Architecture and the Power of Bureaucracy (Vienna, 6–7 Nov 25)

Postal Savings Bank Building, Vienna, Nov 6–07, 2025
Deadline: Apr 30, 2025

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The term "bureaucracy" refers to the organisation of people, processes, and to paperwork. Bureaucracy is often used as a synonym for inefficiency and disinterest, as the so-called "fifth form of rule by irresponsible officials who are not at risk" (Männle 2023). However, bureaucracy can also indicate high efficiency, control, and power (Blau, Meyer 1971). With the advent of the modern state, civil servants commissioned (public) architecture and urban plans by making decisions and setting rules such as regulations, laws, and standards. Although bureaucrats and bureaucracies may aim and perceive their agenda as neutral, the actual impact and influence can be both constructive and destructive.

Although bureaucracy is an inevitable element in the development of the built environment, it does not represent a common denominator in the realm of modern architecture. The conference will explore the material implications of bureaucratic measures, arguing that they already strongly impacted architectural practice and urban form in the late nineteenth century and modern periods. The objective of this conference is to incorporate bureaucracy into the discourse on architectural theory and history as an indispensable element and a powerful factor in the process of constructing a building.

Männle has already asked the question: “In what way, to what extent does architecture require a functioning administration - and where is bureaucracy necessary, or at least useful?” (Männle 2023) We want to find answers and trace arguments that show the significance of bureaucracy for realising architecture in the long 20th century, stretching from 1870 to 2010.

We aim to ask the following questions:
- To what extent did bureaucracy shape the built environment, and to what extent did it challenge it?
- What was the impact of bureaucracy in different political regimes?
- How were reform, normalisation, standardisation, and prefabrication reflected in the bureaucratic processes? And to what extent did bureaucracy introduce and require them?
- How did artistic creativity clash with bureaucracy?
- What relationship did the architects have with the bureaucratic apparatus? Did they merely suffer its existence or strive to tame it or use its power to support their agenda and if so, was it a means to magnify their ideas on architecture or gain lucrative commissions?
- Can we indicate bureaucracy as a positive means in architecture?
- How might the answer to these questions shape a critical understanding of bureaucracy in archi-

tectural historiography?

The conference convenes the Institute of Habsburg and Balkan Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences.

It takes place on 6 and 7 November 2025 in the Postal Savings Bank Building, Vienna.

Proposals should be no longer than 300 words and contain the name of the participant, the affiliation, contact information, projected paper title plus a short CV of one page.

Proposals should be sent by April 30, 2025, to hnidkova@udu.cas.cz

Reference:

CFP: Architecture and the Power of Bureaucracy (Vienna, 6-7 Nov 25). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 22, 2025 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/43761>.