

For such a small country, Austria (population 8.1 million) enjoys one of the world's most vibrant design cultures. "There's constant dialogue and constant battles," says Otto Kapfinger, an architectural historian and curator who lives in the heart of Vienna. Like most everything else in Austria, architecture is taken very seriously here and it often makes front-page news.

Case in point: A group of young Viennese architects recently rallied together to stage a street action—a kind of *salon des refusés*—to protest government practices for hiring architects: "We decided to act on our own and put our position in the public eye," says Mark Gilbert, an American architect who expatriated to Vienna 11 years ago and was one of the organizers of the event.

In response to the protest, a group of small firms were given empty storefronts on Schönbrunner Strasse and asked to create designs that interacted with the immediate neighborhood. Gentrification was becoming an issue in Vienna's Fifth District as an economic shift began forcing small, family-owned stores to close. "Our intention was to break down the distance between architects and the people living in the neighborhood," says Gilbert. One firm, Transparadiso, created homeless shelters, while another team, ENTERprise, created a community

meeting space called City Breeze. "We wanted to begin on the street level and publicize the new architecture outside of the existing institutions, which we felt were excluding us," explains Gilbert.

When not agitating on behalf of the cause of modern architecture, Gilbert has been building up a private practice in Vienna and recently completed the eye-grabbing Haus P. in the city's outlying 14th District. Designed in collaboration with architects Marlies Breuss and Michael Ogertschnig, the house was built on an oddly shaped, leftover lot for Barbara Pichler, a TV journalist, and Philipp Pichler, a psychologist, both in their mid-30s. Gilbert met his client while playing basketball. "Philipp and I have remained good friends throughout the process," says Gilbert. "But the new house hasn't helped his jump shot one bit."

The 10,500-square-foot property is an acute triangle, squeezed between two roads with a steep, sloping grade. In fact, the site is the vestige of a highway that was never built and had originally been set aside for a high-speed access ramp. (The Pichlers were able to buy the land at a good price from the national highway department.) Instead of being constrained, the house takes its cue from the difficult site. It bends and folds, transforming what ▶

Austria 21st-Century Secession

The wood on the front façade is a screen made out of clear fir lathes and stained gold-brown. The screens were assembled in the workshop as large, pre-fabricated elements and then fitted, mounted, and trimmed onsite. "I try to handle each material in accordance to its

innate character, to make it do what it is able to in unusual, sometimes dramatic ways," explains the architect. "In the end, you could say that the geometry of the building was inspired by the interplay between the site and the materials that were used to build it."



Vienna

Project: Haus P.
Architect: Mark Gilbert with Marlies Breuss and Michael Ogertschnig
Location: Vienna, Austria