

GIMME SHELTER

|
Words Oliver Lowenstein

Waiting to catch a bus in the village of Krumbach in the Vorarlberg region of Austria is the stuff of legends since its BUS:STOP project saw invitations sent out internationally to architects to design shelters for the village's bus users...



Krumbacher
Stuba

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I can hear Sami Rintala chuckling over the phone as I describe my experience of being caught in his bus shelter in what felt like the loudest, most intense storm I've been out in for years. The two-floor, piece of transplanted Nordic minimalism was shelter for 40 minutes last summer while all around the ground was pummelled by hail-stones the size of gooseberries. With the semi-nomadic, Finnish-Icelandic, yet Norwegian-anchored Rintala Eggertsson Architects involved, it isn't surprising this wasn't a traditional bus shelter, but it doesn't convey the unusual set up, nor where in the world it happens to be, and how it came about. 'I had heard rumours about Vorarlberg being a place where there is a lot of good timber architecture, but I didn't really understand the extent until I visited,' says Rintala of the hosting region, which invited him and six other international architects to participate in the BUS:STOP project to create seven individual bus shelters in and around the tiny Austrian village of Krumbach.

Alongside Rintala Eggertsson, the other studios that took part were an international and peripatetic cast populating the loosened space of art-architecture crossovers, shuttling from exhibition installation to sculptural showcase. They included Pritzker Prize winners and Serpentine Pavilion participants – Wang Shu from China's Amateur Architects, Japan's Sou Fujimoto, Chile's Smiljan Radic, Ensemble Studio from Madrid, Alexander Brodsky from Russia, and the almost local Architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu (DVVT) from Ghent. All, while working on orthodox projects, have made their names in part through their involvement in these small, bespoke, cultural one-offs, creating a counterpoint to large-scale iconic projects with smaller, modest, anti or counter-ironic works for exhibitions or festivals; physical expressions of the ever-increasing role of cultural tourism. This understates the Krumbach story, however, as BUS:STOP originated from and was organised by the village community itself.

Many across Europe know of Vorarlberg and its remarkable sustainable architecture and building culture, underscored by its use of its most plentiful local building resource, timber, and the essential part the dynamic carpentry, joinery and crafts communities play in the region's building culture. Fewer though

are familiar with how integrated this carpentry culture is, and how, although the architecture practices mainly work from offices in the valley towns of Dornbirn and Bregenz, there is an umbilical connection to the hilly upland and rural Bregenzerwald (the Bregenzer Forest) part of Vorarlberg, which remains a farming, forestry, and (now) tourist region. Many of the first-generation architects were from Bregenzerwald families, and the carpenters, and other crafts people are largely spread across the region in and around its 22 small villages. This intertwined building culture continues today, including young architects who, having grown up in the rural villages, leave to study at central European architecture schools before finding their way back.

Krumbach, with a population of just 1,000, is a case in point. Architects Bernardo Bader and Rene Bechter went to Vienna before returning to the Bregenzerwald. Both operate studios down in Dornbirn, while living in the village. Together they have become the village architects, having completed four joint projects, working with the elder generations and the best-known timber architect in Europe Hermann Kaufmann, including the BUS:STOP project.

'The phone rang and it was the mayor, saying there was something he wanted to talk with me about,' states the thirty-something Bechter. By the end of the meeting it was clear that the project was well advanced. 'A group of around 10 Krumbach residents were proposing to Arnold Hirschbühl, the mayor, that something special could be done with these seven bus stops, which needed replacing.' To Bechter's surprise they already had a short list of 10 international practices, and Austria's pre-eminent architecture curator and head of Vienna's architecture museum, Dietmar Steiner, was on board as overall director. 'Hirschbühl isn't an architect, but he's the kind of person who understood and was enthusiastic about making the project happen. So was I. I could completely see how the project would be fantastic for the village.' Bechter, along with Bader and five other Vorarlberg architects became on-the-ground host practices that carried out the completed designs arriving from around the world.

The Vorarlberg Architecture Institute was also involved, with its new director Verena Konrad becoming the on-the-ground

BUS:STOP Krumbach, Austria

- 1 Sou Fujimoto, Japan
- 2 Architecten de Vylder Vinck Taillieu, Belgium
- 3 Ensemble Studio, Madrid
- 4 Smiljan Radic, Chile
- 5 Alexander Brodsky, Russia
- 6 Rintala Eggertsson Architects, Norway
- 7 Wang Shu & Lu Wenyu, Amateur Architects, China



Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu (DVVT)

When the invitation came through to be part of BUS:STOP, this young Belgian practice's first reaction was complete excitement. 'When we saw the shortlist it was pretty amazing and we thought, "Wow we're in it!"'

'We liked the idea of making a bus stop. It felt like a common thing to make,' says DVVT's Inge Vinck. But its design didn't arrive as easily as some. 'We were struggling with the question of what is a bus stop. We didn't know what to do or draw. By chance we passed a wall in town with a poster of a Sol Lewitt-like sculpture, but in the middle was a doorbell. We passed again a few weeks later, and the light was different, and we saw how it was folded like a book, and we came back to the studio and folded paper, and there we had our simple design.' Soon after, while returning from the Milan Design Expo, they noticed how the form reflected the mountains, and the

grey colour: 'All of a sudden it all came together.' The result is a geometrically abstracted piece, reflective steel and pointed sculpture.

DVVT was paired with Thomas Mennel of the young Memux practice, who enthusiastically took up the project, while metalworker Waldmetall Dietmar Bechter constructed the structure at his workshop. 'We see our bus stop as between architecture and furniture, that it can be both, since the details we do for small projects seem the same to us. It comes even closer to an urbanist way of thinking – every detail is important.'

At the project's opening they discovered the Krumbach community has its own name for the stop: the Chapel. 'We love that very much, it felt quite comfortable to us,' says Vinck, though having a criticism of the Vorarlberg scene. 'We were in way a little disappointed. It is technically very skilled, but doesn't seem to develop or experiment. They do not seem critical in the way they think.'



PREVIOUS PAGE AND OPPOSITE PAGE DVVT



curator, and her predecessor, the long-serving Marina Hammerle, organising study tours for the international architects. There was no certainty what would happen once the 10 invitations were emailed out so imagine the thrill when within a week seven of the architects had responded positively. All knew Vorarlberg by reputation, were attracted by a community rather than big central-arts bureaucracy project, and the sheer exotic element of creating bus shelters for a rural village was beguiling. All the more incredible that holidays in the village were offered as payment.

The finished bus stops are eclectic and rather less utilitarian than the everyday Bregenzerwald shelters (designed by Kaufmann). 'They had total freedom,' says Bechter. Four are in timber, and highlight Krumbach's own forest stands. Of the other three, Fujimoto's steel forest with ascending steps into its interior, a viewing point to look out on the valley below, is the most explicitly sculptural. DVVT's is also steel, but actually provides shelter in its sharp, mountain-peak outline, while Radic's again makes much of views, from an all-glass box, and includes chairs for those waiting for a bus. Each shelter allowed local carpenters, glass, metal and other workers to show off their skills – the level of detailing and finishing work was a key element of the project.

Bechter is completely delighted with his involvement; his match with Fujimoto was, he recalls, a fascinating challenge. As to whether it created a real dialogue is another matter. Fujimoto only visited the site, but 'seemed really surprised and pleased at what we'd done when he saw the pictures'. There's been considerable publicity, generating a flow of cultural tourism, and it's put the village on the architectural map. The wider effects feel less fully realised. BUS:STOP was as much about fostering an outward-looking sensibility within Vorarlberg's architecture culture where, as some acknowledge, there are tendencies for being inward-looking, as it was drawing international architecture to the region. As for improving bus travel, Bechter suggests the stops weren't primarily about this. Which isn't, of course, a reason for not taking the bus to get to this singular art-architecture destination.

Smiljan Radic

At first the Chilean architect Smiljan Radic's shelter appears to resemble a normal bus stop. Look again and it soon becomes apparent that the Zwing stop at the northern edges of Krumbach is anything but. His stop is a bus shelter proper, a glass-encased box, steel posts holding it in place. Inside three wooden chairs, each fixed to the ground, act as an allusion to the domesticity Radic found in the village. The shelter's ceiling, relates to the flat, black concrete moulds found in Bregenzerwald farm houses.

Working with Krumbach's village architect, Bernardo Bader, and Bregenzerwald craft-workers Felder Metall, Markus Faisst and Schedler Bau, the bus stop became a subtle homage to the immediate community as much as a practical waiting shelter. There's a humorous as well in the shape of the wooden bird box perched on the roof.

Radic has recreated something of the interior Bregenzerwald world, though a fully transparent one, so that people can look in as much as those sitting inside can look out at the landscape and the dramatic view.

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Alexander Brodsky

Alexander Brodsky must enjoy the irony of having created the most restrained and sober of the seven bus stop pavilions. The one-time Russian 'paper' architect, who is revered in his home country, is best known for an entirely Russian re-versioning of the Zen Tea ritual, that of the Vodka Ceremony Pavilion, made from reused window frames.

In Krumbach, however, Brodsky has done something more modest, if deceptively ambiguous: a bus stop which might be a tower, a home, or perhaps a dining room, even if the Russian architect stated that he 'tried to design a typical Krumbach bus stop'. There is something robust and solid about the wooden structure, which stands on its four corner posts, open in the lower half, and closed in in its windowed top section. A flat, overhanging roof adds to the impression of a miniature archetypal home crossed with the residual menace of the look-out tower. The grey bench and table, and glazing on three of the four faces of the waiting space, add to the muted, dreamlike quality.

Delivered by host architect Hugo Dworzak and carpenter Gerhard Bilgeri Riefensberg, the stop sits just before the village proper on the main road in from the west, only a few metres from a family house. With its proximity to the normal foregrounds, the oddity of Brodsky's presence in the Bregenzerwald is one that is equally at odds with the straight-forward authenticities of Vorarlberg's architectural culture.





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Rintala Eggertsson Architects

The Nordic world in BUS:STOP is represented by Rintala Eggertsson Architects. After the invitation arrived the practice's Sami Rintala flew down to participate in a study tour, and found a very agreeable architectural scene, not completely unlike, though with significant differences to, his own Norwegian neck of the woods. He was shown the bus-shelter site, Kressbad, which sits outside Krumbach, with a tennis court in the field immediately behind the stop. Further days visiting buildings and meeting local architects were rounded off with evenings sampling local beers and wine, and ending with 'very enjoyable singing' in the local Krumbach taverns.

By the time Rintala was heading home, Bregenzerwald's vernacular tradition of multiple uses in its buildings, including farms and homesteads doubling as animal dwellings and shelters, had set off the beginnings of the eventual bus-stop idea from which the design emerged. Multiple, or at least double, function and form is embodied in the Kressbad stop: two simple cube forms joined and playing off each other.

At ground level the bus stop is an open box, waiting seat inside, softened by a softly rising roof line, and acting to hold the second-floor box, which cantilevers out at the back, to create a viewing platform for any passing tennis fan. Eggertsson, in the Oslo office, and Rintala, dwelling nearly 2,000km further north in Bodo, 'played tennis, knocking the design back and forth' before Eggertsson took over overseeing the work with Vorarlberg's BaumschlagerHutter (Carlo Baumschlager's post-split BaumschlagerEberle studio).

Rintala observes 'the similarities between Vorarlberg and Norway, though the scales are different. In Vorarlberg there are different cultures in each valley.' He found the visits inspiring. 'It's influenced my goals. I've started linking with local wood networks here in northern Norway. We have a small group which is developing a similar approach to wood culture.' He also liked how making the bus stop also involved the local community, including members of Krumbach's brass orchestra preparing the external shingles, while Krumbach carpenters used darker spruce pine internally. The bus stop stands beside the road at Kressbad, similar yet different to the default Vorarlberg Miesian style, yet recognisably Nordic. Rintala says: 'It's a very nice conversation piece.'

Wang Shu & Lu Wenyu, Amateur Architects

Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu, from China's Amateur Architects, winner of the 2012 Pritzker Prize, didn't visit Krumbach, choosing instead to work across time and space from their studio in Hangzhou. The practice's shelter is the most elegant and restrained of the seven pieces. Shu and Wenyu were paired with Europe's pre-eminent timber architect, Hermann Kaufmann, and used the community's local wood stocks, prepared by the Kaufmann family's Reuthe wood factory, for their stop, the first on the main road into the village from the west. At the time Shu described the Glatzegg bus stop as 'like a 120 SLR folding camera that people can sit in' and titled the piece Camera Obscura. The stop is in effect a box of slatted timbers, steadily reducing in size, to the open window or lens looking out on the dramatic landscape. The whole thing is topped off by a zinc roof with some scissor-like playfulness jutting out to its right-hand edge.



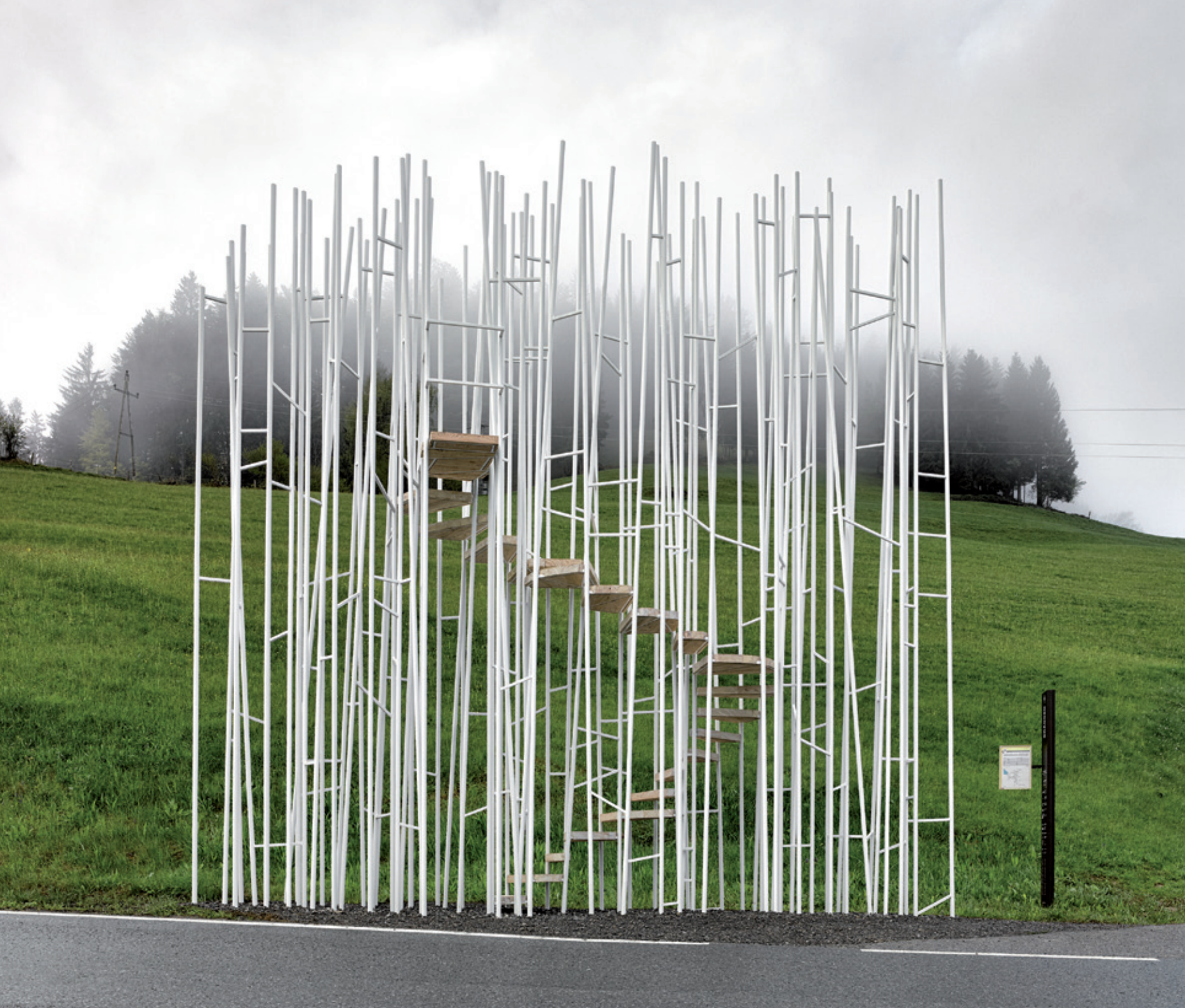
Ensamble Studio

Madrid-based Ensamble Studio – Antón García-Abril and Débora Mesa – was new to the Vorarlberg scene's way of working with the immediate resources to hand, both in locally available materials and the Bregenzerwald craftsmen. Its design embraces this modus operandi in protean form, emerging as it did out of the two architects study visit.

The tour included a visit to one of the many timber drying barns, where they noted oak being dried through a specific stacking technique. This became the basis of Ensamble's bus stop, with roughly sawn oak planks sitting one atop another, until the whole structure forms a seemingly makeshift plank installation. Partnered with Dietrich/Untertrifaler, one of the long-established Vorarlberger practices, and carpenter Gerhard Berchtold for the finished piece, there is a certain flamboyance to the rough-and-ready result, which mixes the lowest of tech techniques – wood stacking – with a simple conceptual conceit. Ensamble, a practice that hadn't worked previously with timber, describes its bus stop as 'a performance with local craftsmen'.

The stop itself stands on the northern edge of Krumbach, opposite the stop by Belgium's Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu, the stacked oak making a cave-like interior space, complete with seat and open spaces, to look out for oncoming buses, and at the rear, the forested horizon and valleys.





Sou Fujimoto

The Japanese architect and 2013 Serpentine Pavilion designer was the first to respond apparently within a few hours, to the initial BUS:STOP invitation. In nearby Basel, Switzerland, a short time later, Fujimoto took a train to Vorarlberg to meet the project organisers and see the prospective site, known as Branden – a steep roadside slope to the south of Krumbach. In response Fujimoto designed a thicket of tall steel rods rising from the ground, the most obviously sculptural of the seven stops, and dropping in a staircase of steps. For the host architect, Bechter Zaffignani, Fujimoto's steel cathedral was a challenge to its usual focus on public and domestic projects in and around Vorarlberg. After receiving the 3D model design files from Fujimoto's studio in Tokyo, Bechter and the engineers started modelling the structural loads of the 88, 45mm-wide rods and 25mm sq connecting elements, before preparing a mock-up. From this, workers from Eberle Metall decided to divide the piece into four segments. After the rods were made they were transported to the site and lifted into place on the reinforced concrete slab. Once in place the rods were painted a signal white as per Fujimoto's instructions, and the wood stair treads placed in position. Fujimoto's sculpture is admired by locals, even though some wonder what this dense scaffold has to do with a bus stop. ■