

SPACE OF WASTE
STOP MOTION PORTRAIT OF
TRASH ROOMS IN VIENNA.

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[12132370]



MA-Thesis

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Social Design: Arts as Urban Innovation
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0 _ **[abstract]** “Space of Waste” is an animated film portrait of trash rooms in Vienna. “Müllräume” (in German) are rooms that exist in many Viennese apartment buildings used to house the containers in which people dispose of their domestic trash. They are intriguing spaces for those who, like me, have always put the garbage in collective bins in public spaces.

Stop-motion felt like an intuitive decision, that fitted our topic and allowed us to bring movement and life to the subject.

Working frame by frame, we explored this particular structure: the place where trash waits to be collected. And even though this might seem like a “clean” way to manage waste, to some, entering this room can feel like a harsh confrontation with the smelly results of our consumption.

Our project and this document try to explore trash rooms as symbolic spaces of how we deal, emotionally and physically, with the matter we produce and dispose of, both as individuals and as a city.



1 _ [space of waste] The city of Vienna was inevitably a prominent subject of the last two years of my life because of Social Design's Class deep connection with urban space and because of the personal impact of moving to a new city. Seeing Vienna for the first time and being expected (and expecting) to be critical of its structures, systems, culture and people, was a challenging experience.

Having Porto, the city I come from and the only other place I've ever lived in, as my reference, the first thing I noticed about Vienna was its sense of scale. That opulence is enforced by the beautiful, impressive and impeccably preserved historic architecture, the wide streets and the cleanliness of the public space. Everyday life, and the waste that results from it, don't contribute to the luxury and classical elegance that Vienna sells. It does the exact opposite: brings you to the present and "clashes" with the horse carriages.

I initially played with this idea and contrast in my first project as part of the Social Design department, "Soon Near You" where Adva Eshel, Judith Haslöwer and I suggested the opening of a McDonald's in a small picturesque Austrian town, Flachau.

During my second semester, in "City vs Citizens", Gala Kuckhoff and I tried to explore Vienna by noticing what is being said to us through (hostile) Design and "who" and "which actions" are being avoided by the city's structures.

In the previous semester, with Katarína Čechová, Tereza Sejková and Juliane Spieß, I learned and explored Vienna's attachment to silence and how the Viennese relate and react to the use of public space in ways and by people that might not align with their version of the city.

In retrospect, I can see a common intention of trying

to point out and play with the uncomfortable realities of a "lived-in" city and how that can look, feel, sound and smell.

In Vienna, domestic trash is not outside in recycling bins as I was used to, it is mostly kept in Müllräume. These trash rooms are spaces where waste is stored in designated bins, until MA48, the city agency responsible for garbage management, brings it to an incineration plant. Most apartment buildings in Vienna have these shared rooms on the ground floors or basements, dedicated to keeping what people throw out locked, dry, and private.

This system might contribute to a feeling of cleanliness and order while walking on the streets and can be efficient as a waste management strategy, but to me was a questionable way of dealing with trash. It hides waste visually from outside (and outsiders), but it creates a much stronger recurrent confrontation for those who live in these buildings.

The Portuguese system, where the trash bins are mostly outside and visible, felt cleaner to me, not visually, but in every other sense. So, I saw some irony in the fact that in a less affluent country that (I feel like) is seen as less refined than Austria, I'm not as in touch with the discomfort of my waste.

This is not an objective truth. When debating this topic, or mentioning my intrigue about Müllräume, it became clear that our sense of cleanliness around trash is cultural and connected to the place where we've always seen it. There, we can accept it or ignore it. If misplaced, its unpleasantness seems to take extra space.

With this in mind, I looked at the trash room at my building every week and questioned it. Should this room, which is bigger than my room, be used for this purpose?

Why are we locking the things we are trying to get rid of?

We entered these rooms using the same universal key as MA48 workers, but with the (considerably less significant) task of taking the trash as a starting point for reflecting on how we use space, where trash goes, at what point an object becomes waste, and what we separate.



SPACE OF WASTE [P.07]

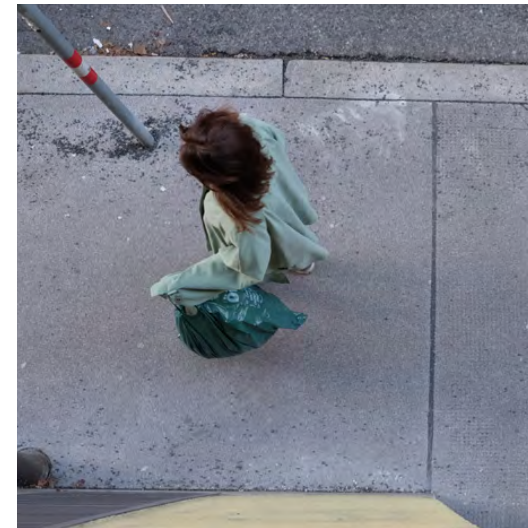
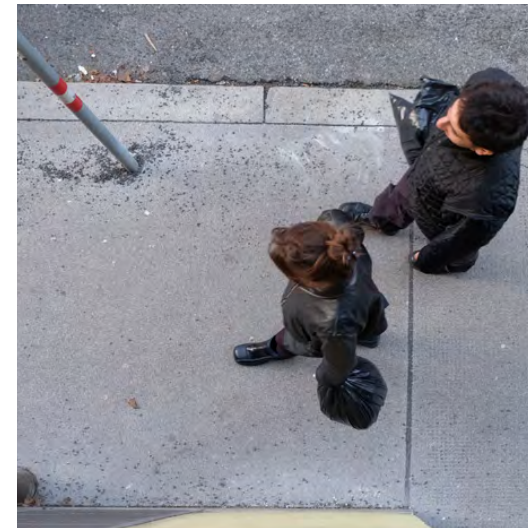
[frames from the “space of waste” video, taken in my building’s trash room, Bürgerspitalgasse, 1060]

2 _ [the life cycle of trash in Vienna]

“Waste and waste-disposal practices contribute to an aesthetic order that places not only things, but also individuals, on symbolic scales of cleanliness, worthiness, and belonging.”

(Moisi, 2016)

In this paper, I trace the weekly journey of our household trash, from the moment it becomes waste until it is progressively out of our hands, then out of our sight and finally out of our minds. My focus was on accentuating the specific moments, both in time and space, when we maintain a connection to the trash we discarded.



[deleted frames]



2.1_ [the matter we produce] Around “one million tonnes of municipal waste are produced” in Vienna every year (City of Vienna, Municipal Department 48, 2013). Some perceive this waste as a private byproduct of individual existence, physical evidence of our most vulnerable states, identity and personal information. But trash can be loaded with statements and choices and so can the way we dispose of it.

The moment we decide to throw something away, we see it as waste, “(...) an object on the edge, on the verge of being valuable or worthless, essential or redundant, visible or invisible. (...) The act of expelling and re-locating an object into the hidden container underneath the kitchen counter is what constitutes it as garbage.” (Moisi. 2016) Sometimes, products are made to be disposable and are trash before they even get to us. And even though some of us have more choices than others when purchasing something, most of our mailboxes will anyway be full of unwanted advertisements, even if they had a “bitte keine werbung” sticker.

Still, our domestic waste can be proof of our consumption habits: which companies are we supporting, what animals are we eating, how fast or slow is the fashion and the food we buy? Are we boycotting the brands that support wars? Do we maybe really like their coffee? We should at least bury the takeaway cup at the bottom of the bin, covered by some less controversial trash. Then, the bare minimum, is that we recycle it.

Separating the trash is the redemption. It's a privilege to feel like we are actively improving the situation we previously ignored, by having five different containers in our kitchen. It also allows for a third shift of guilt: from

the big companies to the choosing consumers and now to those who, potentially without choice, don't separate their trash.

“The threats and risks of an unclean home are tacitly aligned with the dangers associated with the poor, the working class or racialised “others.” In environmental discourse, on the other hand, colours and symbols such as the (...) recyclable paper bag function as perceptual symbols of an abstract Idea of “ecology.” Risks and dangers in this regime of ecology are attributed to those who are allegedly unwilling, unable, or unmotivated to participate in the everyday practices of ecological sustainability.” (Moisi. 2015)

Therefore, the trash bags we fill at home are charged with identity and a private matter that might position us in the public sphere once we take them downstairs.

2.2_ [taking the trash downstairs] For me, the moment I got out of my apartment door “to put the trash out” used to be the point where I would detach myself from the items inside the bags. I still felt responsible for the amount of trash produced as a whole, guilty, but felt no connection of privacy or identity with the specific content of my waste. In the system I was used to, the bins on the street were not directly linked to my household and I was always familiar and resigned with the idea that once I placed the bags there, they were not mine anymore and someone might go through them. As previously mentioned, I not only was conformed with this fact but considered it when disposing of trash, by placing specific items next to the bins and by concealing personal information on letters, for instance.

So, if producing matter is a similar process for me in both Porto and Vienna, with small differences in the content of trash and how I should separate it, “taking the trash downstairs”, instead of “outside”, is a new, intermediate step. By going in the direction of the waste room, hoping that the bags won’t rip and spill on the way, I now take my trash from my private space to a semi-public state.

“We don’t think enough about staircases. Nothing was more beautiful in old houses than the staircases. Nothing is uglier, colder, more hostile, meaner, in today’s apartment buildings. We should learn to live more on staircases. But how?” (Perec. 1997)

In “Species of spaces and other pieces”, Georges Perec’s reflections on different spaces led me to a different perspective on common spaces in our buildings - how the shared spaces, like staircases, elevators or trash rooms, are where we become similar to our neighbours,

performing the same actions and the same roles, and still we do them in a parallel way and mostly in silence.



2.3_ [storing waste in a room] We normally spend very little time in Müllräume. I, personally, hold the door with one foot, press the opening pedal with the other, throw my bag in the container and leave as fast as possible, trying to avoid the wind coming from the bin as the lid falls shut. But our trash stays there for up to a week, waiting with other people's trash, inside locked doors.

“The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and my place, the private, the domestic (...); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics. You can't simply let yourself slide from one into the other, can't pass from one to the other, neither in one direction nor in the other.” (Perec. 1997)

When talking about separation in the waste context, we mainly think about recycling, separating trash into designated bins. But in trash rooms, we also separate on many other levels. By locking the doors, we separate our trash from the other trash. Where it belongs and where it doesn't. We separate who understands, agrees and complies with the system and who doesn't. Who belongs and who doesn't.

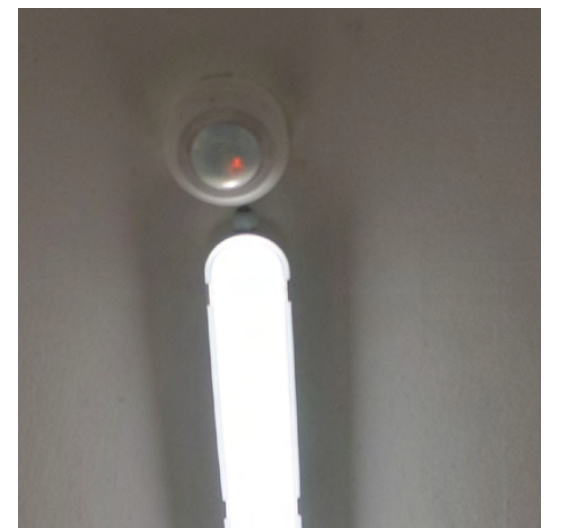
“Trash may surround us only as long as it is not seen, hidden in garbage bins that are themselves placed out of sight. As soon as garbage becomes visible, it is at the wrong place, disturbing a sense of order and regularity and therefore, it has to disappear.” (Moisi. 2015)

The planning and design of the Müllräume follow strict guidelines and specifications. For example, the size of the collection bins is calculated based on the number of flats in the property, the floors must be easy to clean, the walls must be fitted with a protective strip, ventilation

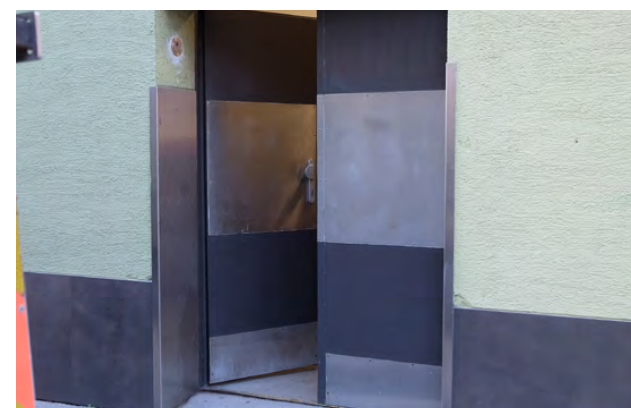
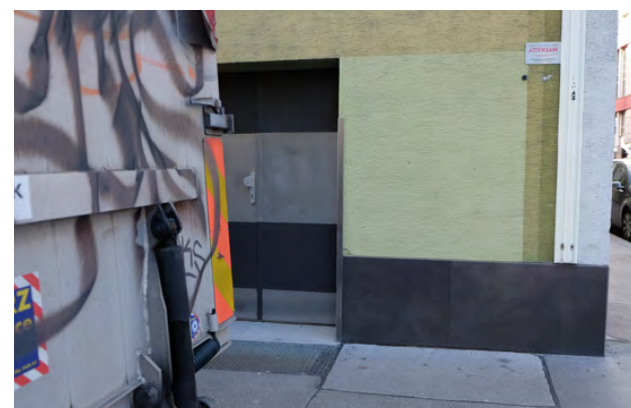
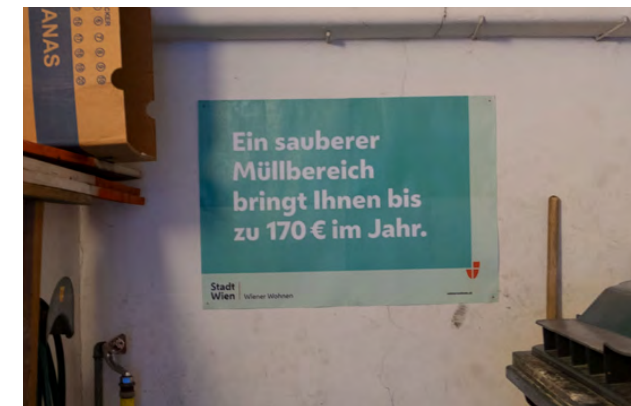
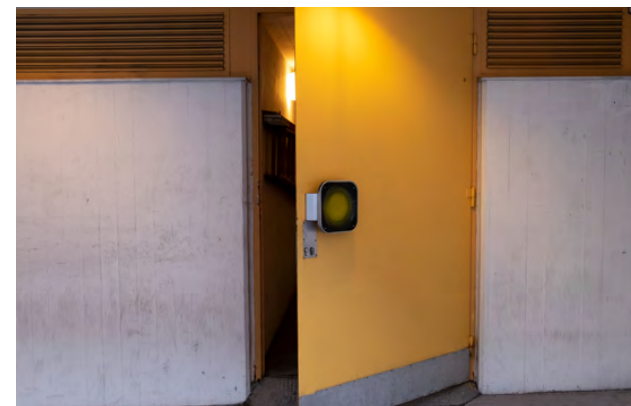
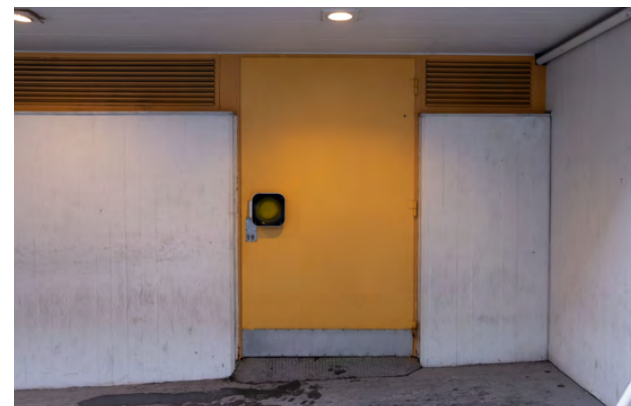
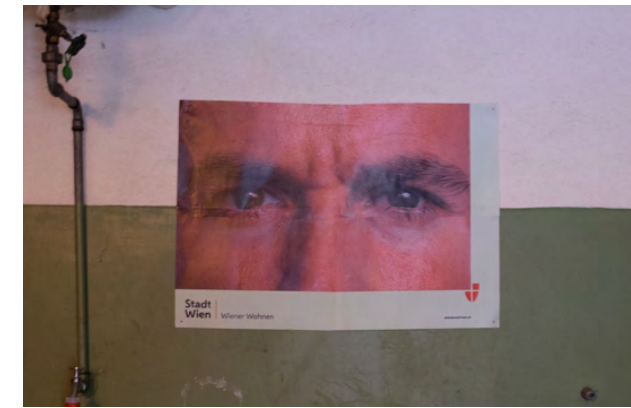
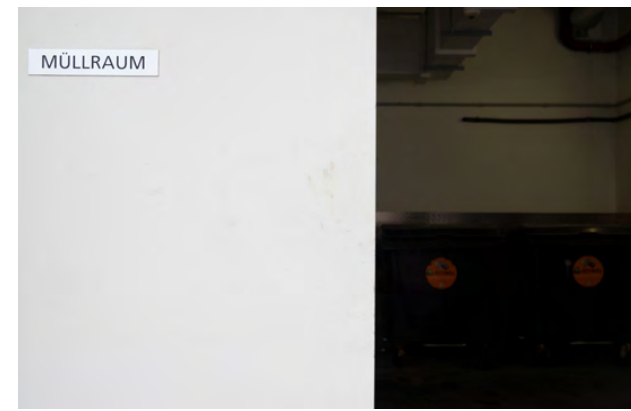
must be installed and regulated lighting must be provided, preventing any impediment of correct use or misinterpretation of the colour-based separation system. Even within the regulations, these spaces still vary. In some buildings, instead of a room, a small part of the inner courtyard is dedicated to this purpose.

The Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna published a study in 2022 addressing the efficiency of different tools that could help reduce littering in society. Four posters were tested in 440 Viennese waste-disposal areas, aiming to assess if the population would respond better to interventions based on implicit and abstract appeals to ecology and social responsibility or to more classical interventions with explicit information laws and monetary benefits/fines. This study was a “collaboration with Vienna's social housing company (Wiener Wohnen) who, in large parts, financed this project” (K. Gangl 2022). Its mere existence interested our group, as a symbol of the efforts of constant improvement present in the system and trash rooms, but the results were also a turning point in our research. The less explicit posters, mainly “a landscape poster” with no additional information, were the ones that accomplished better results in assuring a more responsible usage of the spaces.

Maybe for some, the poster worked as an aesthetic improvement of the trash rooms and therefore an incentive to maintain a tidy atmosphere. But we wondered why, while disposing of trash, a visually contrasting nature scene could be used to change behaviours around waste and improve participation in the management system. To us, the landscape poster became to us a concrete representation of where trash doesn't seem to belong.



[frames from the video: details from the trash room of my building]



SPACE OF WASTE [P.12]

[frames from the video:
“zoom-in” of the posters
form the study, in four dif-
ferent trash rooms]

The short time waste spends in its designated room is long enough to pile together and create a communal pattern of how life in the building looked like in the previous days.

Besides the previously mentioned assumptions about socioeconomic status, demography and class, what other information could be collected when looking at a trash room? We can learn specific things by actively looking through the trash, but what can the general feeling, or this bigger communal pattern tell us, without digging too much? If taken out of context, would we be able to guess the year a certain trash room belongs to? The specific time of the year? The weather, lately? Were people at home most of the week?

How did trash rooms look during the pandemic?

Just like different people or buildings produce different types and amounts of trash, different events or seasons also bring different materials to the bins. If during the summer people have a bigger need to hydrate, larger amounts of water bottles might be disposed of. Maybe during Christmas, the paper bin is full of festive wrapping paper.

Even though these are observations and questions based only on experience and speculation, it's interesting to think of trash rooms as shared parts of the buildings that even if involuntarily, are decorated according to the season.

2.4_ [MA48 pick up] After seven days the cycle breaks, because “for hygienic reasons, every residual waste container must be emptied at least once a week” (City of Vienna, Municipal Department 48. 2013). The moment MA48 picks up the trash also marks the ultimate severance of its connection with its previous owners. Matters of privacy, guilt and identity surrounding waste cease to be relevant as professionals take charge, transporting it to a public and distant location.

“Urban life depends on a fluent, always intact public waste management system that gives the impression that garbage is effortlessly disappearing.” (Moisi. 2015)

The efficiency of the system relies on the invisibility of its processes and creates unseen labour. “Out of sight, out of mind - the aesthetics of disappearing builds upon an aesthetic regime in which there are others other bodies, other hands, other machines - that will make sure we won't be confronted anymore with the garbage we have produced.” (Moisi. 2016) Therefore, we take notice when the processes interfere again with our lives: if the truck is too loud, too smelly or is disrupting traffic.

Our relationship with cleanliness also influences how we perceive MA48 workers, creating a stigma around them tied to class and culture. While many acknowledge the significance of the job, understanding how vital the system is for the city, there is often a slight condescending underline: I wouldn't want to constantly deal with the matter I actively try to avoid in my personal life and think of as unpleasant.

Interestingly, children commonly express aspirations to become waste management workers, enjoying the idea of driving around the city, holding onto the truck.

What factors contribute to this shift in perspective as we age? Could it be an increasing discomfort around waste, or is it just influenced by societal expectations regarding what constitutes a valid and respectable job?

Our project tried to capture the intimate connection with trash, emphasizing the stages where we remain emotionally and physically engaged, keeping the later consequences of our trash as blurry as they feel once the bags are out of sight.

3_ [waste of space?] When I first moved to a Viennese building and visited my trash room, I immediately compared it to another room, one floor up - the one I had just rented. The space for waste (roughly 10,4m²) was slightly bigger than my space (≈9,6m²).

2,60M X 4,00M = 10,4M2

2,2M X 4,4M = 9,6M2

This strange realisation led me to some unreflected questions. Was this a necessary, efficient or human use of these square meters? Could these spaces be housing more important things, even people?

My knowledge about Müllräume or research about trash management was basic and again, my own cultural connection with waste, in relation to its belonging space, was narrowing my views and affecting my perception of the room. And, even though after further reflection I still believe some of these initial, intuitive doubts stand valid, I now see new dimensions of trash rooms. Not only as objectively efficient city structures, but as shared, communal spaces, loaded with interesting residues of the life in that specific building at that specific time.

When focussing on the usage of space, every waste management system has different requirements and comes with its own set of advantages and disadvantages.

If containers are placed outdoors, they occupy public space and in areas or cities characterised by multiple apartment buildings or vertical housing, the demand for public space to accommodate the volume of trash generated by residents might be overwhelming. In such sce-

narios, solutions like trash rooms might be adequate.

Another option is utilising an underground area, by implementing modern containers that occupy minimal public space compared to the substantial amount of trash they can store in the holes underneath the bins. Though great in some locations, this solution depends on a more complex restructure of public space and might be unviable in many places. Chute systems, common in high-rise buildings, and scheduled curbside collection are other collecting strategies applied around the world that can be considered efficient.

When comparing the different systems, their efficacy is often measured in statistics about recycling rates, energy return, participation levels and profits - tangible achievements. These numbers are often not presented with the socioeconomic contexts of the populations, attributing the results solely to the design of the systems and education. This results in unfair comparisons, redistributing guilt in small individual equal pieces and framing the waste management topic as a mere question of will, contributing to the associations between class, cleanliness and dirtiness.

Nuanced factors, for instance, if the collection system is located in public or private space, open or locked, should also be a part of how we compare them. The numbers fail to consider how the context affects the system and how the system, then, affects the context.



4_ [social design context] Through the design of the waste management system, our perception of waste is shaped. “In effect, the environmental discourse on garbage and recycling reduces the political impact of waste to one factor: a human disruption in the harmony of nature. While the global and environmental dangers of the excessive production of garbage are very real issues, by framing the problem solely in terms of ecology, we trivialize and distort the messy entanglements of social, economic, and political processes that account for the notorious magnitude of waste today: plastic bags destroying animal wildlife, endangered plant and animal species, diseases and health hazards, giant amounts of food being wasted. We effortlessly turn from the ethics of consumption to the ethics of sustainability, while the aesthetic regime of disappearing continues to dominate our encounter with trash.” (Moisi. 2016)

Once again, by framing trash as a simple environmental problem where everyone can play their role in the system, we equally distribute guilt and responsibility among an unequal population.

In addition to the 2022 poster study mentioned earlier, other significant design efforts have been made to cultivate a greater sense of individual responsibility around waste.

Since 2009, MA48 has implemented multiple campaigns in this direction, characterised by casual language, a humorous tone, and playful visuals. For instance, the use of puns and catch-phrases on their bins is part of a strategy developed “to point out the necessary cleanliness of the city in a humorous way with a wink. Because the more conspicuous these recycle bins are, the more often they are used.” (City of Viena. Municipal Department 48. n.d.).

The department also sells merchandise publicly, including t-shirts, tote bags, games, a Lego set, and miniatures of Viennese bins. It’s even possible to purchase a small sign that reminds your neighbours of a potential fifty-euro fine for not collecting their dog’s waste. This represents a step towards citizens not only taking responsibility and actively participating in the system, but also being encouraged to enforce the rules among their community.

Social design, as an interdisciplinary field, is challenging to precisely define in practical terms. Therefore, the visual identity of MA48 serves as a tangible illustration of social design for me. The influence of the waste management system on perceptions and behaviours related to trash hinges on design. This includes not only the systemic and procedural design - the aesthetics of disappearing - but also graphic decisions, from the choice of typeface in campaigns to the visual presentation of trash rooms.



[deleted frame]

5 _ [stop-motion animation project] “Space of Waste” started with the idea to research and portray a confined space through the materials within it, using animation. With that in mind, Müllräume seemed like our project’s perfect subject and scenery. Not only were we interested in diving into the topic of waste, but these rooms were also loaded with personal narratives, social questions, intriguing smells and questionable textures that would hopefully trigger our creativity.

Our group, (Elisabeth Utz, Lukas Lex and I), decided to focus on the topic but also dedicate energy to approaching a new medium, so, stop-motion seemed like a fitting technique that was new to us and aligned with the content. Taking consecutive pictures (instead of filming, for instance), allowed us to intuitively control movement and be creative with relatively simple tools and little technical gear. Stop-motion also brings a specific and light-hearted visual effect that we appreciated and were excited to use. Its playfulness could also help us perceive and portray trash rooms in a way that would feel immediate and genuine but also surreal enough to lead to new thoughts and perspectives, both for us during the creative process and for the audience.

“Stop-motion is sort of twitchy. You feel the life in it. If we were to remove that completely, there’d be no point in doing it.” (Selig. 2009) We wanted to explore stop-motion animation by, and while, exploring Müllräume, moving and capturing what could be found in them.

The process started by visiting several trash rooms within the city of Vienna, noticing their differences and similarities and the material locked inside of them.

Looking through trash and at trash as a resource re-

minded me of the fact that in Portugal, we also see the outdoor trash bins and their surroundings as places for exchange. People leave objects, furniture or materials that might be useful for someone else. And they always are: there is nothing that you can place next to the trash that won’t be gone minutes after, no matter how useless it might have looked to you.

Just by entering the rooms with the intention of documenting them, these objects and waste were useful again: at least they were now the subject, the characters and the props for our video. We touched them, moved them, collected footage, sounds and ideas and took some nice things home.

We were frequently caught inside trash rooms and learned a lot from people’s reactions. Some were sorry for disturbing us others got very angry and threatened to call the police. Some of the rooms in question didn’t have a door leading directly to the inside of the building, so it wasn’t a matter of security, it was a matter of privacy. This showed us how some people still feel attached to the waste they throw away: it remains private, or semi-private while waiting in the trash room.

The rooms we visited showed a big variance in their size, design, layout, and lighting... and one can acquire factual information and speculate about the building. After experimenting and playing with both the unexpected finds and the common elements (like bins, brooms and hoses), some sequences started to feel slightly more connected to the social topics we discussed and that we believed were present and visible in Müllräume. Still keeping a “light” approach to the subject and technique, we created storyboards that would, supported by narration,

represent some of our thoughts or trigger new ones.

To represent a more nuanced and specific portrait, we decided to concentrate our research mainly on one trash room. For this, we selected my building's trash room as our main location. We wanted to follow the domestic waste, from the moment we produce it until MA48 collects it, focusing on the "in-between" that we believe Müllräume represents.

We took the "poster study" previously mentioned as a key element of our narrative because it felt like an ironic symbol of what "clean" and "behaving" can mean in these specific spaces.

Our video starts with a collection of pictures of domestic trash that hopefully give a sense of production, consumerism and repetition. It develops into a short narrative about a character who wonders where they belong, and finishes with an abstract representation of the question "What is trash?". A short post-credit scene mentions the amount of virtual information also stored and taking space, and even the amount of digital space we "wasted" with the production of this animation.

This stop-motion project is our portrait of Müllräume.



6 _ [conclusion] With “Space of Waste”, we aimed to shed light on Trash rooms as symbolic spaces reflecting people’s relationships with waste in Vienna. We took an intuitive approach to the subject and medium - experimenting with animation was a particularly enjoyable part of the process.

The project and research started interesting exchanges within the group, with our peers, in our personal lives and with people we encountered while animating. Those, alongside the literature, provided us with valuable insights and caused multiple shifts in perspectives. My personal view shifted when I understood how my discomfort with trash rooms was connected to how attached I was to the Portuguese system and how familiar I was with seeing waste in a different, but equally specific, place.

This suggests that Müllräume are, as we initially believed, polarizing spaces, rich in intriguing social concepts that extend beyond waste management, deeply entwined with fundamental notions of community, privacy, and belonging.

It’s crucial to reconsider the spaces and systems around us, paying attention to the messages they convey, who is being listened to, and who is even allowed inside them. Trash rooms, through their design, laws, and rules communicate expectations and shape the Viennese relationship with cleanliness.

Taking Laura Moisi’s work on the topic of waste, which inspired us during our research and project, we aimed to add the topic of space, “Müllräume” in particular. Her two works cited in this document, “Paradigm-shifts in the Politics of Domestic Garbage-Disposal” and “Scenes of Trash: Aesthetic Order and Political Effects of Garba-

ge in the Home”, address the social-cultural dimensions of domestic trash and the central position these have in society.

Her work felt like a validation of the choice of trash rooms in Vienna as the subject of our Social Design project. Mainly because we could add a new dimension to the conversation: the way space and these rooms affect our connection with the topic and my personal encounter with it, as a foreigner.

In the future, a deeper understanding of certain social topics and references, as well as the involvement of a broader range of cultural perspectives, can lead us to further explorations.

Hopefully, the “Space of Waste” stop-motion animation will continue the conversation about Müllräume and how we deal with trash.



[process photos: myself, Elisabeth Utz, Lukas Lex]



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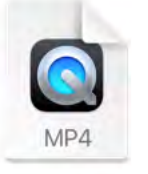
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[process photos: Lukas Lex, me, Elisabeth Utz]

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THANK YOU TO EVERYONE THAT CONTRIBUTED, SENT TRASH PHOTOS, PROOFREAD
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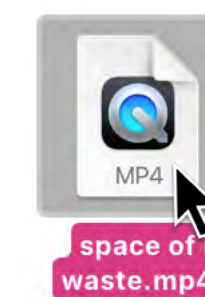
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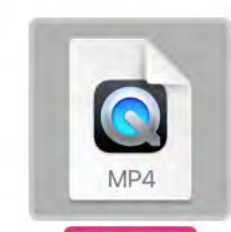
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Social Design: Arts as Urban Innovation

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