

North Vienna Station: A Paradigmatic Abandonment for a 'More Livable Future'

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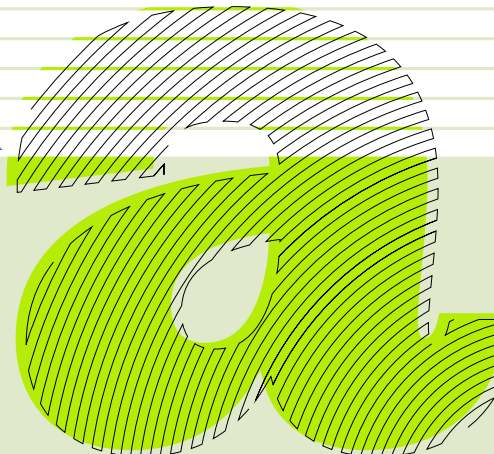
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Vienna is one of the first cities to regulate the preservation of existing urban ecosystems, even granting legal status to some places abandoned by humans—where nature has freely emerged—, thereby ensuring coexistence with the inhabiting species. This article aims to clarify how this achievement is motivated by the intertwining of spontaneous, creative, and affirmative experiences in some of these places—such as the North Station—and the European Architectural Competition. This contest introduces, first, the theoretical framework that values these experiences and then institutionalizes the lessons learned from them in its new editions. Thus, this text portrays, in three acts, the European competition and Vienna as institutions and laboratories—of ideas and sympoietic practices, respectively—that think and design reciprocally.

Keywords

 Nordbahnhof

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 coexistence

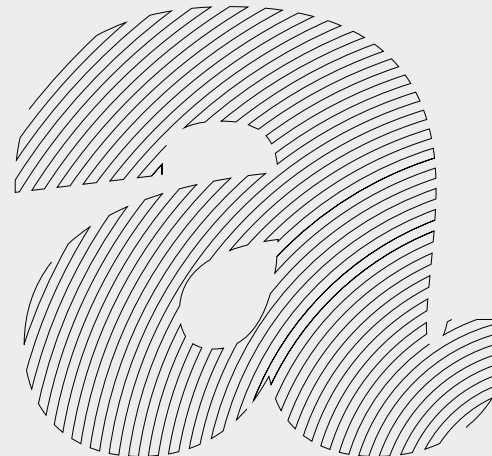
 ethics of care

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ACT 1: FROM THE UNINHABITABLE MILIEU TO THE FREIE MITTE

Europan urges us to challenge our familiar repertoire and ponder about inclusion beyond the human species. By providing space and a voice for all living entities, we can improve our conduct and well-being. Measures of care are necessary to protect coexistence from the climate emergency, overexploitation, pollution, inequality, and injustice. A new understanding of coexistence must emerge instead of 'business as usual'. Europan calls for a radical paradigm shift and associates itself with Joan Tronto, a significant political theorist of 'care ethics'.

—EUROPAN, LIVING CITIES: CARING FOR INHABITABLE MILIEUS

Europan is a Europe-wide architectural competition that defines itself as a “competition (...) that has set itself the objective of deepening knowledge and research in the fields of habitat and urban planning” (Europan España, 2012).¹ The sites it addresses are typically characterized by the fact that they have been discarded by market forces and logics. Consequently, Europan becomes a space of opportunity for rethinking these places through experimentation and innovation.

Our reflection on Europan stems not only from the competition² but, more importantly, from the particularly revealing theme chosen for its latest 2023 edition: *Living Cities, Caring for Inhabited Environments*. It is worth noting

¹ Europan is a platform that invites architects under the age of 40 to reflect on urban sites in Europe. Since its founding in 1988, it has held seventeen calls for proposals, each one focusing on a specific topic (Europan España, 2012).

² One of the authors of this article has won five Europan first prizes.

that this translation provided by the Spanish secretariat falls short when compared to the terminology used by the Austrian secretariat: *Living Cities, Caring For Inhabitable Milieus*. Beyond quoting Tronto in its introduction to the theme, the deliberate use of the term *milieu* is especially striking—a point we will explore further later on.

Examining the previous edition, we observe that while the overarching theme remains consistent, the focus shifts: *Living Cities, Metabolism*. The Spanish secretariat employed predictable terms to define the notion of metabolism, such as regeneration, life cycle, energy, and biodiversity. In contrast, the Austrian secretariat introduced distinctive concepts, including solidarity-based coexistence, balance, and repair:

European¹⁶ deals with the topic *Living Cities* and calls for a new planning paradigm determined to develop integrative strategies for a caring coexistence. The question of inclusive and resource-conscious planning concepts will be negotiated. 'Balancing' and 'repairing' solutions are sought to respond to the local, regional, and territorial effects of an escalating, multi-layered global crisis. (European Austria, n.d.)

Where does this intriguing divergence by European Austria from the general theme originate? Part of the answer lies in the individuals who composed the jury for that edition, among whom is Elke Krasny, an advocate for care as “a new lens (...) to understand the practice of architecture” (Krasny, n.d.). Even more revealing, however, is the presence of Bernd Vlay, President of European Austria and its Secretary for two decades.

In the same year as the call for proposals (2021), Vlay and his partner, Lina Streeruwitz, successfully persuade the Vienna City Council to recognize a new category of natural space: the *E Natur und Erholungsraum* (Space for Nature and Recreation). “The ‘and’ between the two opened exactly what the concept of the *Freie Mitte* always promised, a coexistence of the civilized and the uncivilized, of the human and non-human, of the wild and the tamed” (Streeruwitz & Vlay, 2022, p. 31).

Both authors use these words to refer to the proposal with which they won the competition 10 years earlier, precisely under the motto *Freie Mitte*. Interestingly, *Mitte* is the German equivalent of *milieu*, while *Freie* means ‘free’. And here comes the first twist in this story.

ACT 2: FROM THE CONCEPT OF *GSTETT'N* IN NORDBAHNHOF (2011) TO THE LEGAL CATEGORY OF *E NATUR UND ERHOLUNGSRAUM* FOR ST. MARX (2019)

When Vlay and Streeruwitz arrive at North Vienna Station³ (Nordbahnhof) in 2011, they experience a revealing contradiction (Figure 4):

³ Opened in 1838 as Austria's first railway station, and used mainly for freight traffic after World War II.

Literally, nature was sowing the seeds of the *Freie Mitte* as a striking counterproject to the original masterplan, which had proposed to fill the gap in the urban fabric with a continuation of the historic block structure (...) Still, it was not only plants and animals that found their space here, but also those human activities that do not unfold as easily in civilized urban space. Thus, the *Freie Mitte* was already there before our first site visit. (...) When reflecting about the ambiance of the place, the extraordinary relations between people, animals, and plants in this area made us think of the forest, where respect and freedom are in a delicate balance, and where you greet people you meet, even if you do not know them. (Streeruwitz & Vlay, 2022, p. 5)

Figure 4: Nordbahnhof: Strolls in the wilderness (top), The skaters' vegetable garden (center), Skate park in the making (bottom). Source: Streeruwitz & Vlay, 2022, p. 4. Photographs: Studio Vlay Streeruwitz (top); ALM diy (center; bottom).



4 Here we see how nature reappeared in this forgotten void, weaving a network of relationships and affections over the last few years with humans who have now been curiously displaced by the city they created.

5 See <https://nordbahnhof.wordpress.com/>

The *Freie Mitte* proposal advocates precisely for respecting and preserving (caring for) everything that already exists (Figures 2 and 3), 'as found'.⁴ Soon after, Bernd Vlay and Lina Streeruwitz will begin promoting neighborhood meetings where the protection and preservation of what exists 'as found' becomes a shared desire. It is worth noting the creation of the blog *ig Lebenswerter Nordbahnhof* (the livable North Station),⁵ which serves as a platform to channel the desires and aspirations of the inhabitants and, above all, empower them as a group. This is how, for example, they successfully prevented the construction of a landfill and ensured the preservation of an old bridge 'as found'.

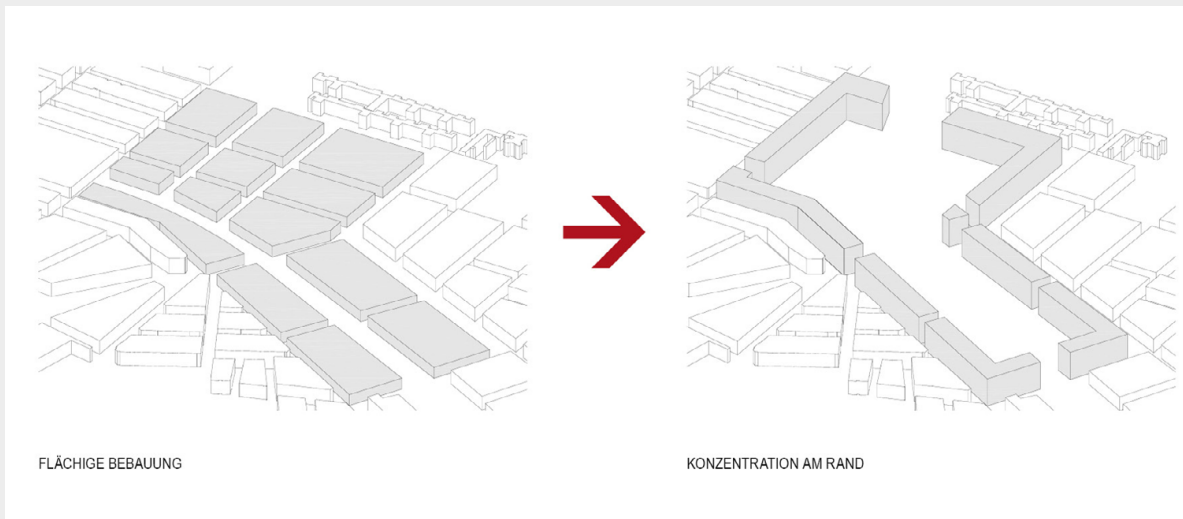


Figure 2: Nordbahnhof. Existing urban plan (1994) vs. urban plan of the competition (2011) award. Studio Vlay Streeruwitz, 2011. Source: Courtesy of Studio Vlay Streeruwitz.

Thus, what Bernd and Lina initially encounter is this 'other' place, overtaken by unprogrammed human activity. Fascinated by this phenomenon, they sought to make their proposal for preserving what they had deemed as feasible by 'laboratorizing' Nordbahnhof through a research project titled 'Mischung: Possible!' ('Mixture: Possible!'), developed in collaboration with *tu Wien* between 2017 and 2019. As part of this initiative, they transformed one of the abandoned halls, the Nordbahnhofhalle, into an incubator for all those 'other' situations that have no place in the normativized city of Vienna, containing, during the process, the real estate pressure.

Nevertheless, this image of a functional void at the North Station remains tied to an anthropocentric perspective, which will soon be challenged by 'other' emerging practices. Notable examples include the photographic works of Alfred Setik and Bernhard Schubert, which portray this place as a vibrant relational ecosystem, and the installations by Phoebe Gannisi and Zissi Kotionis, who use existing railway elements to establish a dialogue with the local bird population.

6 See <https://www.azw.at/en/articles/critical-care-architecture-and-urbanism-for-a-broken-planet/>

7 A 31.5-hectare biotope on the tracks of the former Anhalter and Potsdam stations.

8 The first edition of this guide to Vienna's urban natural spaces featured wild green areas, overgrown open locations, and wastelands, labeled as *Gstett'n*. All these areas receive minimal maintenance or are not maintained at all, in order to make their features visible or to keep them accessible.

9 Although the wall fell in 1989, the Western Senate began promoting the classification and mapping of biotopes as early as 1984, following more than a decade of pressure from urban ecologists who had already initiated pioneering research on the flora and

This drift turns Nordbahnhof into a kind of laboratory for sympoietic practices (Haraway, 2019) that seek 'making-with' the 'others' who are already present. In fact, the exhibition title chosen by the Architekturzentrum Wien for showcasing everything that occurred here is particularly revealing: 'Critical Care - Architecture for a Broken Planet'.⁶ These practices, on the other hand, represent a significant learning and/or discovery experience for the authors of *Freie Mitte*, who eventually come to recognize that:

We have been facing a shift of paradigm in how we see our role as humans: instead of being a privileged species that dominates the others, we feel endangered ourselves and long for new terms of coexistence with nature and other species. (Streeruwitz & Vlay, 2022, p. 9)

This statement—which is precisely linked to the idea of 'care' formulated by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fischer that underpins *Living Cities*, the driving theme of the 16th and 17th editions of the European competition—allows us to now understand the *Freie Mitte* proposal from

A perspective which celebrates the existence of every given type of being that specifically poses the question of what counts for its mode of life (...) everything for which existence implies a gamble, a risk, the creation of a point of view about what, from then on, will become a milieu (Stengers, 2010, p. 37).

It is precisely Isabelle Stengers' idea of 'milieu' that underpins the concept of *Mitte* advocated by Bernd and Lina's proposal, and draws attention to coexistence in the design of Nordbahnhof's central void by landscape architect Thomas Proksch (Figure 3).

We hereby highlight the pedagogical work carried out by Bernd and Lina when they took Vienna City Council staff to Berlin to visit the Gleisdreieck Park,⁷ which demonstrates that love towards these places can be developed—even if they lack grass and flowers. However, this sensitivity is not foreign to them. In fact, the Vienna Environmental Office (Wiener Umweltschutzamt), author of the *Gstettenführer* guide,⁸ links this place to the term *Gstett'n*: a transient, temporary place subject to constant change, where nature regains its place. For Vienna, the culture of reclaiming vacant land has its founding moment precisely with the fall of the Berlin Wall⁹ and the emergence of the *Braichen*.¹⁰ Following this path, we find the case of Wienerbergteich¹¹ in Vienna, before *Freie Mitte*.

fauna of urban areas.

¹⁰ The *Braichen* were barren spaces, resulting from no longer existing geopolitical divisions or a

certain economic paralysis, which then emerged as a field of opportunity for botanists, artists, or even any committed citizen.

Subjected almost from the beginning to increasing building pressure, not all of these spaces continue to exist.

¹¹ Re-naturalization of 123 hectares, including a lake, on a former clay mine for brick manufacturing.

Figure 3: Nordbahnhof. Landscape project for the central void. Thomas Proksch, Land in Sicht, 2023. Source: *Nordbahnhof die Freie Mitte: Zwischen Historie und Innovation*, n.d., p. 10.



All the previous examples— all the *Gstett'n*, all the *Braichen*— highlight “shifts in modes of attention, when soils shift from being merely an inert resource— invisible, neglected, uninteresting matter—to be felt as alive”¹² (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2024, p. 45).

The major difference between Gleisdreieck and Wienerbergteich compared to Nordbahnhof is that, in the former, human action— public institutions— determine(s) the conditions under which flora and fauna should be renaturalized. In the latter, it is nature itself that makes this decision.

Five kilometers south of Nordbahnhof, during the years of the ‘Mischung: Possible!’ experience, European Austria photographs the Viennese site (Figure 4) for the 15th edition of the competition. This site, which houses the St. Marx underground station, is yet another abandoned location¹³ with a railway history that has been reclaimed by nature.

And it is in the midst of this history where we find ourselves, as designers, presenting a proposal for the future of this site: aware of this process, and ultimately winning the competition. By carefully describing and restituting both natural and non-natural elements that allow to develop the site with its natural, historical, and social identity, the proposal dictates that the new buildings, as in Nordbahnhof, occupy only already sealed areas, leaving untouched those where nature is already unfolding (Figure 5). However, this sensitivity, explicitly acknowledged in the jury’s decision, is not predetermined by the competition’s brief, as evidenced by the project that won second prize (Figure 6).

¹² *Trans. N.:* A source different from the source quoted in the Spanish original version is used: “Re-Animating Soils.” *The Sociological Review*, 67(2), p. 392.

¹³ Abandoned by humans, who focus their interest on locations that are easier to develop, until the scarcity of land makes it necessary to return to places like these.



Figure 4: Image of the European 15 competition site in St. Marx, Vienna. Source: Competition information provided to participants. Photograph: European Österreich, 2019.

↓ **Figure 5:** Ground floor, winning proposal for the European 15 competition in Vienna. Source: <https://playstudio.es>. Drawing: PLAYstudio, 2019.

14 For architects Alison and Peter Smithson, the idea of *as found* emphasizes engaging with the existing as found.

In fact, the theme for the 15th edition of the competition is *Productive Cities*—quite different from *Metabolism* in the 16th edition, or *Caring for Inhabitable Milieus* in the 17th. Nonetheless, our proposal is strategically positioned within this well-established underlying debate: a reality prevalent in the most advanced academic contexts of the time. However, we do not introduce the ethics of care through an explicit reference to the literature of its most prominent authors, but rather, by strategically using references accepted by the discipline, which at least allude to some of these principles.

‘Capability Mound’, our proposal at St. Marx, conceals a non-romantic idea of the *as found* (much like *Freie Mitte* did at the time), despite employing certain romantic imagery and making direct reference to Alison and Peter Smithson.¹⁴

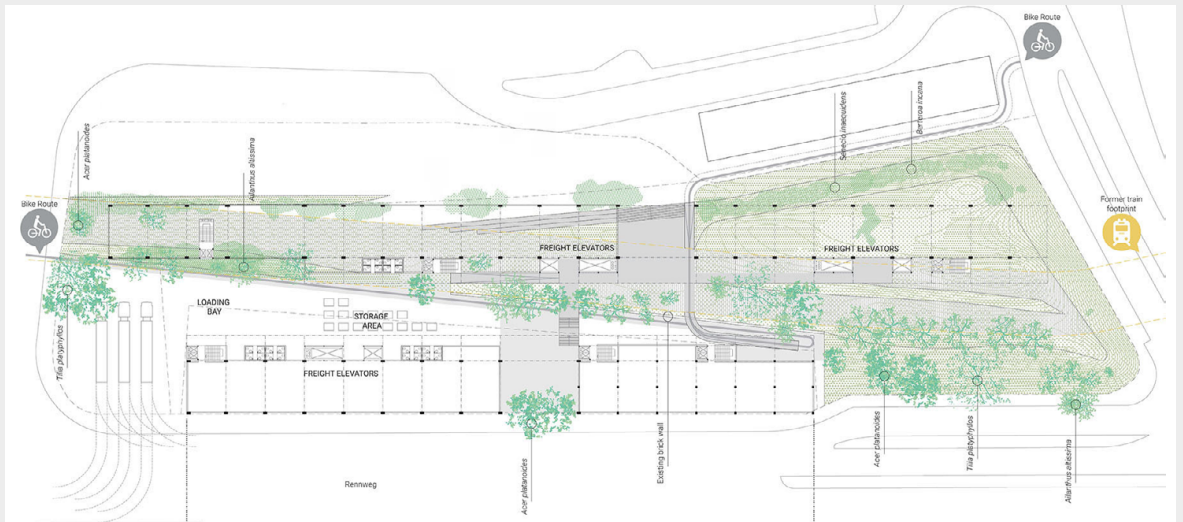




Figure 6: Roof plant, second prize in the European 15 competition in Vienna. Source: <https://abnormalstory.com/Der-Januskopf>. Drawing: ops! - Of Possible Scenarios, 2019.

In 2019, while ‘Capability Mound’ becomes the winning proposal, the Nordbahnhofhalle incubator is lost in a fire. However, the seeds of its future have borne fruit: the Department of Parks and Gardens has since worked on ways to implement the ideas of *Freie Mitte* and, above all, preserve and protect the central void of Nordbahnhof. It is here where a fascinating controversy arises, described by Bernd and Lina, and that is worth quoting at length:

The obvious category would have been recreation area/park, but the problem was that this comes with a lot of rules and regulations that would have been quite harmful to the idea of the *Freie Mitte* (...). In parks, the city of Vienna takes full responsibility: pathways are cleared regularly, loose branches are cut off (...). In the forest, on the other hand, responsibility is transferred to the individual (...). This difference results in an increased awareness and a certain respect for one’s surroundings. The *Freie Mitte* had to be a cross-over between the two, offering spaces for all generations and providing a sense of security, while at the same time protecting biodiversity and creating a feeling of unfamiliarity and adventure in the middle of the city. So, a new zoning category was invented that allowed for exactly this ambiguity: E Natur und Erholungsraum- Space for Nature and Recreation. (...) a coexistence of the civilized and the uncivilized, of the human and non-human, of the wild and the tamed. (Streeruwitz & Vlay, 2022, p. 31)

ACT 3: A CLIMATIC ROADMAP (KLIMAFahrPLAN) TO SAVE A CAPABILITY MOUND

It is worth noting that the years following 2019, when ‘Capability Mound’ won, are marked by considerable resistance to the real estate market’s

¹⁵ The ownership of the St. Marx site is divided into three: ÖBB (the State Railway Agency), WSE (Municipal Housing Enterprise) and Immovote (a private developer).

¹⁶ See www.wien.gv.at/spezial/klimafahrplan/

expectations,¹⁵ which were eager to occupy as much surface area as possible and, above all, eliminate any trace of 'original forest' in favor of creating a 'more human park'. The initial situation is quite similar to that of Nordbahnhof—although, as we can see, significantly delayed in time.

In 2022, Vienna publishes its *Wiener Klimafahrplan* (Vienna Climate Roadmap),¹⁶ with section 5.2 specifically addressing and developing the category *E Natur und Erholungsraum*. This category grants existing, self-generated natural ecosystems (*Natur*) the right to exist, persist, and, of course, coexist with humans (*Erholungsraum*). At last, an ecosystem like Nordbahnhof acquires legal status, paving the way for the protection of other spontaneous ecosystems, such as St. Marx. As a strategic decision, the 'Capability Mound' project is temporarily put on hold during these years, fully aware that the drafting of this regulation could ensure its safeguarding.



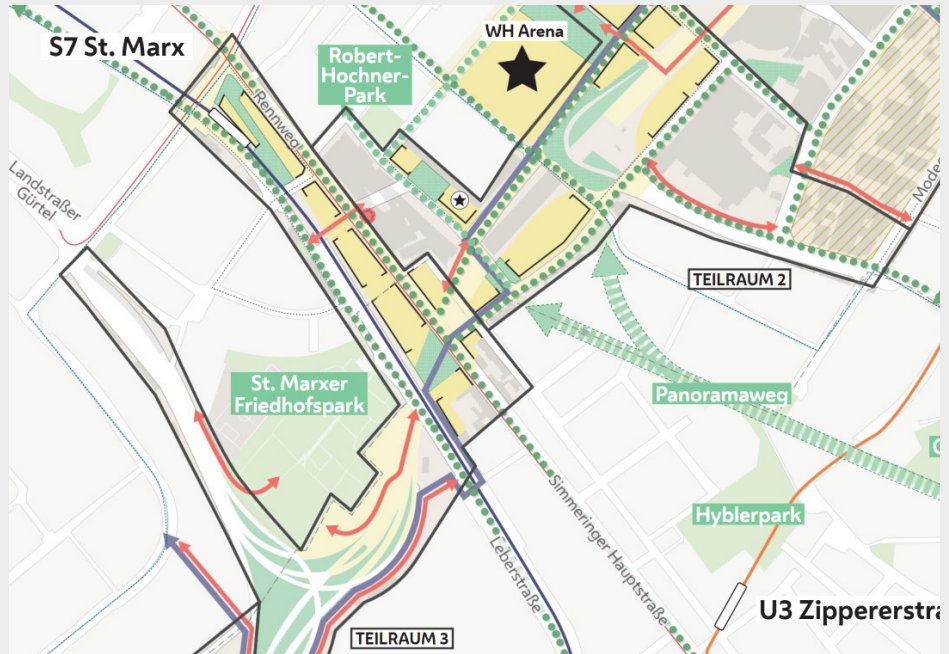
↑ **Figure 7:** Neighborhood participation for the project at Nordbahnhof. Source: Streeruwitz & Vlay, 2022, p.15. Photograph: Clavis.

↗ **Figure 8:** Participatory process for the elaboration of the urban plan in Neu Marx, Vienna. Source: www.wien.gv.at/stadtplanung/sek-tangente. Photograph: Raumposition, 2023.

It is, in fact, the *Wiener Klimafahrplan* that provides a legal foundation—one year later (in 2023)—for drafting the urban plan for the Neu Marx area, where St. Marx is located. Reproducing the attentive listening model of agents employed in *Freie Mitte*, Vienna's MA21 (the equivalent of the Municipal Department of Urbanism) organizes several discussion panels to address the future of this area, with the winning proposal of European15—advocating for the preservation of nature as found—participating as one of the key agents (Figures 7 and 8).

In December 2023, the final plan is published. The battle in St. Marx comes to an end. The existing *milieu* or *Mitte* is officially recognized through a green zone designation, protecting it from being developed for future constructions (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Detail of the urban plan in Neu Marx, Vienna. Source: www.wien.gv.at/stadtplanung/sek-tangente. Image: Raumposition, 2023.



CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between *Inhabitable Milieu*, the theme of the 17th edition of the European competition in Austria in 2023, and *Freie Mitte*, the slogan of the winning proposal for Vienna's North Station in 2011, positions this biannual competition as the central character in this story—particularly through the figure of Bernd Vlay. We suspect that his role as Secretary for two decades in the organization of nearly 10 editions of the competition, along with his participation in the debates raised by the various submitted proposals, is fundamental to understand the approach of *Freie Mitte*. However, the key also lies in the set of free and spontaneous practices that were already taking place before Nordbahnhof became the object of new urban development.

In fact, we can assert that the significance and pertinence of *Freie Mitte* lies not so much in the proposed design, but in the recognition and valorization of all that was already happening there. While the initial perspective is anthropocentric, the very decision to suspend a more disciplinary design in favor of a management process allows us to understand Nordbahnhof as a space for experimentation, where a whole series of sympoietic practices soon emerge, guiding its authors to a 'more livable future' (Haraway, 2019).¹⁷ These practices are what distinguish *Freie Mitte* from the Viennese *Gstett'n* culture. But even more important is the fact that all these creative practices—whether planned or not—interpellate the most disciplinary knowledge: architectural competitions.

¹⁷ In reference to Chthulucene time. As Haraway explains, it requires sympoiesis rather than autopoiesis. Sympoiesis implies 'making-with', while autopoiesis, being more self-referential, only denotes self-creation or self-organization. Sympoiesis entails learning from and collaborating with others to build a more livable future (Haraway, 2019).

¹⁸ Fischer and Tronto note that, care "includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (as cited in Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 3).

Which comes first: the European of the discipline or the Vienna of practices? Perhaps the answer is irrelevant, as the main interest of what has been presented here is understanding how both realities have allowed reciprocal thinking, by shaping themselves as spaces where ideas and practices have been tested and intertwined. It is precisely at Vienna's North Station where these two laboratories overlap, and the architectural project becomes a research endeavor in its own right. Furthermore, one of the consequences of this research, or perhaps a result, is the acceptance by Viennese institutions of the need to develop a new understanding of coexistence for a more livable future. The drafting of a regulation for the protection of places like Nordbahnhof or St. Marx, where life is sustained by a complex network of relationships between humans and non-humans,¹⁸ is a first step.

Beyond the fact that Vienna can become a reference for other cities, what we wish to highlight is how Nordbahnhof has been conceived by the multiple agents involved as a laboratory for testing ideas through a series of sympoietic practices, ultimately becoming a space for the construction of theory. It is precisely the architecture competition itself, understood as an institution, which not only values these practices but also appropriates the resulting theory or thought to ultimately design new futures through the creation of its guidelines and the configuration of juries in new editions.

Thus, on the one hand, we advocate for the figure of the architectural competition as an institution that fosters profound changes in design practices; on the other hand, we vindicate Nordbahnhof as a paradigmatic case study used by European for projecting itself. Both, in conclusion, can provide us the clues to continue traveling the long road to materialize, from the architectural discipline, the intangibility of the *ethics of care*. **D**

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