem to be appropriate in the current situation, since the political climate is already very polarized. Instead we consider it more productive to establish situations for collaboration and enable communication with opposing parties. Listening to artists’ voices, their unorthodox methods to rupture disrupted communication and opposition, and counteracting demagoguery – this is what we envision as the ‘new normal’.

## References

---

Foucault, M. (1984), 'Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias', *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October ('Des Espace Autres', March 1967, trans. J. Miskowiec), <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>

Holub, B. (2020), *Third World Congress of the Missing Things*, NORMAL.

Holub, B. and Hohenbüchler, C. (2015), *Planning Unplanned: Can Art Have a Function? Towards a New Function of Art in Society*, Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst.

House of Architecture Graz (ed.) (2018), 'Future Architecture summer school: Desperate houselives/Ideas for peri-urban areas', Graz, <https://hda-graz.at/programm/future-architecture-summer-school-ausstellung-en>. Accessed 11 November 2020.

Lefebvre, H. (1968), 'The right to the city', in *Writings on Cities*, 1996.

transparadiso (Barbara Holub/ Paul Rajakovics) (2013), *Direct Urbanism*, Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst.

transparadiso (Barbara Holub/ Paul Rajakovics) (2020), *NORMAL – Direct Urbanism x 4*, Vienna: Salon für Kunstbuch.

## Footnotes

1. See Jenny Holzer's 'Protect me from what I want', as part of the series *Truisms*, Manhattan/New York, 1977–79.

2. And just recently (in September 2020) the Hamburg Port and Logistic AG (HHLA) acquired the majority of the multifunctions terminal 'Piattaforma Logistica Trieste'. See: <https://hlla.de/medien/pressemitteilungen/detailansicht/hlla-investiert-im-adria-hafen-triest> (accessed 8 November 2020).

3. This text, entitled 'Des Espace Autres', and published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967.

4. This text has slightly been updated from its first publication in *transparadiso* (2020).



What is normal

5. [http://static.kulturserver-graz.at/kultur/pdfs/2020/call\\_englische\\_version.pdf](http://static.kulturserver-graz.at/kultur/pdfs/2020/call_englische_version.pdf) (accessed 5 March 2020).

6. Cooperation partner of transparadiso: Michael Petrowitsch. NORMAL is realized in cooperation with: HDA/ House of Architecture, Graz; Forum Stadtpark, Graz; *dérive\_magazine* for urban research, Vienna; the districts of Andritz, Waltendorf, Liebenau and Wetzelsdorf.

7. Graz is experiencing an ongoing dying of inns, as it is also the case in many small towns in Austria.

8. Barbara Holub introduced this transdisciplinary role between artists, architects, urbanists, urban researchers and other disciplines in the frame of her artistic research project Planning Unplanned.

9. See also the summer academy 'Desperate Houselives' of the HDA (House of Architecture, Graz), which dealt with five peri-urban districts in Graz (e.g. Wetzelsdorf and Liebenau) in the frame of the architecture summer 2018: <https://hda-graz.at/programm/future-architecture-summer-school-ausstellung> (accessed 5 March 2020). 10.

11. In collaboration with the Parish St.Paul; the church was constructed in 1971 as seminal building by Austrian architect Ferdinand Schuster (1920–72) who radically re-interpreted the classical function of a church as a multifunctional space.

12. In cooperation with the Youth Center 'Am Grünanger'.

13. Arbeitsgemeinschaft Anastrophale Stadt or AG Agrikultur-Stadt-Transfer; Team: Hyun Ju Do, Julia Rabusai, Christian Richert; in cooperation with the Grottenhof Agricultural School, organic gardener Johannes Pelleter, inhabitants of Wetzelsdorf and many other participants.

### Final article published

---

Art & the Public Sphere, 9:1&2, Intellect.  
<https://www.intellectbooks.com/art-the-public-sphere>

### Citation

---

Holub, Barbara (2020), 'What is normal', Art & the Public Sphere, 9:1&2, pp. 15 - 27, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1386/aps\\_00030\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1386/aps_00030_7)

---