

Eco-wise, Vorarlberg's building culture is ahead of almost all of Europe.

**Dietmar Eberle, Walter Unterrainer** and the Energie Institute's **Helmut Krapmeier**, talk 'comfort', social housing's roots, and Vorarlberg's pioneering role in the passivhaus movement



One of Walter Unterrainer's (and Vorarlberg's) earliest Vorarlberg Passivhaus projects, for the 1997 Cepheus research

## VORARLBERG

# A passive revolution goes active

Throughout the sprawl-like patchwork of towns and villages that Vorarlberg consists of, individuals and communities have embraced not only modern, but also some of the most ecologically advanced buildings in Europe, particularly passivhaus buildings. In 2006 the only passive secondary school so far built in Europe opened in the village of Klaus. This followed some of the earliest passivhaus research, which has since matured into passivhauses becoming an accepted part of Vorarlberg's housing and other building types. There are both industrial and multi-storey passive housing blocks, and on new years day 2009 a law came into force which requires all multi-storey housing to be built to passive standards.

For the architecturally inclined the unusual mix of contemporary and experimental building aesthetics adapted to hundreds of years of the region's traditional strength in craft skills, particularly carpentry, is also often remarked on. The Vorarlberger Baukünstler generation have also been particularly engaged with building cultures social dimension, improving the quality of housing for the average man and woman, rather than on high-profile cultural or celebrity showcases. Vorarlberg's passivhaus building community is but one element in this broader building culture, and although important for many of the architects, it's this wider context which is equally significant. Certainly, this remains at the heart of the practices such as Baumschlager & Eberle, albeit transported and translated to massive new projects in, for instance, Brussels, Beijing, or Shanghai. The title of one of this practice's early monographs, *House-ing*, underlines this focus on residential building culture, where craftsmanship, urban systems and sustainability have all been integrated into its housing philosophy. Indeed Dietmar Eberle will talk of never believing that 'this thinking of more sustainable development is strong or specific enough to create an all embracing architectural form.' Eberle points out that improving a building's performance, in energy and other terms, is what will be

effective, part of rational, economic understanding, and that if architects can provide the same or higher standards of housing for only one fifth rather than half of a family budget, then this gives people 'more freedom to decide what they want.'

One way to look at the practice's work is as a part of the gradual improvement of the continent's housing stock. Eberle notes how during the twentieth century average European living space increased from 12 metres to 40 or 50 metres. It's very simple, he continues, 'it comes down to investment cost and of maintenance cost, the connection to energy.' This may sound a distance from Eberle's early Baukünstler incarnation, but actually Eberle is pointing out the obvious. Also, there is a consistent line of thinking from the early, 'simple building' forms, respectful of Bregenzerwald farm craftsmanship, vernacular and Segal housing experiments up to the present day high-rises and airports that partially consume the practice's current workload; that of knowledge rather than technics as the guide to architectural thinking. For Eberle, the passivhaus movement is part of this wave of knowledge production and he believes, while it has been useful, future knowledge will bring about building developments that will inevitably overtake the passive revolution. In different language Walter Unterrainer, another of the original Vorarlberg Baukünstler architects, who for many years has been specialising in passive buildings, talks of practicality and an attraction to lower, rather than higher-tech choices being shared by all his generation of architects.

The sustainability being practiced in Vorarlberg follows much of this approach, essentially a 'simple', indeed elegant and integrated decentralised energy systems thinking, though with technics gradually moving to arguably gain the upper hand over knowledge. In architectural and building terms, this building culture grew mainly out of the county's second or Vorarlberg Baukünstler generation's early active interest in the overlaid social, energy and sustainable issues, expressed