

Interview: an.ders Urania

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interviewed by Eva-Maria Ciesla and Hannah Strothmann*

Eva-Maria Ciesla, Hannah Strothmann | *How would you describe your collective work and intervention in architecture as a discipline and practice?*

Jeanne Astrup-Chauvaux, Timo Panzer, Malte Wilms | The an.ders URANIA [Urania Otherwise] initiative was founded to save the An der Urania 4-10 high-rise building in Berlin-Schöneberg from demolition. The building was designed by the architect and former Senate Building Director Werner Düttmann in the 1960s and is owned by the state of Berlin. For us, the demolition of the An der Urania building raises many questions about the way we deal with buildings that are no longer deemed fit for use, which structures are not living up to today's standards, and about pollution and the management of toxic compounds in and out of the city.

As we work as a non-commercial, self-organized civil society initiative, it is difficult to classify our practice. We work together on various topics and in groups and have developed a way of working that is similar to that of journalists or a consulting agency. Thus, we call our practice a »disruptive consultancy agency«, digging into public archives and collectivizing our knowledge to propose an alternative to the demolition plans and to formulate clear demands to the BIM (Berliner Immobilienmanagement GmbH [Berlin Real Estate Management]) and the Senate Administration: to 1.) immediately stop the demolition process; 2.) use Urania 4-10 as a real-scale laboratory for building conversion; 3.) organize a public competition for its rehabilitation.

Where do you see the potential of working as an initiative to intervene in urban environments and in political and economic forces that shape architecture and contemporary cities?

To intervene in the fate of the Urania 4-10 building, we decided to directly address the Senate and BIM GmbH. Utilizing our diverse expertise in architecture planning and theory, artistic interventions, and communication, we proposed alternative narratives of the future and raised political awareness about demolition practices in general. Throughout the process, we maintained a positive approach that highlighted the value of Urania 4-10, demonstrating that rehabilitating such a large building complex could be a significant advancement for Berlin and a learning opportunity for the rehabilitation of other buildings sharing a similar fate.

All of the labor we have invested in the initiative is unpaid and voluntary, which means that the capacity to engage throughout the campaign was different for each one of us. For some of us, this unpaid workload was possible due to our paid positions as architects or planners in (more classical) architectural contexts or institutions. Finally, this activist engagement was a way for us to contribute to a vision of architecture we believe is politically and socially more just, an important work that falls out of the field's economic frame and relies on civic engagement.

To what extent does working as a group influence your practice in particular?

The members of our initiative bring diverse knowledge and experience from collective collaboration, press relations and academic research, as well as planning and construction work. These diverse professional backgrounds led to creative and complementary working methods during the campaign. Through regular weekly meetings and topic-oriented working groups, we can contribute according to our inclinations and interests. This results in an inspiring and efficient collaboration that can operate on various levels simultaneously.

The collaboration within the group works as long as individuals take responsibility for certain tasks and at least two or three others actively support them.



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An der Urania 4–10, Berlin-Schöneberg, 24.10.2023. © Timo Panzer.

Can you tell us about some of the concrete results of your interventions?

A powerful result and important tool was the »feasibility study from below« which we published in November 2023. Now there was a study that the responsible politicians and decision-makers could not ignore. Simultaneously, we started a petition for the preservation of the building and collected over 4,000 signatures in three months, giving many people the opportunity to support the cause.

Through regular press releases, contributions to local radio stations, and a constant social media presence we aimed to draw attention to the ongoing demolition and to the stubbornness of the Senate Administration to engage with the process. We subsequently received requests from newspapers, universities, and other organizations for interviews, discussion rounds, lectures, and exchanges, during which we could reflect on our position and expand our network. Nonetheless, we realized that the anti-demolition discourse is still mainly limited to the architectural field, although the way Berlin handles its built assets really is a societal problem. Despite all our efforts, including organizing a demonstration in front of Urania 4-10 in February 2024, we must acknowledge that we were unable to engage a larger portion of Berlin's population in the debate.

The public reactions anticipated from the Senate and BIM were absent for weeks. As a result, we repeatedly invited Petra Kahlfeldt (Senate Building Director in the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Building, and Housing) and Birgit Möhring (Managing Director of BIM) to a public discussion, »Rethinking Instead of Demolishing« as part of the end of the exhibition »The Great Repair« – an invitation they didn't even bother to respond to. Shortly after, we were invited by the Department of Real Estate Management at TU Berlin for another discussion, which Petra Kahlfeldt and Martin Sowinski from the BIM GmbH finally attended. While our colleague Lena Löhnert made a convincing case in showing the importance of rehabilitation and the lack of transparency in the Senate's protocols, Martin Sowinski made it clear that the decision to demolish was final and could not be reversed. At the very same time, only a few kilometers away, the first elements of the facade of Urania 4-10 were torn down by the excavators.

In a final attempt to stop the demolition, our initiative organized a meeting with Theresa Keilhacker (President of the Berlin Chamber of Architects), Matthias Noell (Professor of Art History at UdK Berlin), Martin Sowinski,



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An der Urania 4–10, Berlin-Schöneberg, 18.5.2024. © Timo Panzer.

and the BIM's team responsible for the building's fate. We sent open letters to Building Senator Christian Gäbler and Finance Senator Stefan Evers, and had several phone calls with Petra Kahlfeldt. All these efforts were in vain and those responsible for the demolition continued to shift the blame on to one another. The demolition followed its course and trucks loaded with crumbled concrete continued to leave the site to fill Berlin's waste disposal units.

Besides feelings of helplessness and frustration, our engagement and the actual demolition of the building have made clear that it is particularly important to review, document, and make this process visible – disclosing the lack of transparency in public institutions toward civic and expert opinion. Therefore, our initiative's work is now transitioning into a more documentary, reflective, and conciliatory phase of collaboration.

What role does architectural knowledge play in your practice and interventions? Which techniques and instruments are important for your work?

Our knowledge as workers in the field of architecture strongly shaped our collective strategy. Starting with a self-organized »feasibility study from below« we decided to reclaim a common tool of urban planning protocols – a step which was crucially missing from the Senate's decision to demolish and which the collective ufoufo had been calling for since February 2023. Using technical drawings, CO₂ balance assessments, and statements from different experts, we leveraged our knowledge as planners to offer positive alternatives and counter the pro-demolition arguments of BIM GmbH and the Senate. Parallel to this work, we also tried to make our struggle visible in public space by organizing a public demonstration, putting up posters, and hanging a 10-meter-long banner from the facade of the building – less conventional methods for architects, but necessary steps to bring attention to the politics behind our goal.

Where do you see the possibilities for transferring your ideas of intervention to everyday architectural practice and the building professions? What are the difficulties of transfer? What should change in the profession?

The work in the initiative has shown that there are already many groups, initiatives, and organizations that are committed to a socio-ecological transformation of buildings at risk of demolition and to public protest



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An der Urania 4–10, Berlin-Schöneberg, 12.07.2024. © Timo Panzer.

against demolition. Despite these numerous engagements, we see the difficulty in communicating this expertise to a larger audience in order to bring about a general change with regard to adaptive reuse and renovation projects.

A slow change is already becoming apparent with a changing thematic focus in architectural education, to which we contribute by sharing the story of our process in different academic contexts.

In addition, we claim that building law in Germany must change so that an assessment of buildings' potential for conversion and rehabilitation becomes mandatory before a demolition permit, which should include an account of the climatic impact, can be granted. At the same time, the conversion of existing vacant buildings must become easier. To this end, the state of Berlin has already been provided with the template for an urgently needed amendment to the building code by the Architektenkammer [German Chamber of Architects], which favors the preservation of existing buildings and sustainable construction methods.

A thematic differentiation in dealing with buildings at risk of demolition could trigger a general change in the appreciation of existing buildings in practice. Well-known organizations such as the HouseEurope! initiative advocate for the development of laws at a political level that facilitate renovation projects for existing buildings to make better use of those buildings' resources and protect cities from further speculation.

Conversely, this would bring about a fundamental change in architectural practice and could lead to a shift in the construction sector through the better taxation of renovation work.

Against the background of the massive CO₂ emissions from the construction sector, rethinking the building industry and outdated urban politics are urgent tasks, and the immense amount of work it demands must be made possible by public financial support and political acknowledgment.