

Global – Neutral. Architecture from Austria in Africa and Asia 1955–1989

16.04.–05.10.2026 | Exhibition hall 2
Press conference: Wed 15.04., 11:00
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The exhibition “Global – Neutral” invites visitors to discover traces of Austrian architects’ activity in African and Asian countries between 1955 and 1989 – a period of global political upheaval in which many nations gained independence from colonial powers and international cooperation was shaped by the Cold War.

After 1945, the processes of decolonization and the Cold War altered the global balance of power and created new political alliances. Architecture became an integral part of these global negotiation processes. The newly founded states of Africa and Asia emerged as key venues for international architectural and planning projects. These projects served not only to advance construction and build infrastructure but were also expressions of political stances in a world being reorganized. Collaboration with internationally active architects from East and West often reflected these political alliances.

In this context, Austrian architects operated from a unique position stemming from Austria’s political neutrality. With the State Treaty of 1955, Austria had regained its sovereignty on the condition of permanent neutrality. On the international stage, the country cultivated the image of a nation unburdened by colonialism and positioned itself as a neutral mediator between the Cold War blocs. This foreign policy orientation led, among other things, to Vienna becoming into the seat of international organizations and establishing itself as a hub for international dialogue.

In contrast to planners from the major Cold War powers, who were often perceived as representatives of a political bloc, Austrian architects came forward as relatively independent partners. Even so, their projects in countries such as Burkina Faso, India, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Nepal, and Tanzania were tethered to political and economic interests – for instance, as part of development programs, cultural exchange, and symbolic and diplomatic gestures on the international stage.

“Global – Neutral” presents a previously overlooked chapter of Austrian architectural history. Point of departure is Architekturzentrum Wien’s extensive collection, whose transnational holdings broaden the scope beyond Eurocentric views. Plans, photographs, and models shed light on the work of architects such as Carl Auböck, Djamshid Farassat, Norbert Heltschl, Hans Hollein, Helene Koller-Buchwieser, Shahrzad Seradj-Kraupp, Hannes Lintl, Carl Pruscha, Roland Rainer, and Anton Schweighofer. The exhibition explores the multifaceted correlations between architecture, geopolitics, development cooperation, and transnational knowledge exchange.

Seven episodes situate projects by Austrian architects within a global context

1. Geopolitical Interdependencies

After 1945, the Cold War and decolonization fundamentally shifted the global framework of architecture. International competitions in Africa and Asia opened up new opportunities for Austrian architects – albeit within continuing colonial power structures and knowledge systems. Architectural journals such as *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* and *The Architectural Review* disseminated and shaped international discourses on building in overseas colonies and “tropical” climate zones. In this way, they also shaped the ideas of Austrian architects, leading to the emergence of a “Made in Austria” tropical modernism.

2. Monuments of a New Era

Many of the newly founded states in Asia and Africa relied on representative architecture to demonstrate national self-determination, modernity, and international connectivity. Television towers emerged as symbols of progress and were often realized in collaboration with international architects. Hannes Lintl, for example, benefited from this; after completing the Danube Tower, he received commissions for television towers in Indonesia and Iraq. Roland Rainer and Johann Staber were invited to participate in international competitions for large conference and event centers. For states in the Non-Aligned Movement, collaborating with Austrian architects was particularly attractive: as representatives of a neutral country, they were seen as partners without an ideological agenda.

3. Diplomacy or Deal?

Commissions for Austrian architects and construction firms in the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia often arose from close ties between diplomacy and business. Beginning in the early 1950s, Austria's Chamber of Commerce opened up new markets through foreign trade offices, delegation trips, and trade fairs. Architects such as Eva Mang-Frimmel, Karl Mang, and Wilhelm Cermak designed official trade fair pavilions, thereby shaping Austria's image around the world. For companies like VOEST or the construction firm AST, countries such as India and Kuwait became lucrative new markets.

4. Blueprints for a “Better World”

In the 1960s and 1970s, Austrian development cooperation was primarily driven by church and civil society organizations. Despite their neutral, humanitarian self-image, their activities in the Global South were linked to political interests. The Catholic Church, in particular, often operated within the framework of colonial legacies. Architects such as Helene Koller-Buchwieser, Willi Ramersdorfer, and Anton Schweighofer designed projects for SOS Children's Villages and the Austrian Young Workers' Movement (ÖJAB) in Burkina Faso, India, South Korea, and Vietnam. Norbert Heltschl, Walter Hildebrand, and Ottokar Uhl implemented projects for the Catholic Church and Caritas International in Tanzania, São Tomé, and South Korea.

5. On Assignment for the United Nations: Carl Auböck and Carl Pruscha

As part of the UN's development policy programs, architects became experts on global development issues; Carl Pruscha and Carl Auböck III exemplify how architects from Austria were involved in these development projects. Pruscha served for about ten years as a

UN advisor to the Nepalese government, creating a remarkable body of architectural work that reflects his vision of a locally rooted modernism. Auböck served as a representative of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) and as an advisor to UNIDO. This illustrates how design policy was negotiated as a factor in national development.

6. The Persian Wave: Transnational Dialogues

From the mid-1950s onward, Austria became a magnet for Iranian students. The connections formed during this time often endured even after graduation and did not point in a particular direction: Collaborative projects such as those by TEAM A Graz and the Werkgruppe Graz, or Roland Rainer's publication "Anonymous Architecture in Iran," demonstrate mutual exchange. Architects such as Shahzad Seradj-Kraupp and Djamshid Farassat, who both studied in Austria in the 1960s, returned to an Iran whose modernization policy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Farah Diba Pahlavi brought about economic growth and a construction boom—which in turn attracted Austrian architects such as Hans Hollein.

7. Anton Schweighofer's Excursions into the "Orient"

Toward the end of the 1970s, architecture in Arab countries and in societies in which Muslims have a significant presence moved to the center of international architectural discourse. The establishment of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the growing prominence of Hassan Fathy, and the conception of the second Venice Architecture Biennale, entitled Architecture in Islamic Countries, bear witness to this trend. Anton Schweighofer had taken an interest in this architectural culture early on and viewed his engagement with it as part of "a longstanding Austrian tradition." His excursions with students from the Vienna University of Technology, dedicated to the theme of Tourism & Tradition, ultimately led to their participation in the Venice Biennale.

Curators: Monika Platzer, Susanne Rick

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Publication

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