

The Political space

This fall, the Architekturgalerie am Weißenhof in Stuttgart is showing the exhibition "Und jetzt - Akute Positionen junger Büros zu Architektur und Planung". The protagonists of the exhibition are presented here in a series of interviews. Part 3: *forty five degrees*

How are crises changing the practice of architecture? *forty five degrees* from Berlin are looking for answers beyond the conventional idea of architecture by bringing together everyday practices in connection to global narratives through performative and spatial elements. They reflect upon their own experiences and acknowledge the importance of an urgent shift in the architecture discipline for a more just and sustainable future.

A conversation with Alkistis Thomidou and Berta Gutiérrez Casaos about the exclusionary power of the established system confining space, a questioning of reductive dichotomies as well as what radical design means today and how can give us clues for the future.

Why do you call yourselves forty five degrees?

Alkistis Thomidou:

The name *forty five degrees* has a significant meaning for us. It reflects the diversity of our team, which includes professionals from Greece, Italy, France, and Spain—countries in the southern part of Europe. Some of us studied or currently live and work in northern Europe. One of our ongoing research projects explores the idea of the 45th parallel north, an imaginary line that runs across central Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black Sea. This line symbolizes the intersection of various dichotomies within Europe—social, economic, and climatic—and helps us delve into the complexities and identities within the continent. By focusing on this central yet overlooked space, we aim to understand (and challenge) the differences that characterize Europe. Still, mainly we want to stress the elements that we have in common, or how the differences can be understood as a potency and not as a burden.

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos:

The year we founded *forty five degrees*, 2020, Europe reached a new temperature record, namely 45°C. Another reason why we chose this name was to embody a multifaceted perspective that merges ecological, climatic, geographical, and geometric thinking. Our approach involves seeking inspiration from diverse sources and disciplines to enrich our practice. Ultimately, this collaboration arose from the profound shared interest in yielding spatial practice otherwise and the potential of architecture to challenge and redesign inequitable and exclusive structures—social, material, and geographical—, striving to create more accessible and just spaces for conviviality.

Ongoing crises and the end of the star architect

You also describe those events as something that has had a very personal impact on your life and career.

Alkistis Thomidou: What we have in common, is that we are part of a generation deeply affected by the 2008 crisis, mainly impacting Southern Europe through the so-called 'austerity policies'. For those of us studying architecture across Europe at that time, it marked a significant turning point in the field. We were trained to believe that architects are saviors who arrive, design grandiose forms and buildings, and reinvent the world. Since 2008, this notion has become obsolete, yet we need to find what the contemporary meaning of architecture and the role of architects are.

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: **To give a tangible example in the context of Spain,** Peter Eisenman designed the City of Culture of Galicia in the outskirts of Santiago de Compostela, when eventually during the development of the project upkeep was so costly that the public administration struggled to rise the funding needed to its completion. Over the years, the building has not met the expectations of attendance and surely has not become a cultural milestone. Interestingly, during its construction, Andrés Jaque unfolded a critical project called 12 Actions to Make the Cidade da Cultura Transparent, in which he tried to unveil the conflict that this project was generating at the regional level and make it accessible to the inhabitants. Nowadays, we witness the colossal downfall of the deconstructivist star architect figure—an entity excessively inflated in the last years, embodying a centralized cultural perspective, and symbolizing a grotesque disconnection from reality. I am of the thinking that architects did not read Derrida as he meant it, there was a great misunderstanding.

The point is that there is a huge gap between what we have been taught and what it means to be an architect today. We come from countries that had to endure severe budget cuts, people were evicted from their homes, and streets were conquered by police brutality; there was great unrest and disruption for years. All these events can't fall on deaf ears. We are a generation that has the duty to take the leap.

How do these conditions affect the practice, particularly your practice, and your opportunities to work as architects?

Alkistis Thomidou: In the last fifteen to twenty years, we have been confronted with high-speed development and unteamed growth, that has put massive resources into stabilizing a continuously dying system. This directly applies to architectural production. This system has closed off the entry points to protect itself, and this makes it difficult for young people to participate—there are concrete barriers that can be explained by economic interests or the limitation of access to commissions. But there is also a mental barrier, which consists of the fact that the old image of architects is firmly anchored in people's minds and shapes how the Architecture chambers define this image, and how access to the chambers is granted. Many practitioners have not studied in Germany, they come from all over the world, but they live and work here, and it is not a given that they are recognized as architects here. Undoubtedly, this is outdated from the contemporary ways of living and working, and this is a problem we face.

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: In the end, it is a question of culture, what is the space-making culture that we want to introduce and be welcomed to? Few people ask what it means to work outside the system, and one needs to understand this very question if one wants to transform and include a wider array of practices within it. As young generations, we see old forms of living crumbling, and we want to see what can grow from the ashes: unexpected and more diverse ways of doing than the current order. It's about creating a framework for architecture, for architects, that allows spaces for a new practice to arise, a framework that can accommodate and integrate different personalities, paths, and destinies, instead of reducing architecture to nine phases of construction.

How do you deal with the fact that there are these hard boundaries?

Alkistis Thomidou: I don't think that the title protection of the chambers is a problem per se, the chamber system is a great thing. However, the chambers have to ask themselves what the purpose of the chamber is today under the current conditions. Do they want to protect the architects or the practitioners, change the image of the profession, or is it about protecting the market, the existing order?

Being an architect today

What is your vision of architecture and design?

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: We are interested in what 'radical design' could mean today in a context of deep crises and exhaustion of life and nature.

What does "radical" mean to you in this context? Doesn't claiming radicality run the risk of paying too little attention to the context, the connections, because if you're radical you position yourself outside of them?

Alkistis Thomidou: Yes, you're right, "radical", like many other words, is in danger of becoming a buzzword, overused, just as it has happened with sustainability, or with so-called green architecture: business as usual, but with integrated solar cells and vertical gardens.

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: We, therefore, use 'radical' in a very specific way: departing from our ongoing research called Radical Rituals. Here, 'radical' works in relationship to 'rituals' as a bonded binomial. There is a force that emerges from the societal layer and holds the power to transform the space.

Alkistis Thomidou: Through this project we are looking at case studies throughout Europe, along the 45°N parallel. Through field trips and interaction with local agents, we examine different practices of commoning that tackle global challenges in a situated manner and through the lens of community and territory. Those practices can be understood as *rituals* insofar as they allow these communities to grow and establish and thus allow their members, to react to the impositions of everyday life. We call these rituals *radical* because they could point to possible changes and a potential new state of things.

Can you illustrate the impact of this meaning in the spatial context in which you work?

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: In this context, we are not talking about urban planning or architecture, but about spatial practices at large. For us this terminology includes the many actors who conform and shape space. We are interested in these relationships between people, including non-human actors and anthropogenic effects, and we look at them across scales. This holistic way of looking at space is important to us so that we can imagine other ways, forms, platforms, and other communities. We find ourselves in a hard political and social context where space is becoming more and more exclusive, and privatized; where the control over bodies and societies has significantly increased. We defend that, in this threatening context, there are surely many ways of escaping this enclosure; perhaps, what would be radical today is to stop paying the extremely inflated rents in our cities so people could negotiate fairer living conditions overcoming the market rules.

Alkistis Thomidou: In the end, we are always looking at how novel conditions of urbanity are necessary to create possibilities for self-organization and this kind of everyday inventiveness that frees itself from given conditions. How do people, not exclusively architects, craft spatial configurations through spontaneous appropriations, inventing tools for developing hybrid spatial and organizational typologies that exemplify and, most importantly, perform spatial agency: what can we learn from them?

Creating contexts

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: We quickly realized that solutions don't come solely through design. It's not about designing or fixing places from an outsider's perspective, which presumes there's a problem to be solved. Instead, we wanted to learn from the forms of living rooted in the world, some pre-existent—even for centuries—or emergent configurations, as deeply transformative paradigms. We also have personal experience with the struggles embedded in these spaces, where conflicts swiftly impact the politics of the space. This intersection of space and politics expands the theoretical field rapidly.

Are there any role models or references that your work builds on?

Alkistis Thomidou: Well, as we are explaining, the world as it is with its many actors and places is our model. But otherwise, we often revisit works from the 1970s and 80s across various disciplines. For example, the radical architecture movement in Italy posed questions that are still relevant today, though often overlooked. For us, it's crucial to return to this period before the hyper-development of neoliberalism, as it contains traces of imaginative theses expressed in diverse forms.

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: We draw inspiration from a wide range of creative practitioners, not limited to the realm of architecture, but also from arts, science, philosophy, and political science. Artists who work at the intersection of arts and architecture, challenging conventional views of architectural practice, particularly inspire us. Figures such as Isa Genzken, Michel Asher and Judy Chicago, to name a few. But also contemporary thinkers such as Marina Otero Vreizer or Tim Ingold.

How would you describe your way of working?

Alkistis Thomidou: Through interdisciplinary collaborations and a multi-level approach across different spatial scales, we try to create frameworks and contexts rather than solely fixed-built spaces. Our work transcends the architectural scale or the scale of objects, incorporating reflections on physical, social, and economic dimensions. As a team, we collaborate both within and outside forty five degrees, bringing diverse experiences and expertise together in a complementary way. Additionally, we engage with other experts to adapt to each project's scope. For instance, we are currently collaborating with an acoustic engineering studio on the realization of music studios for a creative agency in Berlin.

Berta Gutiérrez Casaos: It is always important for us to consider what we can contribute as a connective element. One example of this is the installations we created for the 30th anniversary of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Despite the tight budget, our project aimed to develop, mobile infrastructures and other elements, that wouldn't permanently redesign spaces, but rather facilitate outdoor use. These flexible installations were designed to invite interaction and play. Given the institution's limited storage space, we planned the installation to serve other purposes beyond the long weekend of festivities. It was intended to be multifunctional, adaptable for various uses, and open to different interpretations.

Alkistis Thomidou: Ultimately, in research, pedagogy, and practice—be it scenographic, architectural, or conceptual—we are driven by the question of what architecture is today and the potential role of design practice in becoming an emancipatory project for societal transformation. This inquiry has united us, along with our shared belief in space as an enabler of life, across diverse media and contexts.

forty five degrees is an international *collaborative* practice for research and design. It was founded in 2019 by Alkistis Thomidou, Berta Gutiérrez Casaos, and Giulia Domeniconi. The studio questions current spatial practices and seeks new methods, resources, and means. Through research, design, and artistic experimentation, they analyze physical, social, and economic interdependencies. The members of *forty five degrees* are

fascinated by the inventiveness of everyday life, think about alternative models of inhabiting the world, engage in communities and networks, and push the boundaries of spatial disciplines. *forty five degrees* strive to create inclusive and accessible spaces through careful work with scale, materials, and design language.

<https://www.forty-five-degrees.com/>

The interview was conducted by Lena Engelfried, Hanna Noller, and Christian Holl on May 6, 2024.