

# Building Narratives



**Story-making  
for accessibility  
and empowerment**

**A conversation between  
Justinas Dūdėnas,  
Andrius Ropolas,  
Paula Brücke  
and Arian Lehner**



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Storytelling

“Architecture is about giving people spaces. We build spaces not with bricks and stones, but with events and videos.”

**Two architects from Lithuania, who fell into writing, meet two architects from Austria, who fell into documentary filmmaking, to share their methods and practices of story-making about architecture in different media. “Archifutures” put together Justinas Dūdėnas and Andrius Ropolas of Architektūros fondas with Paula Brücke and Arian Lehner of Mies.TV. Both pairs want to make architecture and urbanism more accessible, both want to broaden the narrative: a discussion ensues.**

**Paula Brücke (Mies.TV)** How did Architektūros fondas form? And what kind of work do you do?

**Andrius Ropolas (Architektūros fondas)** It is an interesting and slightly strange situation. Justinas and I are sort of represententing Architektūros fondas [AF], which means “Architectural Foundation” in Lithuanian, but nobody really knows who works there and who is a member. There are no official affiliations, so it is a sort of guerilla-type architectural organisation. If you have a good idea, AF as an umbrella can help you make it happen by lending its portfolio and structure. Justinas and I are part of it but, since nothing is official, we cannot really talk on behalf of the organisation. We can talk about what we do at AF though, and this is related to why we are talking to you: because we are interested in trying to develop and explore different ideas about how architecture could be communicated.

**Justinas Dūdėnas (Architektūros fondas)** I was just remembering how we became a part of AF. Andrius was writing an architecture blog – the first one in Lithuania. I was done with academia and, together with another friend of ours, we wanted to talk more about architecture. So we decided to make a podcast, and thought that the AF name

## Mies.TV

Arian Lehner and Paula Brücke are part of Mies.TV, which is a network formed by architecture students ranging from Austria to the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Mexico. It was founded with the initial idea of exploring and recording all aspects of architecture using the medium of video interviews. Through open screenings, architecture festivals, television shows and panel discussions, Mies.TV aims to communicate architecture to an audience from both within and without the realm of architecture through the use of digital tools and physical events.

*Previous Spread:*  
Hidden Architecture  
Image: Norbert Tukaj

would help open doors. We didn't have our own organisation, something often needed to apply for funding, so we asked AF for permission to use their name. That is how we got in.

**Andrius** The three of us started talking on Google Hangouts, recording it as a podcast and shared it. Now it has evolved into some sort of strange publication. Our goal is to make a decentralised publication. Magazine like *Volume*, for example, have a themed issue every half year. We do it similarly, but instead of publishing the content ourselves, we give it away. We have a theme and ask people to write about it or make a podcast or something else. When we receive the content we decide what type of audience it fits and through which medium we should publish it. So we don't have our own publishing platform, we just share. We talk about architecture and try to find different ways of publishing and spreading it.

**Arian Lehner (Mies.TV)** So you collect material and then distribute it to appropriate publications? This must mean that you also have a lot of connections to Lithuanian platforms.

**Andrius** Yes, but Lithuania is very small so it did not take long to get to know the magazine editors.

**Paula** In your view, was there something specific that was missing from other publishing platforms?

**Justinas** Absolutely. Many architectural topics were missing. The discourse was very narrow. There were some articles about heritage. There are some specialised architectural magazines but they are less open to theoretical fields and more focused on professional reviews of certain buildings, or new interiors. We see our mission as strengthening the general discourse about architecture, bringing in the language of more subtle or diverse views.

## Archifutures

I really believe that architects are not the ones who ultimately decide or have the power to decide what will happen. Times have changed. The clients, public and politicians make the decisions. The quality of spaces and buildings is therefore dependent on what they think and what language they use, how they express themselves and what they have heard about architecture. This is what we are trying to slowly impact.

**Andrius** We want to encourage people to write and talk about architecture, that's why we created an open call and invited people to submit papers and illustrations. Selected authors received prizes and had their works published. Most of the submissions came from people who have never written about architecture before. There were philosophers who were interested in architecture, for example, and now they had a platform to share their thoughts. So this is our aim: to talk about architecture, but also to help others to talk about it. These two things are closely related.



We focus more on written ideas but, as I understand it, you do more visual, video work. How did you start and why?

## Architektūros fondas

Architektūros fondas is a volunteer-based non-profit NGO founded by architecture students and a young generation of professionals in art and design from Lithuania.

Andrius Ropolas is an architect, a critic and a partner at the Office De Architectura. He has been writing about architecture for more than 10 years.

Justinas Dūdėnas is an architect and semiotician based in Vilnius. He works in transdisciplinary areas, and he is a founding partner of the exhibition design practice Centras ir Institutas.

Recording a podcast on architectural criticism with Andrius Ropolas from Architektūros fondas (left) and the Lithuanian architect, critic and publisher Audrys Karalius (right).  
Image: Leta Lileikyte

**Paula** We started as a student project, in our first year of studying at the Technical University of Vienna. We felt distanced from professors and professionals there and were missing a link with professional architecture. So we had this really naive idea of just asking architects if we could come to their offices and interview them about how they work. We did not just talk to architecture offices, we developed a specific three-part format: RE-PORTS (reports) on different architecture-related topics (for example: architecture photography, renderings, architecture and film, etc.), PORT-RES (portraits) of architects and UNI (university) related topics. What was also interesting for us was that there was a TV channel available for us to use right from the beginning.

**Andrius** Like a real TV channel on air?

**Arian** Yes, there is a non-commercial television channel called Okto which is publicly-funded, mainly by the City of Vienna. It can be seen on a physical TV, but also has a live-stream and they give opportunities for niche groups to make programmes. So, for example, you have a Latino TV show which is made by Latinos living in Austria or you have one for ex-Yugoslavians – and then you have 19-year-old students making their own show about architecture: *Mies.Magazin*.

**Paula** This was very helpful at the beginning to get attention and be taken seriously. It also made it easier to get to talk to people. There was basically no one who was not up for being interviewed – architects like to talk about their work. From the beginning, we focused more on the talk itself rather than trying to show built architecture projects in the video. We started without any knowledge about filmmaking, but this evolved through time.

## Archifutures

Our work has since expanded and we are not just a TV series now, we do other events too.

**Arian** We were naive teenagers who started filming, we never saw ourselves as journalists. We saw that architecture media is often highly philosophical and theoretical – if you are not an architect, then it is very hard to follow. Since we were not architects yet, we said, “Ok, let’s have super straightforward questions”. The amazing thing is that we got super straight answers back. Now we have over 150 interviews.



*Above:* Interview scene with Timmy Whitehouse and Paula Strunden, students from the Bartlett School of Architecture in London (2018). Image: Mies.TV

*Below:* Paula Brücke, Bernhard Mayer, Christoph Holzinger, from Mies.TV, interviewing Jean-Philippe Vassal (of Lacaton & Vassal Architects) at the 20<sup>th</sup> Vienna Architecture Congress (2016). Image: Mies.TV

We started in Austria, but then I went on an Erasmus exchange to Manchester in the UK, so we tried to do the same thing there, and started *Mies UK*. We interviewed

architects, students, model makers, photographers... We also have the same set-up in Mexico City, interviewing architects in Spanish. So Mies.TV has become a structure that works globally but at a local level. Every country works within their local or national framework.

**Andrius** How do you choose people and topics?

**Arian** When we started, we saw ourselves as part of the audience. Our aim was not to dive into a specific topic, but to generate a broad overview. We might be the first architecture medium that Austrian students encounter. We have the opportunity to present ourselves every year at the Technical University of Vienna in front of 700 first-year students and are part of the official study material. We still see our potential as the link between people interested in architecture and the architecture world. We also do interviews on topics we don't personally agree with, but then we just let people talk for themselves.



Arian Lehner from Mies.TV interviewing Bjarke Ingels, from BIG Architects, at the 15<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2016). Image: Mies.TV

**Paula** Back to you, how do you define your topics?

**Justinas** The public discourse around architecture, which defines what is considered cool, right and skillful,

**“When we started, we saw ourselves as part of the audience. Our aim was not to dive into a specific topic, but to generate a broad overview.”**

is sometimes more important than the benefits of good education and skills of architects. Because the architect is so often forced to do something specific. The brief of the building is the defining moment, and it comes from the general culture. So the narratives are absolutely important. In our project we preferred not to spread any particular narrative or have certain narrow goals or missions. We wanted to have a look at *how* we speak about architecture. What are the discourses? What do people actually care about? We told writers to feel free to write about what they care about.

**Andrius** But we still defined the topic of “Building Narratives”. That was our initial starting point. We didn’t ask anything particular, but wanted to explore the possibilities of narrating architecture, through writing, but also illustrations or poems.

**Paula** So you are curating?

**Justinas** Yes, you can call it curating. As Andrius said, we set this broad topic, but for some it turned into self-awareness – about how to express yourself and to be aware of the field – and for others it became more particular – about regeneration or preservation, for example.

**Andrius** There is a big difference between looking at dominant and interesting themes on a global and a national scale. In Lithuania, heritage is always a topic. Lately public spaces have become a topic here too, because there have been some projects that dealt with public spaces in a rather tricky or aggressive way. But there are other topics out there. We want to expand the Lithuanian field of discussion, otherwise we would only talk about heritage and public space. Maybe we could start with what Europe is interested in and talk

about it in Lithuania. Our ambition is to find bigger topics. Often in architecture you can find these trendy artificial topics that have nothing to do with architecture. For example, there have been a lot of discussions lately about the pandemic that seem forced. You see this big buzz around it, which is often used as PR: architectural companies are 3D-printing parts for fighting the virus, which is ridiculous.<sup>1</sup> Their main point is to show it on Instagram. Like: “we are reacting, we are relevant, don’t forget us”. But maybe we could find more meaning by looking at less flashy but more meaningful keywords like “home”, which is always interesting and important. And having in mind this situation, it seems this could be the real essence, a main focus point for architects who want to contribute.

**Justinas** Regarding dominating discourses: in Lithuania, speaking about public space is mostly focused on transit, the quality of roads and sidewalks. It is very focused now on the possibility of moving quickly to avoid people and contact. It diminishes the very idea of a city as your greater home, which in turn reduces the sense of the ownership of public space. The understanding of public space as your own, being a host of your city could be a very interesting addition to the topic of home.

**Andrius** We mostly notice this by sitting and observing. As you do a lot of interviews, you talk with architects and learn something and find information. Do you see any shifts or patterns in those interviews? That architects tend to answer your questions in a particular way? Or things that architects could be interested in in the future?

**Paula** That is really a hard question. We try to have a broad overview, but our resources are not big, so we can’t have a big overview or predict big narratives. I find it quite interesting that you are critical of certain trends and topics, because topics are not something that we reject. We would be interested in

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kate Wagner, “Coronagrifting - A design phenomenon” [Eds.], [mcmansionhell.com/post/618938984050147328/coronagrifting-a-design-phenomenon](https://mcmansionhell.com/post/618938984050147328/coronagrifting-a-design-phenomenon) (accessed August 3, 2020).

talking to people about 3-D-printing masks in the current situation, for example, if their work has any impact.

**Andrius** No, for sure. It would be good if somebody did this research and found out how it really is. I just have a preconception that, in reality, it is less honest than it looks. Also, we operate differently, you talk more actively with people and we observe more.

**Arian** What is also interesting about interviews is that you let people talk themselves rather than having a journalist re-writing what they said in an article. Certainly we can steer the direction of the dialogue by what we ask and we can emphasize what we think is important through editing. But principally it is up for the audience to form their own opinion. We like to give questions to people and not necessarily answers.

**Andrius** Did you ever encounter any controversy?

**Paula** In Berlin we made a RE-PORT about the controversial rebuilding of an old baroque palace – the “Berlin Palace”, after a GDR state building on the site was demolished in 2008. To rewrite a part of Berlin’s history in this way was a political decision, so we did interviews with people from both sides of the debate. For us it was a good example of being in the midst of a controversy. Interestingly, most of our interviews on YouTube have no comments. This one does.

**Arian** And then it was a political comment about the content of the video. Our interviews and screenings provide input for discussions, since we do not directly praise or attack any issue, but just collect different opinions.

Our team in Paris – Mies.FR – has their own beautiful and interesting dynamic when it comes to discussing topics.

The French interview show is presented at a bistro close to an architecture school. The interviews screened there seem to function merely as an input for the big discussion that is sure to follow. I'm not kidding, those French students can discuss the topics raised in the interviews for hours – with increasing volume and beautiful but aggressive French words being thrown around. Once, an interviewed architect did not come to the screening himself, but his secretary and the team had to defend their practice and their office against revolutionary, almost demonstrating, Parisian students. It is great to see how Mies.FR becomes an input and a platform for discussion in this way.

**Justinas** What do the different Mies.TV teams have in common? Is there some common structure?

**Arian** The main structure for all countries lies in producing video interviews: RE-PORTS, PORT-RES and UNI. Those three segments, at eight minutes each, are put together into a twenty-seven minute episode, which is presented at a physical screening – for free and to anyone who is interested. The decision about who to interview is up to the local producers and their idea of what is important in their native context.

**Paula** And the idea behind the interviews is always the same: it is focused on the spoken word. We visit offices and look “backstage”, instead of filming their buildings. And there is emphasis on communicating for a broad audience.

**Justinas** How many countries are there now under the umbrella of Mies.TV?

**Arian** In total we have seven countries – Austria, United Kingdom, Slovakia, Mexico, France, Germany and the Netherlands. At the moment four of these are regularly developing videos.

**“We don’t create videos that are just hosted digitally somewhere, neutral and without any human connection.”**

**Andrius** I'd like to go back to your screenings, which you said are live. I'm curious as to why, what does it add? Why do you do it physically instead of online, for example?



**Arian** I like the idea that our platform is not just about giving people information, but that we create a frame, a space for people to come together. Our interviews are just the start of thought, out of which something common and interesting could emerge. That's why we even organised summer festivals for five years. Instead of rock bands playing, we had architects giving lectures. Our visitors were walking around with beer and flip-flops, watching architects talk. But we also had a band, dancers and magicians. By bringing people together you also bring information together, and you can share it. We are able to see our audience and our audience is able to see us, the ones who produce the videos. We don't create videos that are just hosted digitally somewhere, neutral and without any human connection.

Mies. Festival 2013  
in Seestadt Aspern, Vienna  
(Austria), October 12, 2013.  
Image: Mies.TV

**Justinas** This example from France was very inspiring, it probably wouldn't work anywhere else in this way. How does it work in Vienna?

**Paula** The culture of discussion in Austria is very different. It is not so advanced, people do not really like to discuss that much. But sometimes it works. If people are not eager to communicate during the formal discussion, it is still important to be able to host people live. I believe that people approach an issue differently when they watch it together.

**Arian** It is also significant that we are creating a community. The variety of people who have been coming to our screenings during the past eight years is growing, changing and developing. People bring friends along that did not study architecture but enjoy attending and listening due to the easy-to-understand approach.

**Paula** And during the quarantine restrictions, when it was not possible to do physical events anymore, we did live events online. I think it works quite similarly to online film festivals, where people watch a video simultaneously, since it is live and bound to a specific time.

How do you work within social distancing restrictions?

**Justinas** In our case, the curating, publications, podcasts were not live anyway, so there was not much of a difference. For other branches of Architektūros fondas it was very different. Many projects were postponed or even cancelled.

**Andrius** In general, we work mostly virtually, we don't even exactly know who reads what we do, or who our audience is. Maybe this is something we should work on,

maybe we should know our audience better. Knowing your audience affects how you talk about architecture. There are different mediums and languages you can use. Like you use video as a medium. For us it is text and audio, but then again you also have different styles of talking.

**Paula** You were talking before about the topic of “home” and its growing importance. Do you think this is more closely connected to general interest from non-architects?

**Andrius** I think many people didn't think that much about their home or what home is but have started to think about it now. Maybe it is a good opportunity to jump into that and try to navigate within this interest. People naturally spend more time at home now, rethinking work, and their relationships with their home and environment. This is not because home happened to become suddenly relevant - it was always relevant but maybe now more people might be interested.

**Arian** Architecture is about giving people spaces. We build spaces not with bricks and stones, but with events and videos.

**Andrius** This is exactly why we started this Building Narratives idea. You can change spaces by discovering something that was not discovered before. Because the standard of beauty is vague, and nobody knows what's beautiful anymore. How you tell the story then becomes a kind of PR, making spaces for people to discuss how they see things and then maybe they will start seeing things differently. Maybe this is enough sometimes. ■

**“How you tell the story then becomes a kind of PR, making spaces for people to discuss how they see things and then maybe they will start seeing things differently.”**