

# Werkraum Bregenzerwald

## Not Just a Matter of Form

**Trades & Form**

Austria

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The Bregenzerwald craftspeople are known for the high formal quality of their work. This is the result of a conscious and organized effort to explore traditional artisan knowledge vs. contemporary design, cooperation vs. competition – knowing what one wants as a prerequisite for being able to integrate outside influences in a harmonious way.

Werkraum Bregenzerwald is the name of the industry alliance formed by the craftspeople of a small region in the Austrian federal state of Vorarlberg. Funding was provided through an economic initiative to strengthen the region. The highlight among the Werkraum's many activities is a triennial design competition in which craftspeople and designers participate as a team.

Felt swing, Design  
and production:  
Johannes Mohr,  
Andelsbuch





“You’ve never been to the Bregenzerwald?” a native responds in consternation to the strangers’ apparent “lapse in knowledge”. The proverbial self-confidence of the locals, the so-called Wälder, always seems coupled with a friendly yet unrelenting tendency to want to promote the region. Even the sun is beaming, defying all warnings given prior to this trip that Vorarlberg is the area with the highest rainfall in Austria. For the next few days the photographer will sigh over and over at the perpetual postcard blue of the sky as we drive over gently rolling hills with grazing cows and through the villages, with their old shingled houses typical of the region. Interspersed in this landscape is the young generation of a new architecture that has no ambitions of making its traditional brethren seem shabby, but instead reiterates their merits in a contemporary language, thus projecting the reputation of the Vorarlberger Bauschule into the world.

### **The Bregenzerwald or a wonderland with structural backwardness**

From the local vantage point, Vienna, the Austrian capital, lies behind the Arlberg mountains (as opposed to “in front” of the Arlberg: “Vor”Arlberg). The horizon unfolds to the west and north, and Vorarlberg, Austria’s westernmost federal state, has certainly profited from its position at the junction of four nations: Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein. It developed into one of the most affluent areas in Europe at a time when beyond Vienna the Iron Curtain had brought the West to a halt. The somewhat remote Bregenzerwald region benefited from this link to the outside.

Metropolises such as Zurich or Milan can be reached in a few hours, a fact that the Wälder never tire of mentioning. As a cosmopolitan-minded region, one is just far enough away from everything to be able to cultivate one’s eccentricities, and yet one is close enough to the heart of the economic centers to be able to make contacts easily. The inhabitants of this region are considered a people of their own, deeply rooted in their native soil and at the same time quite open, a unique folk. Even the regional home page forewarns tourists about the “somewhat self-willed”, but “extremely hospitable” locals. And if you’re not in the mood for fine dining, you might have trouble finding anything else. In a nutshell: the Bregenzerwald region is like a wonderland straight out of a storybook.

There is a flip side to the coin. Its thirty thousand inhabitants are sparsely scattered throughout twenty-four communities. During the day the villages are deserted. The predominant economic sectors, tourism, trade, commerce, and agriculture, only offer a limited number of jobs, so that many are forced to look for work in the Rhine Valley. According to surveys, the average income in the Bregenzerwald is 25 percent below the Austrian mean. Commuting does as little to stabilize the social structure as the gourmet tourists, who come from afar to the villages to have master chefs pamper their palates for an evening. The young people often leave the villages because the large companies in the valley coax them away with better job perspectives than a workshop with ten employees can offer. In the Bregenzerwald region three quarters of the people practicing a trade, work in more than 500 micro enterprises. Limited demand within the region forces these businesses to export their products, but because of their small-scale structure, they can only be competitive to a certain extent in the changing European market.

The Bregenzerwald is a region characterized by so-called structural backwardness. Limitations forced the people here early on to be flexible and mobile, they had to go out into the world and look for work elsewhere. In his autobiographical novel *Aus meinem Leben* the Bregenzerwald writer and social reformer Franz Michael Felder describes the fate of the Schwabian children who were sold to wealthy farmers in Allgäu as cheap labor for seasonal work in the seventeenth century. Following the Thirty Years’ War, the famous Vorarlberg Baroque architects, most of whom came from the region of Hintere Bregenzerwald, went, for lack of commissions in their native region, to southern Germany, Switzerland, or Alsace in search of work. It was necessity that drove them out into the world, thanks to which they went down in the history of church architecture and brought new knowledge back with them when they returned home.



### **The village as origin and force field or the story of a strong sense of regional identity**

Many people have gone away and some have returned. Markus Faißt refers to the Bregenzerwald as a “force field” – because of the air, the landscape, and the social cohesion that still exists here. On Sundays after church, you go to the tavern and “exchange views of the world with the rest of the villagers.” After eight years of working abroad, Faißt returned to Hittisau where he took over his father’s joinery and turned it into the Holzwerkstatt, a modern woodworking studio with ecological and environmentally friendly building standards. Faißt works exclusively with solid wood from the Bregenzerwald, felled in the winter and purchased directly from the owner of the woods; material is handled according to the phases of the moon. The wood is seasoned, allowing it to dry slowly in the air, and is neither varnished nor stained, but left untreated or leached, pre-wet, oiled, waxed, so that the products continue to breathe, age visibly, and acquire a patina. Around here, people will tell you that Faißt won’t touch wood he hasn’t seen as a living tree.

One can talk to five Bregenzerwald craftspeople and they’ll give you five different work philosophies. But common to all is first and foremost a strong sense of ancestry. In one’s own family history there is usually a craftsman’s tradition that extends back over generations. Even today private living quarters and the workshop are close together. The children move about naturally in the workshops and business spaces, curiously eyeing the customers. The businessmen and women of today are the children of yesterday; in the workshops they have taken over from their fathers, they grew into their professions playfully, built soapboxes or “nailed stuff together”. If one doesn’t show a clear affinity to the trade by the age of fifteen, one won’t become a proper craftsman, is an adage one hears a lot around here, from the parents’ and the grandparents’ generations alike. And one either believes that kind of thing or not. But people’s convictions here are more strongly embedded in their living and work conditions than elsewhere, in the stories of how it used to be and how it is or should be today. Everything seems to have arisen from itself, to have grown together; everything mutually determines everything, the living space, the inhabitants, the culture.

The work people do here, what they live from, can only be understood in this context. To the outsider, the Bregenzerwald seems at first glance an overall cultural phenomenon. One might call it a strong sense of regional identity. Even the exotic refreshment stand in Bezau reflects this in its unintentionally comical name *Wälder Kebab*, which on the other hand also shows that even in the Bregenzerwald there are limits to everything. In any case, strong regional identity is a good basis for securing a position in the increasingly global competition. Particularly with small businesses accustomed to regular competition among themselves, a socioculturally determined sense of affinity can create common ground.

### **How lucky to live in Vorarlberg or where business enterprise and architectural culture converge**

In the Bregenzerwald, the natural living conditions were harsh in many ways. Regional identity here, therefore, goes hand in hand with the notion that you don’t get anything for nothing. The three-year-old daughter of the upholsterer Johannes Mohr is no exception. Once, when a customer visiting the workshop asked if she wanted to be a princess one day, she answered without hesitation: “Nein, ich will ‘schaffe’” (No, I want to work.) “Schaffe,” the Alemannic word for “work” has a proud connotation in this former “farming republic.”

It is said that the Vorarlberg saying “schaffe, schaffe, Häusle baue” (work, work, build a little house) reflects Vorarlberg’s collective motto for life. It is no coincidence that the opening exhibition of the Vorarlberger Architekturinstitut spoke of a sense of being lucky to live in Vorarlberg. Since early on, culture of architecture and culture of living have been regarded as one. For this reason, one can only understand the development of the Bregenzerwald trades and crafts industry in the context of Vorarlberg architecture. At the open-air museum Stübing near Graz one can see how the Bregenzerwald house had already become a model to copy by the eighteenth century because at a time when in other areas the smoke kitchen was still common, it already provided domestic comfort with its tile stoves and wall paneling.





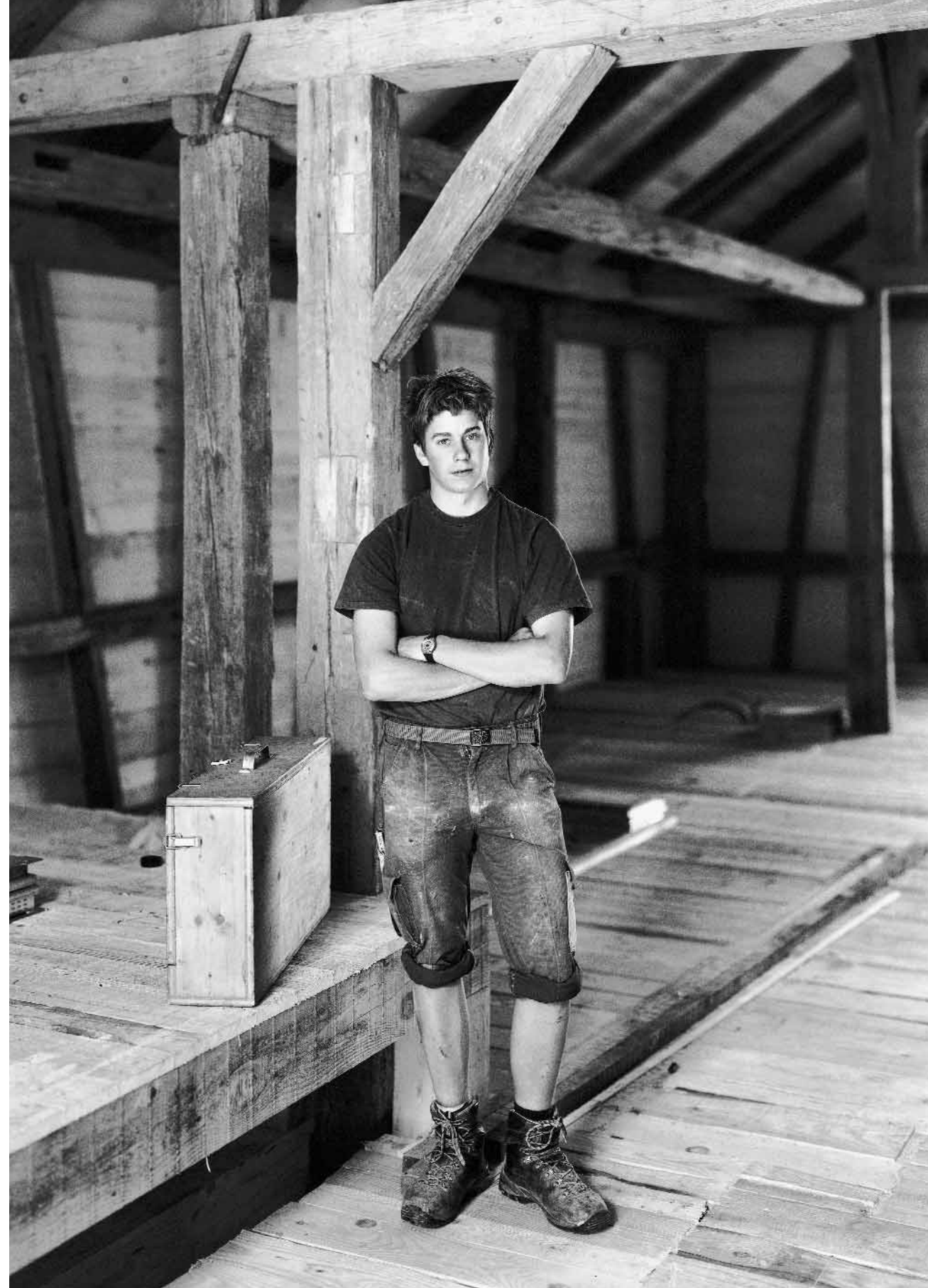
This still forms the basis of a Vorarlberg architecture that has witnessed an unparalleled boom in the past thirty years. Taking its start from the work of a handful of pioneers in the 1960s, it developed into a regional movement that sees art, handicrafts, and industry as one. Many of its representatives come from craftsman's families – an aspect not to be underestimated, for returning to the Bregenzerwald after their studies were not outsiders with theoretical knowledge, but insiders brimming with new ideas. With their architecture, these men not only pondered the roots of regional architecture but the local tradition of highly skilled craftsmanship as well. The architects' regional identity gave the Bregenzerwald trades and crafts industry new impetus.

Vorarlberg developed into an internationally renowned center of contemporary architecture. The architects have initiated an overall cultural phenomenon that is being propagated by all those involved: politicians, awarding authorities, clients, trades- and craftspeople. There is an overall demand in respect to the quality of local architecture: newly built structures in Vorarlberg should feature a strong positive link to the region. The craftsmen, according to Roland Gnaiger, Vorarlberg architect and professor at the University of Art and Industrial Design in Linz, have been part of the process of development, supported it and helped shape it. This may explain the unusual comments of some star architects, who say they aren't always involved in the completion of the interiors of their buildings anymore because some craftsmen are perfectly capable of planning and carrying out this part of the job on their own.

Clemens Lässer,  
apprentice at  
Berlinger Holzbau,  
Alberschwende

### Rethinking the old **or** deciding over one's own location

The influence of the architects is enormous, says Wolfgang Schmidinger, who has among other accomplishments successfully launched a furniture series under the label *Schmidinger-modul* and is represented at the international furniture fairs in Cologne and London. The architectural imperative to build in such a way that a structure fits into its surroundings, that the function of the object remains visible despite the formal intentions of the architect or designer, and that one takes the natural resources into consideration, also set the standards for the furniture, interior fittings, and prefabricated building components of the Bregenzerwald craftsmen.



Also contributing to the shift in the image of the craftsman was, in no small part, the takeover of businesses by the next generation. Today's businessmen and women started running their parent's companies in the 1980s and 1990s, long after the image of the craftsman's trade had changed fundamentally. Occurring hand in hand with the trend toward less expensive industrial serial production was the shifting view of furniture as an expression of lifestyle, bought according to trends and just as easily cast aside. When furniture delivery vans started showing up in the Bregenzerwald, local craftspeople realized that they could only assert themselves in the competition on their own territory if they were willing to reevaluate their own strengths and expand them. The uncertainty of the customer was growing with the plurality of styles. The craftspeople could draw on knowledge passed down over generations and implement this with the help of modern technology, but they had no answer to the new formal challenges confronting them. The importance of design, says Schmidinger, is much greater now than in former times, and the formal challenges facing craftspeople are correspondingly high.

The craftspeople in the Bregenzerwald were fortunate to have had the architects to blaze the way, revealing the kind of development a concerted approach to quality, design, and materials could produce. The realization that they were at a high level in terms of material processing, but could use some help in the design department, led a few craftsmen to launch the competition *Handwerk und Form* (Crafts and Form) on the 200th anniversary of the Andelsbucher Handwerkerverein in 1991. Participating craftspeople each chose an architect or designer – if possible from outside the region – and developed a project with this partner. “The special area where we live and work,” says Johannes Mohr, “has its advantages, but it has its pitfalls as well.” In cooperation with Wolfgang Schmidinger and based on plans by the New York architect Steven Holl, Mohr, for example, produced the chair that Holl had designed for the piano room of the dormitory he had also designed for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). If you want to keep pace with the times, you can't allow yourself to be cut off and you've always got to be aware of the danger of economic isolation and mental sloth. In the city you are more likely to pass window displays with the latest product designs, or you can go to the museum to get a general picture.

The entries to the competition *Handwerk und Form* were judged by a jury of experts according to form, usefulness, suitability for daily life, and material handling, and were exhibited in old sawmills and barns in a workshop-like atmosphere. Johannes Mohr remembers that first competition well and quotes one of the judges who criticized the “opulent alienation of an Alpine style” that “shouldn't be supported in this form.”

“You need a thick hide,” Mohr says who for our interview happens to be wearing a T-shirt that says “Mohr Polster” (Mohr Cushions). With the presentation of the results of the competition, the trades and crafts industry received quite a bit of attention and coverage from the public and the press. Mohr sees this as the event that got the ball rolling: in the years to come, our most pressing question would be how to bolster the trades and crafts businesses and give them a collective identity.

#### **From below and from above or when entrepreneurial dedication meets an economic policy initiative**

The efforts of the craftspeople were not in vain, for in the second half of the 1990s help arrived in the form of an economic policy initiative aimed at bolstering the Bregenzerwald region. Commissioned by the federal state of Vorarlberg, the *Standortinitiative Bregenzerwald* was a joint project between various partners from the public and private sector. Thus unified on a political level as a regional planning community, the initiative founded the company *Regional Development Bregenzerwald* (*Regionalentwicklung Bregenzerwald GmbH*) in 1997 in order to meet the requirements for an EU grant and to serve as an impetus and a further means of support in handling the organizational work for relevant projects. Furthermore, this coordination on a regional level also sought to prevent conflicts caused by competition, strengthen small businesses, and reduce costs for the individual communities. In cooperation with the company *Prisma*, founder of the “Impulszentrum” in the heart of the Bregenzerwald, it also worked out studies and concepts that would locate potential points of contact for cooperation.



After the so-called Cheese Route had proven successful in the agricultural and tourism sectors, focus was shifted to the trades, a major industry in the region. At the onset of the project, the general trend – with the exception of a few communities and businesses – showed declining activity on the part of the trade guilds over the past two decades. In addition, the image of trades and crafts on the whole was waning. With the trend toward mass production and new technologies, they were seen as outmoded compared to industrial production, which seemed to be the very symbol of everything that was modern. Thus trades and crafts are not perceived by society as professions “with a future”. This in turn does little to encourage young people to learn a trade, especially since higher education continues to gain importance. In this context, initiatives like the competition *Handwerk und Form* constitute a superb counterstrategy because they signal innovation and change within the given field.

The joint effort of the craftspeople, e.g. for the competition, might therefore be a potential point of departure for a regional development project if the trades and crafts associations of all the communities participated. Parallel to the theoretical evaluation, a hearing was also conducted to give the protagonists the opportunity to express their expectations and wishes for a partnership of craftspeople. The discussion was “impassioned and contentious” and called for intense mediation and heated debates, recalls Franz Rüb of the Regional Development Bregenzerwald. Among the topics of discussion were how far the partnership was to extend or what objectives it sought to pursue. For instance, it took a long time before people could agree on the form of PR work needed. Finally, they had to work out a clear concept as to what the future activities of the association would be. The political support provided an important basis for all this, Franz Rüb continues. He also emphasizes that the communities still carry out their tasks “with varying enthusiasm”, but adds that everyone, nevertheless, basically agrees that the money is being put to good use. He concludes that as a result of all this, the craftspeople took the project into their own hands and with a lot of personal dedication and hours of volunteer work they founded the association and made it work. It was the ideal example of a grassroots business initiative “from below” and the economic policy interests of a region meeting each other halfway.

The motivation behind the idea was not the notion of making up for a deficit but of strengthening existing potentials. But, Markus Faißt stresses, without the government subsidy many important achievements that the association has implemented during the five years of its existence wouldn't have been possible.

During the founding process, it became clear that the participants didn't want to form a classic cluster that would produce jointly or market its products collectively under a single label. Some suggested setting up a kind of agency that would bring craftspeople and customers together as needed. Others were opposed because, as they argued: “then all of a sudden our opinions won't count.” A network of this kind that reached into the individual corporate structures would probably have gone against the strong character of the businesspeople, some of whom were already well established at the time and a few of whom could even boast a clientele that extended to neighboring countries, the UK, and overseas. Now when the craftspeople talk about the early days, they all have to chuckle. One of the other ideas had been to start a sales organization and distribute their own joint brand. Sometimes today's members shake their heads over some of the theoretical plans proposed by the regional developers. That's a good sign, Franz Rüb says, because it shows that the craftspeople identify with their association in its current form.

Perhaps ten percent of the original plans were actually implemented, says Markus Faißt. Still, in hindsight the protracted review process is regarded in general as having been stimulating. It strengthened our self-confidence about our “Wälder existence”, Faißt explains. And he personally was “virtually forced” to think about his own situation. Discussing what one had in common with the other craftspeople and where to draw the line between one's own business philosophy and the rest of the group probably also helped get rid of fears in situations where people shared related skills or manufactured similar products. It may seem paradoxical, but a decisive step toward diversification took place between the founding of the association and the collective market launch: the craftspeople recognized that they complemented each other through their different business cultures and that this complementarity gave rise to inspiration.

### Exercising the mind **or** competitors who interact productively

The Bregenzerwald trades- and craftspeople finally founded an association in 1999. From the beginning, their credo was to be sensitive to different business and product philosophies. The name *Werkraum Bregenzerwald* stands for a collective outward presentation that signals both regional authenticity and individual freedom of movement: an arena of productivity where the individual business retains complete independence. A space needs fresh air to breathe, this was a place where exchange could take place: the will to open oneself and invite new stimuli is also reflected in the association's name (*Werkraum* = workspace). The fact that the association is not only interested in a network of its own members but one that includes institutions with the same objectives is also manifested in the choice of its location: the headquarters of the *Werkraum Bregenzerwald* can be found at the "Impulszentrum" in Egg.

Within the region, of course, the craftspeople don't need advertising because everyone here knows everyone, says the Bregenzerwald architect Hermann Kaufmann, who teaches timber construction at the University of Technology in Munich. But in general, dealers as well as architects confirm that the dominance of industrial production has led to a Europe-wide shortage of craftspeople who can guarantee precision manufacturing and are at the same time able to deliver large quantities of one-of-a-kind products at realistic prices. Today, if one wants to achieve something in this area, a Swiss dealer and business partner of a Bregenzerwald craftsman notes, one has to unite, particularly in the face of the growing competition brought on by the eastward enlargement of the EU. Not only does a collective outward presentation have a stronger effect than advertising as an individual business, but this kind of alliance builds trust because it conveys to the customer a picture of stability in both a qualitative and entrepreneurial sense. The Vorarlberg architects, too, are full of praise about the craftspeople for the process of self-examination they have willingly embarked on. And this in turn strengthens the relationship between the architects and the craftspeople.





Furthermore, the *Werkraum* can also be seen as a showcase that provides a glimpse of certain shared characteristics, regional traits: clarity of design, lack of ornamentation, strong identification with the material, and a functionality that lends the furniture flexibility, mobility, and everyday practicality. And with these traits as their trademark, the *Werkraum*, which has since expanded past its regional borders, reciprocally reinforces the region's authenticity. In the five years since the association was founded, the craftspeople have carved themselves an image as well as a market niche. *Werkraum Bregenzerwald* is a name now known far and wide.

**“We’re not a beekeepers’ union” or why quality consciousness can be hard work**

Creating a collective brand was a process that included not only the most obvious but also perhaps the most important aim of the association. The actual dynamic that has motivated the Bregenzerwald craftspeople since the 1990s is a process of self-examination: members reflect jointly on quality and seek to support each other rather than weaken each other through price wars. This objective is apparent in the three main activities of the association: the competition *Handwerk und Form*, which is now run by the *Werkraum* and is held regularly every three years; the *Werkraum*'s own journal, which is published annually; and the *Lernwerkstatt*, a workshop designed to pass on the traditional techniques of the trade.

Don't imagine the *Werkraum* as some kind of beekeepers' union, says Johannes Mohr, “where everyone agrees with everyone and you just sort of piddle around.” And Markus Faißt concurs, preferring to describe the *Werkraum* as a “marriage of convenience” rather than of love. He says it's a blend of idealism and pragmatism, which is why he never had a second thought about joining. Nobody will deny that the meetings and activities often explode into literal fights and that it costs an enormous amount of energy on top of their everyday real jobs. “A lot of times one has to jump over one's own shadow in order to recognize common strengths,” says Johannes Mohr.



But that two competitors can grow together is something all of them agree on. All of them have the will to maintain and improve the already existing quality. Faißt refers to the Wälder mentality as a “good corrective measure”. If here in the Bregenzerwald we were only to make the kind of design that sells in Milan, that would mean “something is wrong,” he says. In this sense the triennial competition *Handwerk und Form* constitutes the heart and soul of the association: it is the opportunity to present Bregenzerwald craftsmanship at regular intervals and in new and cutting-edge forms. The individual carpenters benefit directly from the connections to designers, product designers, and architects forged here. Some prototypes developed in month-long processes of experimentation have become successful products. Everyone agrees that participation in the competition raises the overall quality of the trades and crafts in the Bregenzerwald and opens new opportunities: In 2002, for example, Roland Gnaiger and Adolph Stiller conceived of a spin-off event, the exhibition *Möbel für alle / Everyone’s Furniture*, which is accompanied by its own catalogue and has already been held in Vienna and Munich, among other venues.

With the annually published journal, the *Werkraum* has created a vessel for regularly presenting its own activities and objectives in a published form, thus giving a wider audience access to internal topics of discussion. In order to create a professional outward image here as well, the *Werkraum* enlisted the skills of Harry Metzler, a graphic designer based in Schwarzenberg. He came up with an attractive, contemporary design, which association president Anton Kaufmann says should have “role model character” and serve as the *Werkraum*’s calling card, with a clear layout, succinctly rendered content, and an exquisite appearance right down to the paper it’s printed on. The journal addresses the cultural-historical roots of the trades and crafts industry in the Bregenzerwald (e.g. with reference to the Baroque architects), writes about current themes, presents competition results, and announces upcoming events. Experts in the trades and crafts field and above all in the area of product design contribute articles, making the journal an up-to-date forum.

Markus Faißt  
with “Sinus-Sonus”  
Musical instrument,  
therapeutic device | Design:  
Edgar Höscheler,  
Markus Faißt  
Production:  
HolzWerkstatt  
Markus Faißt,  
Hittisau

→  
From left to  
right: Anton,  
Josef, Alois,  
and Wolfgang  
Schmidinger

→  
Family and  
employees at  
Firma Mohr in  
Andelsbuch,  
standing from  
left to right:  
Doris Schelling,  
Christian Greußing,  
Nadezda Filipovic,  
Katharina Steurer,  
Johannes Mohr;  
and sitting:  
Andrea Mohr,  
Anna Maria Mohr,  
Regina Feurstein







### Back to the future **or** how one cooperation leads to another

The *Werkraum*'s contemplation of history isn't just theory. It has given rise to the *Lernwerkstatt*, in which apprentices are given hands-on instruction in the old techniques of the trade. The centuries-old houses in the Bregenzerwald are a daily challenge for the trades and crafts businesses. Often, when it comes to renovating old buildings, the craftsmen are the first and most important contact persons for private homeowners. The more a craftsman knows about old techniques, the more likely he will be able to influence the owner's opinion in favor of restoration according to monument preservation considerations. The old techniques, however, are carried out in a contemporary form, i.e. using modern technological equipment and know-how.

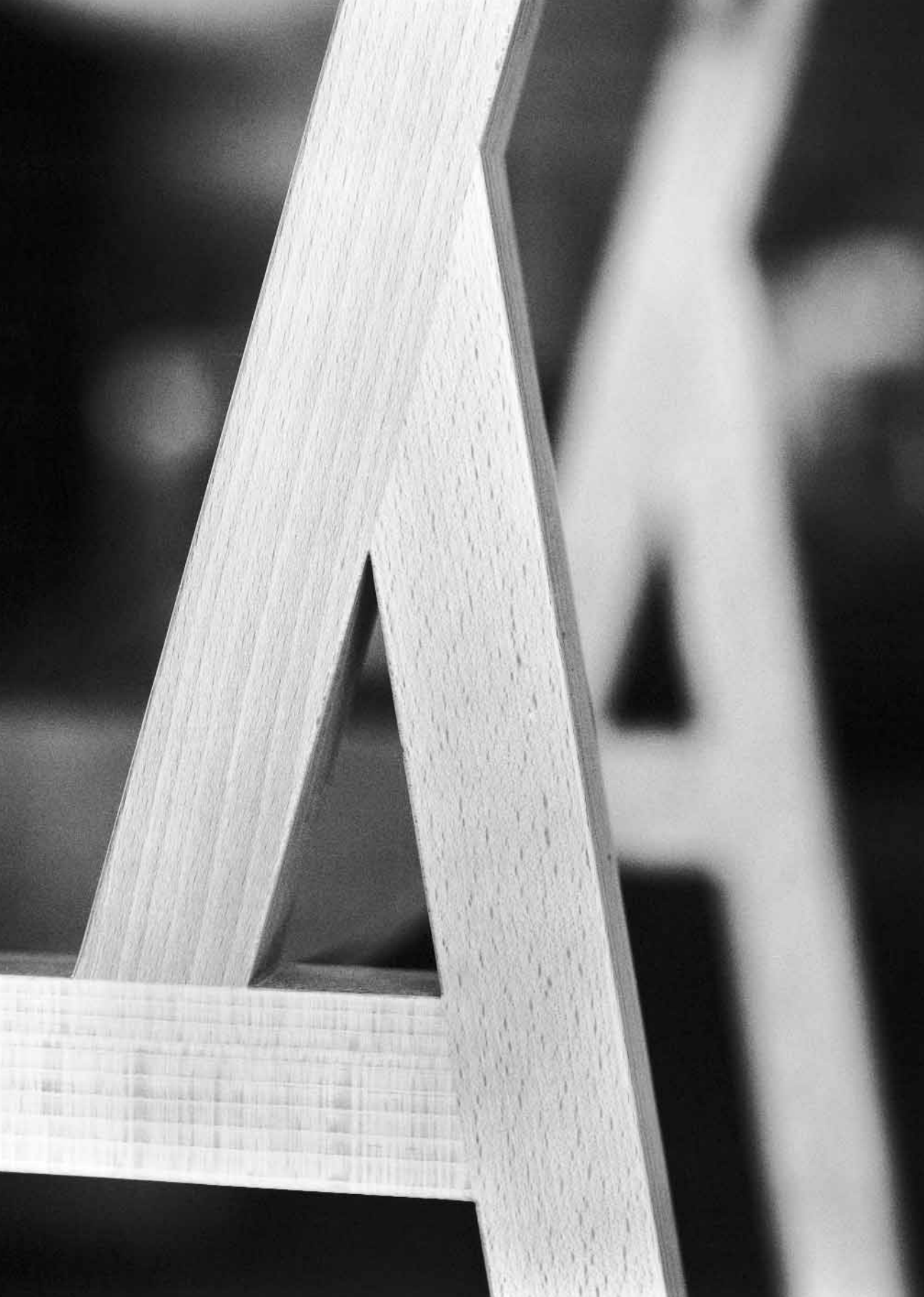
The *Werkraum* has found a partner in the community of Alberschwende, which years ago formed a committee to improve the design of the town center. The community made a building available that provides the opportunity for instruction based on a real project. An empty, hundred-year-old barn in the center of town is being renovated by apprentices and retired masters. Once restoration is complete, the building will be available to the community of Alberschwende and to the *Werkraum* Bregenzerwald as a multi-purpose hall and display room for exhibitions. A project that in the name of fostering traditions, technological progress, and vocational training allows cooperation between politicians, monument conservation authorities, and the *Werkraum*, stresses the importance of cooperation between young and old, and offers the attractive practice-oriented learning site of an old building.

Despite all political support, it still quite amazing that such "totally different characters with such divergent interests" (Johannes Mohr) have banded together as a group that is more than merely a trade guild because it formulates objectives, discusses questions of quality, and reflects on the future and on ensuring the continuation of the trade. And in these qualities the predominant mentality in the Bregenzerwald certainly provides a positive environment. Thanks to this, the local craftspeople have developed a healthy sense of self-confidence and the capacity for self-criticism, without which the willingness to cooperate couldn't have developed. According to Hermann Kaufmann what is most important about the *Werkraum* Bregenzerwald is the fact

Michael Beer  
(left) and Michael  
Vögel, apprentices  
at HolzWerkstatt  
Markus Faißt,  
Hittisau







that the craftspeople see themselves as an interest group and define common goals for themselves and not so much the publicity factor. Through their willingness to talk to each other, the craftspeople also indirectly strengthen their partnerships. The mentality of the diligent little house builder also has its negative aspects: there is the danger of leading a reclusive existence that prevents you from being able to see beyond your own garden fence. Much has already changed in the way group members deal with each other, says Wolfgang Schmidinger, who used to outsource work to other workshops even before there was a *Werkraum*. It used to be that if he got an order that went beyond his capacity, he would turn it down; whereas now, he'll usually accept it and incorporate other workshops into the project, or he'll refer the client to one of his colleagues. The *Werkraum Bregenzerwald* is an outward presentation that also, and to no small extent, produces inward effects.

Chair "Delta"  
Design: Christian  
Steiner, Vienna  
Production:  
Schmidingermodul,  
Schwarzenberg

### Founding

In 1999, some one hundred workshops banded together to form the association *Werkraum Bregenzerwald*. Following a consolidation process it now consists of approx. 65 members. There are seven people on the board of directors, three of which represent the Bregenzerwald regions Vorderwald, Mittelwald, and Hinterwald. One third of the members are carpenters or represent the timber-working trade in a broader sense; in addition to one bespoke tailor, there are also a few locksmiths and crafts-people from other sectors. Most of these workshops small enterprises with less than 10 employees.

### Activities

The association's main activities are the competition *Handwerk und Form* (Craft and Form) held once every three years and the publication of its annual journal. The *Lernwerkstatt* intends to teach apprentices the old techniques of the trade in a contemporary fashion.

An important platform is the website with links and useful information, news-groups, upcoming events, an apprenticeship openings list, and a members list with links to their own company websites.

The association organizes regular lectures and discussions on business law, structural issues, and interdisciplinary subjects. A medium-term goal is the planning of a permanent exhibition on the Vorarlberg master Baroque architects.

Felt cube  
Design and  
Production:  
Johannes Mohr,  
Andelsbuch

→

Chair strung  
with leather  
cord | Design:  
Johannes Mohr,  
Andelsbuch  
Production:  
Anton and  
Johannes Mohr,  
Andelsbuch

→

Chair "Hop"  
Design: Lorenzo  
Merani, Genoa  
Production:  
Schmidingermodul,  
Schwarzenberg









### Financing

According to the company *Regional Development Bregenzerwald* (Regional-entwicklung Bregenzerwald), the government-funded start-up capital for developing the project – consulting, discussion leader/s, services, etc. – amounted to 110,000 euros (50% EU LEADER II, 15% state, 15% local, remainder from sponsors and private companies). Financing for the first three years came to approx. 100,000 euros annually (one third each from local, EU/state, and membership dues). The Bregenzerwald is classified by EU funding measures as a target 2 area, i. e. region eligible for secondary priority funding. Current financial support received from the state of Vorarlberg (one third) and the EU (two thirds) amounts to 30% of the budget to be reported annually. The *Werkraum* headquarters are staffed by a part-time employee. The competition *Handwerk und Form* is relatively expensive due to space rental, jury, infrastructure, but these costs can be covered almost completely by revenue from advertising and entrance fees.

### The design competition *Handwerk und Form*

With the intention of drawing inspiration from outside the region, a group of Bregenzerwald craftspeople launched a design competition in 1999 – eight years prior to the founding of the *Werkraum Bregenzerwald*. The guidelines called for a craftsperson and a designer to team up in producing a prototype that was to fulfill the highest standards both in craftsmanship and formal design.

The furniture and everyday articles produced in this way were judged by a professional, paid jury of experts. The results were then presented to a wider public in a collective exhibition under the title of *Handwerk und Form*. The success the competition had with the general public and experts, convinced the craftspeople that a collective presentation platform would be desirable in many respects and fueled the idea that eventually led to the founding of the future association. Thus it can be said without exaggeration that the competition *Handwerk und Form* was an important catalyst for the founding of *Werkraum Bregenzerwald*. After its creation in 1999, the *Werkraum* was put in charge of the competition, and the organization of this triennial event has since become one of the *Werkraum*'s main activities.

### Intensive collaboration between architects and product designers

The original competition procedure proved positive and was adopted permanently: a craftsperson seeking to participate finds a designer to work with – if possible from outside one's own region, in order to introduce new impulses. The collaboration is seen by both sides as extremely beneficial and inspiring. Still, one must be aware of the time and mental energy involved for all participants: the design work on the prototype takes place alongside normal business operations and is, according to past experience, extremely time and energy consuming. The entire process until completion of the prototype often takes months of exchange between craftsman and designer in order to harmonize practical construction methods and theoretical design principles. Quite a few prototypes created for the competition have since been manufactured on a small scale and have thus provided a partial compensation for the enormous investment of effort. Often, however, the prototypes must be adapted for the market in order to be able to sell them at a realistic price. The attractiveness of the competition, thus, has less to do with economic considerations; rather it can be seen as a stimulus to promote innovation and formal progress. This represents a future potential not to be taken lightly because the competition expresses the will to maintain not only a high level of craftsmanship but also cutting-edge design.

The competition *Handwerk und Form* is a good example of the fact that financial support doesn't necessarily just increase expectations, but can on the contrary also stimulate personal initiative and investment. Price competition between the individual workshops or businesses is mitigated by the solidarity of an innovative environment in which mental mobility forms a basis for the future. As a side effect, this might also produce a social dynamic, as demonstrated with *Werkraum*, that leads to cooperation and collaboration in other areas as well.



## Key project insight

- The *Werkraum Bregenzerwald* reinforces the existing strengths of the region: high standards of quality, strong entrepreneurial spirit, self-confidence of the craftsman, openness to dialogue.

- It counteracts the weaknesses of the trades and crafts industry – lack of design impulses, poor public relations know-how.

- This collaboration promotes the awareness that the forces working in different directions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can converge and interact in a productive, energy-laden context. This lets the members present themselves as a collective industry without impeding the growth and development of different business philosophies.

- The design competition exposes the craftspeople to constructive and formal innovations.

- The competition guidelines of submitting a prototype developed as a team leads to intensive cooperation between the craftsman and the designer, usually an architect. This continually gives rise to new contacts that go beyond the framework of the competition.

- In the Bregenzerwald there is a tradition of intense contact between craftspeople and regional architects. In general, this close, fructifying cooperation – kept alive not least by the competition *Handwerk und Form* – is an interesting strategy for regions with a strong building trade.

stool|box  
“Fatty-Containers”  
Design: Harri  
Koskinen, Helsinki  
Production:  
Schmidingermodul,  
Schwarzenberg

←  
“Sexy Sofa”  
Design:  
Peter Zumthor,  
Haldenstein  
Production:  
Johannes Mohr,  
Andelsbuch

