Making Difference
Reflections on teaching "Architectures of Gender"

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In this essay we reflect on our experiences of collaboratively conceiving and teaching the tripartite seminar series "Architectures of Gender," held at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zürich as part of our appointment to the Visiting Lectureship of the Theory of Architecture between 2017 and 2019. Doing so, we will first address the particular institutional and disciplinary context in which our course sought to intervene, before sketching out some of its wider ambitions, contents and methods. In closing, we consider the legacy and contribution of our seminar to discourse within the department—given its disappearance from the curriculum after we left the school.

To start, a few words to situate ourselves: One of us trained in architecture, coming to this discipline—using the contemporary jargon of institutional diversity—from a "non-traditional background," and later transitioned to architectural history and theory within the Anglo-Saxon academic system. The other is an art historian with an interest in contemporary spatial practices as well as the relationship between art and architecture, having lived and worked in Japan for several years before teaching at an art and design college prior to joining the architecture faculty of the ETH Zürich. In different ways, our personal and professional histories have shaped our way of navigating this peculiar academic setting, which we joined with a sense of excitement but also bewilderment. Our *modus operandi* as researchers and, foremost, as pedagogues was driven by this productive friction with our day-to-day work environment. Understanding our labor as a form of practice that critically engages with its context and seeks to transform it, we act in a collaborative, transdisciplinary and transversal manner.

Before working together, we were both active members of a large grassroots initiative called the Parity Group, which came together in 2014 and

sought to address the severe underrepresentation of women and general lack of diversity at all levels of the Department of Architecture at the ETH (and beyond). This absence was present throughout this institution, from leadership positions and as role models to the subjects of research and objects of study in an overwhelmingly European, male-focused curriculum. Through its annual symposia and action-oriented workshops—called the Parity Talks (2016–2019)—this transient and large group has spun a dense web of relations to other individuals and collective actors who advocate affirmative change in our discipline.[1] Discussions around pedagogy were part and parcel of its institutional activism from the outset, with the idea of an interdepartmental seminar focusing on issues of gender first circulating "in the air" in 2016.[2]

When we conceived "Architectures of Gender" in the summer 2017, we were not aware that there had been previous efforts to introduce gender as an issue into the curriculum at the ETH. Unbeknownst to us, there was a forgotten history of researching and disseminating the contribution of women to the production environment at this institution. Under the direction of Eliana Perotti and Katia Frey, a research group investigated the architectural theory and pedagogy of Flora Ruchat-Roncati and has been crucial in unforgetting this history.[3] This has been particularly insightful at a time when the department's once progressive past—Ruchat-Roncati was the first woman to be appointed to full professor at the ETH Zürich in 1985, two years after an exhibition showcased the work of the pioneering Swiss female architect, Lux Guyer—came to haunt the school, as criticism and controversies mounted around strategic professorial appointments.[4] Apart from Ruchat-Roncati, whose preserved lecture notes testify to her commitment to showcasing the work of women architects, such as Eileen Gray, the seminal contribution on the part of Petra Stojanik and her elective course *Frauen in der Geschichte des*

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1   For an account of the Parity Group and its activism until 2018 see: Lange/Malterre-Barthes (2018).

2   To that end, one of the authors and Emily Eliza Scott chaired a roundtable salon on feminist pedagogies at the 13th AHRA international conference Architecture & Feminisms at KTH Stockholm in November 2016. See: Lange/Scott (2017).

3   See their two edited volumes in the series *Theoretikerinnen des Städtebaus* (Women Theorists of Urbanism): Frey/Perotti (2015)(eds.); Frey/Perotti (2019)(eds.).

4   See the monographic issue "Flora Ruchat-Roncati. Architektur als Netzwerk" in *werk, bauen + wohnen*, (2017); and Frey/Perotti (2018).

Bauens (Women in the History of Architecture) must be mentioned as well.[5] Stojanik initially joined the department in the mid-1980s as part of Roncati's team and worked independently as an assistant professor for design from 1993 to 1996. At the same time, the *Institut gta* (*Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur* or Institute for History and Theory of Architecture) also went through a period of intense retro- and introspection, as 2017 saw its fiftieth anniversary. It, too, had its share of controversy regarding practices like hiring and awarding tenure to women. Its history is marked by the absence of women among its rank of full professors, with Bettina Köhler's short tenure as assistant professor between 1996 and 2002 providing the only exception. A statistical analysis by Sarah Nichols and Ita Heinze-Greenberg, presented as part of the *gta50* exhibition, also exposed the predominance of male figures as dissertation topics in the 198 completed theses. Not a single one was supervised by a woman professor.[6] After Petra Stojanik's important work of documenting women's contribution to the built environment all but disappeared—if not from research, then from teaching, and following the departure of these ground-breaking women from the department around 2000,[7] this means of inquiry has recently been revived by colleagues such as art historian Dora Imhof through her oral history courses and Silvia Claus, former director of the Master of Advanced Study (MAS) in History and Theory of Architecture.[8]

Our course, however, remained distinct from these efforts. Supplementing, rather than contrasting, the "herstory" mode of including women into canonical narratives, "Architectures of Gender" introduced the knowledge developed by gender and queer studies into theory and design studio practices, bringing with it the potential to deconstruct long-accepted notions that form the foundation of this discipline. Across its three iterations, the seminar set out to study architecture's role in the social and material construction of (binary) gender in the modern era. Following contemporary thinkers

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5   Stojanik (1995). It is also worth noting that figures like the art historians Irene Nierhaus and Dorothee Huber also published essays in the series *Beiträge zum Diplomwahlfach Frauen in der Geschichte des Bauens*, edited by Stojanik between 1994 and 1996.

6   Nichols (2019).

7   Of course, others deserve to be mentioned, as well, such as Barbara Zibell.

8   At the time of writing the website/database of the MAS seminar and research project *Frauen Bauen* was under construction. See: http://www.schweizerarchitektinnen.ch, accessed on March 9, 2021.

such as Paul B. Preciado, we were interested in asking how architecture not only houses gendered bodies, but also—somewhat paradoxically—plays a role in the constitution of those bodies, and their corresponding subjectivities.[9] Michel Foucault's concept of "political technology" proved useful here. With the former he sought to describe the complex protocols, arrangements and apparatuses that not only give stability and meaning to social institutions, but also shape modern subjectivity by acting on, as well as operating through, the body. We see architecture as such a form of technology, where modern self(-hood) and power intersect. Despite the seminar's focus on close readings of theoretical and historical texts, our goal was to cultivate discussion. Rather than resort to simple answers or hide behind "neutrality," we sought to develop an atmosphere of critical questioning. This entailed shifts in perspective in order to destabilise fixed meanings and undo the "invisibility work"[10] that sustains normalization—not only in architectural discourse, but also in the unquestioned customs and codes of everyday behaviour within a predominantly masculine, white, heterosexual, European academic environment. The encounter with a range of texts from different authors and various architectural case studies provided productive openings to re-think the process of mutual co-construction between architecture and its human subject(s).

Making Difference: Revisiting gender, separate spheres, challenging narratives *(Fall Semester 2017)*

If built structures do not necessarily represent sexual difference, how exactly did they create and maintain separate spheres? Why does modernity's seemingly neutral architecture, modelled after a universal image of the ideal man, create—above all—exclusions? These are some questions that motivated us to propose a seminar on the intricate relationships of specific gender constructs, stereotypes and spatializations. (Figure 1) In order to deconstruct normative programs and protocols, the course aimed at an in-depth understanding of the matter in which unconscious daily behaviour

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9   Kogan (2010).

10   Boys (2018).

Figure 1: Poster, Seminar: Making Difference. Architectures of Gender. ETH Zürich, Faculty of Architecture, Fall Semester 2017, based on art by Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Poster Design: Blanka Major.

and language re-produce heteronormative space in architectural plans and practices. Acknowledging the relevance of performativity in architecture, we analysed specific types of gender-segregated spaces. To accomplish this, we chose a group of texts whose authors have tried to de-normalize the built environment. These texts enabled us to sharpen our attention to the implicit meanings that are embodied in spaces and descriptions of them as well as to improve our analytical abilities over the course of the seminar, which had three-parts: A) gender, sexuality and separate spheres; B) queer lives de-naturalizing normative space; and C) methodological approaches and the plurality of voices in different waves of feminism since the 1960s. Regarding the theme of gender, sexuality and separate spheres, we acknowledge that spatial segregations manifest a range of different intersectional or discriminatory attitudes. One of them is the stereotype of the biologically rooted, gender binary and sexual identity/orientation, deconstructed since the 1990s by gender theorist Judith Butler, among others.[11] Through the centuries, several moral presumptions and prescriptions have shaped and co-produced a set of behavioural rules, specifying how bodies should inhabit and use private and public spaces.[12] A telling example is the use of bathrooms in Switzerland: Even if almost everybody is quite used to share a toilet with people of different sexes at home, regulations and hence installations in Switzerland—as well as until recently in many Western nations, impose a binary separation in public and semi-public spaces such as restaurants. We took the investigation of the conditions on campus focusing on the Department of Architecture at the ETH. First, the students examined the regulations regarding toilets in public buildings. Then they experimented with the signage of the bathrooms within the faculty building and documented the reactions of the passers-by to these changes. Finally, they counted the number of students and employees, comparing the proportionality of men's, women's, and gender-neutral toilets.

Turning to the question of queer lives and the de-naturalization of normative space, we asked, along with the English philosopher Sara Ahmed: How do the spatialities of a non-heterosexual life look like? After all, what most people perceive through their privileged experience as their "comfort zone" is largely moulded on everyday heteronormative assumptions of gen-

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11 Butler (1990), "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," 6–16.

12 Preciado (2004).

der roles.[13] Beyond these "comfort zones," one discovers non-compliant bodies that appropriate specific locations in the urban fabric, transforming them into safe spaces. A screening of Wu Tsang's film *Wildness* (2012) organised with the students at Helden Bar, one of the long-standing, weekly gay-bars in Zürich, offered an excellent opportunity not only to personally connect to the founders of the gay-rights movement in this city, but also to learn about their perspective on urbanism and the transient nature of such "safe spaces." It also allowed students to gain first-hand experience with a non-normative community without objectifying and exoticizing its members.

Regarding the methodological approaches and the plurality of voices in different waves of feminism since the 1960s, it was necessary to discuss the nature of historiography, that is, how the history and criticism of architecture is conceived and communicated. What are the theoretical positions and names of architects who represent what we consider the architectural canon? How do positivist objectivity and a universalist perspective construct the impression of a researcher's seemingly neutral voice? What are the strategies to enhance knowledge that go behind this purported neutrality? How do we build our stories and devise analytical models? In order to do this, do we need to rely on key heroic figures, or can we talk about collectives, constellations and networks instead?

Care work: Ecologies of care and interdependent bodies
(Fall Semester 2018)

We continued the series in Winter Semester 2018, centering our seminar on "reproductive labor," which is necessary for all human production, architecture included. (Figure 2) The procreative and nurturing capacity of the female body has too often been treated as a prerequisite for the expropriation of women's unpaid work, in the context of reproduction and more widely. This normalization not only devalues all kinds of care and maintenance at the emotional level but also makes it invisible and pushes it into oblivion. So, we wondered: How has this attitude towards feminine care and reproduction informed planning, from the design of single-family houses to the layout of cities? The critical analysis of philosopher Nancy Fraser provided us

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13 Ahmed (2004), "(Dis)comfort and Norms," 146–155.

with a framework to answer this question. In decrying the present-day conditions of "late Capitalism," she speaks about a crisis in care work that affects a whole range of interdependent services, in particular, the "global chains of care."[14] Fraser's analysis ties in with earlier critiques of capitalism's dependence on unpaid reproductive work, notably those found in Silvia Federici's early text "Wages against Housework."[15] Addressing this issue from another perspective, Ruth Schwartz-Cowan's socio-anthropological studies trace the (psychological) effects of a supposed technological or industrial revolution in the household on the workload and expectations of "housewives" since the 1920s. Schwartz-Cowan ultimately provides tools for critically discussing not only historical developments but also a means to evaluate the promises of contemporary smart home technologies.[16]

Another issue that Fraser addresses concerns the consequences of the division of labor in two-wage households, where both partners engage in professional activities outside the home, thus requiring someone else to perform the domestic tasks for remuneration. To meet this demand, migrants entrust their children and elderly parents to other family members and then perform domestic work elsewhere in their country or abroad for wealthy families. The majority of these migrants are women. They range from unskilled domestic workers to trained health services personnel. Rather than creating conditions that could facilitate the evolution of the organization and valuation of these personal services, the importation of labor displaces the problem by not addressing the unfair distribution of these tasks within the home.[17] These interdependencies create specific spatializations. In Hong Kong, the ephemeral space that regularly surfaces at outdoor gatherings of domestic workers on their day off from work is one example. In order to reflect on how these issues structure our built environment, we assigned small research projects in Zürich. These included: An investigation into whether and how Zürich's development strategy (Zürich 2040) considered aspects of gender and care; the social and spatial distribution of care work in different communal housing models; Swiss research and development of smart home technologies and automated care solutions; architec-

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14   Fraser (2016).

15   Federici (1975; reprint 2012).

16   Schwartz-Cowan (1976).

17   Fraser (2016).

tural projects for people with disabilities; the history of the HIV-Lighthouse hospice in Zurich; and the mapping of maintenance regimes and networks in the HIL building, which is home to the ETH Zürich's architecture department on the Hönggerberg campus. The aim of this research was to further develop analytical tools to evaluate architecture through the lens of gender. These projects resulted in stimulating students to reflect on the lifestyles and everyday experiences that unfold in their architectural designs and within buildings. However, we know very well that a more equitable and fair distribution of reproductive tasks, for example, a revaluation or—even more—an appropriate remuneration for all kinds of maintenance and care work, does not depend solely on architectural design. Nevertheless, the architecture we propose reflects our social attitudes and expectations, while it imposes them onto the people who use it.

body_building: Bodies of knowledge / knowledge of bodies
(Spring Semester 2019)

Our encounter with non-normative bodies by way of the mini symposium on interdependence[18] and the design of spaces with bodily difference rather than an "ideal user" in mind prompted us to think more deeply about the concept of the body in and through architecture. For this reason, we devoted the entire third semester to questions concerning the gendered body, and its metaphorical and material (re)building in the contemporary era of technologically enhanced living. (Figure 3) While once again cultural and social theories provided the critical framework and tools to understand notions of "difference" and "care" in their spatial dimension, during this semester, histories and philosophies of science and technology took center stage. Above all, Donna Haraway's subversive re-reading of the technocratic figure of the "cyborg" and its emancipatory transformation to counter gender bias, binary

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18 On the notion of interdependence see Kathryn Abrams' article that discusses the encounter (a stroll through San Francisco's Mission district) between disability activist Sunara Taylor and the philosopher Judith Butler in Astra Taylor's documentary film and later book *The Examined Life* (2008). (Abrams (2011)).
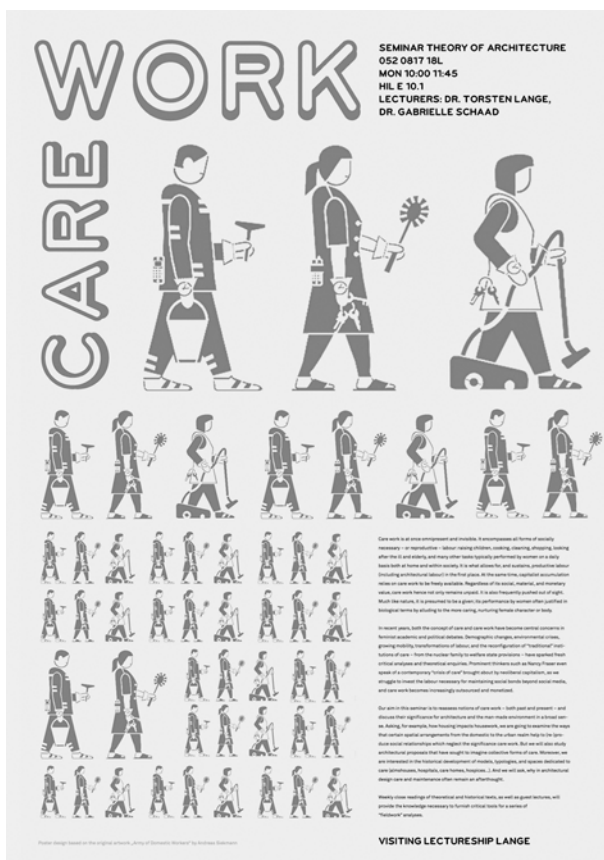
Figure 2: Poster, Seminar: Care Work. Ecologies of care and independent bodies. ETH Zürich, Faculty of Architecture, Fall Semester 2018, based on art by Andreas Siekmann. Poster Design: Blanka Major.

constructions, the "reproductive matrix" and essentialist understandings of nature, became a key reference.[19]

Humanoid figures—half-living fleshy body, half machine—have haunted the (architectural) imaginary and its discourses for a long time, often serving distinctly utopian or dystopian narratives. The same counts for the idea of architecture and technology more broadly as extensions to the body and its capacities. Likewise, if the human body did indeed serve as a model for architecture, the latter has also contributed to the former's construction, especially in the modern era, through techniques of measuring, norms and standards. We therefore explored the following question: How does this relationship change in the present day, as the boundaries between human body and technology increasingly blur, and the presumed integrity of the body becomes subject to debate and alteration?

Taking recent theorisations of "embodiment" in feminist, queer-, critical race- and disability studies as our point of departure, we problematized the body as a historical and cultural construct, and asked: To what extent can its un- and re-building in certain forms of trans* embodiment bear the utopian potential to destabilise associated binary understandings, like nature vs. culture? Which concepts of the body undergird these visions? How did they historically come to be? What drives the desire to leave behind humanistic ideas of the body in favour of a "posthuman" future? and: Is this posthuman future already inscribed in the vibrant material assemblages that constitute our embodied experiences?

To answer these questions, we looked at ways in which modernist architecture declared the "normal" body—a highly artificial construct based on statistical averages drawn from anthropometric data since the nineteenth-century advent of "Human Science"—its aesthetic ideal. Depicted in drawing standards and measured human figures and thus becoming legible to architects and designers, "Man, the measure of all things" turned out to have severe implications for all those who were rendered "nonconforming" by this new "normate template," as Aimi Hamraie has shown—be they female, racialised, or otherwise pathologized human beings.[20] Given this effacing, disabling and levelling character of our modern-day material and built environment, it is not surprising that, since the late-1980s, techno-feminists have seen a great emancipatory

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19 Haraway (1985).

20 Hamraie (2017).

potential in the advent of cyberspace and virtual reality. It is these disembodied visions and their critique (as phallogocentric) found in the writings of feminist philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray, who advocated a return to corporeality and lived spatiality, that we turned to next. After considering the experience of living and interacting with machines and (medical) technologies in a shift from prosthetic to augmented bodies—which, needless to say, comes with its own contradictions around standardisation, technical compliance, and fixedness/user-friendliness—we focused on techniques of altering one's own body. We also looked at the spaces in which these self-modifications take place: Marcia Ian's account of female body building practices in a public sports facility and Paul B. Preciado's auto-theoretical story of using "testogel" in the safety of their home. The semester ended with a look to the future. We engaged with Jack Halberstam's reading of Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitectural" projects as a blueprint for recent art and spatial practices, those by trans* artists in particular that encourage us to "unbuild gender" in dialogue with the notion of the "posthuman" and considered Laboria Cubonik's call to "denaturalize" as found in the Xenofeminist Manifesto. In addition to Jack Halberstam's guest lecture (Figure 4), a presentation by the architect Joel Sanders introduced us to his recent "Stalled!" project about the design of gender-neutral and inclusive public bathrooms.[21]

Teaching to transgress: In lieu of a conclusion

Over the course of the two-year period, the "Architectures of Gender" seminar series and its occasional side events allowed us to build transversal connections both inside and outside our institution, for example, with design studios like Adam Caruso's "Hidden Interiors" (Fall 2018), which investigated gender, among other issues, to understand the politics of domestic space. The most rewarding of those collaborations, however, was with the Future Clinic for Critical Care, a performance-based event series around questions of care organised by disability scholar and activist Nina Mühlemann, the comedian and performer Edwin Ramirez, in collaboration with artist Jeremy Wade.[22] Together with students and other colleagues, like Li Tavor, we participated

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21   See https://www.stalled.online, accessed on September 7, 2020; Sanders (2017).

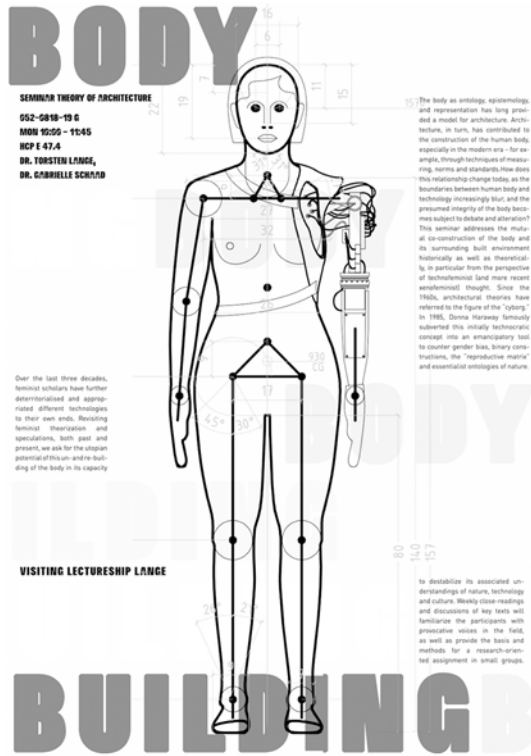22   See https://www.futureclinic.org, accessed on September 7, 2020.

Figure 3: Poster, Seminar: body_building: Bodies of knowledge / knowledge of bodies. ETH Zürich, Faculty of Architecture, Spring Semester 2019, based on art by Thomas Carpenter. Poster Design: Blanka Major.

as the ETH Critical Care Collective in two events that focused on the theme of home (February 2019) and the institution (November 2019).

Traces of our conversations with students remain visible not only in the "Making Difference" seminar blog, which became a space for participants to test ideas and practice their writing skills.[23] They have also informed the approximately ten elective theses that address different aspects of gender and architecture—from biographical studies (on Lina Bo Bardi and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky), to historical analyses of modern office and residential buildings against the background of women joining the labour force, to speculative and creative enquiries into the colour pink and the gendered dimension of contemporary public space. In combination with external factors—the growth of the *Frauenstreikbewegung* (women's strike movement), in particular—these conversations have stretched far beyond the ivory tower of the ETH.[24] They amplified the voices of empowered students to engage more actively in the institution and the ongoing debates at the Parity Talks, specifically to speak up about instances of sexism and harassment or the toxic culture of the *crit*, the design consultation with a supervising instructor, and to voice their dissatisfaction with the painfully slow progress in achieving parity in professorships, the invited speakers at public events, as well as diversifying the curriculum.

Whether or not we succeeded in making a difference within this relatively short span of three semesters remains to be seen. Let's work to make sure that those who might stumble upon our modest efforts in twenty or so years will no longer feel that nothing has changed. With bell hooks we believe that "the work of transforming the academy" demands that we "embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot be easily discouraged."[25] Ultimately, only in a mutually empowering partnership between students and teachers will the transgression of outmoded patterns be achieved.

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23   See https://blogs.ethz.ch/making-difference, accessed on September 7, 2020.

24   See Schaad (2020).

25   hooks (1994), 33.

Figure 4: Jack Halberstam, Guest Lecture, ETH Zürich, Faculty of Architecture, Spring Semester 2019. Source: Torsten Lange/Gabrielle Schaad and Lisa Maillard.

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