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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. This is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it, exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La, professor of architecture and chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening.

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This episode was originally recorded prior to the pandemic and was scheduled for release in the spring of 2020. However, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the US, the GSD evacuated its campus and transitioned to remote learning. We're so sorry for this delay.

Now, as the GSD once again, resumes in-person public events on campus, we're delighted to revisit this engaging conversation and we look forward to sharing future episodes. So without further delay and hoping you are well, here is *Talking Practice* with Kersten Geers.

Joining me today is Kersten Geers, co-founder with David Van Severen of OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen and the Kenzo Tange Design Critic at The GSD. OFFICE was established in 2002, and is located in Brussels, Belgium.

The firm received the Belgian Prize for architecture and the Silver Lion at the 12th Venice Biennale. The diverse output of their practice ranges from buildings, such as private residences and industrial facilities, to essays, publications, and exhibitions.

Kersten and David have taught widely in the US and in Europe. This fall they are leading the second installment of their GSD studio focused on American architecture, titled the American Section. Welcome, Kersten.

**KERSTEN
GEERS:** Thank you, Grace. It's a pleasure to be here.

GRACE LA: I always like to start our conversations to learn a little bit more about you and David, and how you met together in Spain. And very specifically, you had mentors there, Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros. So tell me about this experience and what impact it has on you.

**KERSTEN
GEERS:** Sure. The truth about our so-called Spain encounter, there's various versions of the story. It's to say that both David and me, we studied in Ghent. And we both studied in Spain at a certain point, but never together.

So I was there studying under Iñaki and Juan, Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros. I think it must be '96 or '97. I don't exactly remember. And they had an enormous impact in the way they were looking at architecture.

I would dare to say from a very pragmatic perspective, it was very new. We came from a school in Ghent, which had quite a different orientation, very, very deep in history, interesting too, very important. But they looked at the states, they looked at certain ideas of tech architecture, high tech in a certain sense.

And so when I was there, many elements, which became important later, they brought on the table. And then two or three years later, David, in a conversation, actually, we were together in a trip. We were talking about where to go to study a year abroad.

He decided to go to Spain as well. So that was kind of, I would say, a relay. I gave the baton to David and he went there too, and he was also with Iñaki and Juan. And so that created a shared background. But we never really did it at the same time. It's interesting.

GRACE LA: Yeah. So then you met outside then?

KERSTEN GEERS: Yeah. We both studied in Ghent, so we were somehow coinciding in the school. But we were not exactly the same age. So I was about to leave the school the moment David was entering. He was there the second year.

And the real coincidence was a trip to Los Angeles, which was after my same year in Spain and before his year in Spain. Which is interesting because let's say this other, I would say, imaginary reference, LA technicolor sky, well, the whole American obsession, if you want, somehow got born there.

But of course, we were not aware of it. And Ábalos and Herreros were almost like bookends for both of us. I think it was Iñaki and Juan who somehow made me at least aware of the painting of Hockney, a bigger splash on the cover of the book of Reyner Banham, his famous book on *LA, The Architecture of Four Ecologies*.

And that created a-- it was a very powerful image. It was a powerful idea, somehow very much connected it with a way of looking at a certain architecture. LA was a topic, but it was at the same time very far away. Then in my last year in Ghent, there was a possibility to do a trip to Los Angeles.

There was an organized trip to visit the city, a trip which also David joined. Independently, we were there. And so we coincided in this trip. We realized somehow that we shared a lot of fascinations. And so in that conversation came about, what should I do next year?

So I said, well, what about Spain? I enjoyed it. I enjoyed Ábalos, Herreros. And so he went there as well and voila. I think it brought in elements which then made it much easier also to have that conversation together because ultimately, our office is very much an office where the conversation happens.

I think it's David, it's myself, and we talk. Of course, when you want to talk, it's important to share a certain amount of, I would say, basic interest, basic ideas.

GRACE LA: I think that's so critical when you're in a partnership. Maybe we could talk a little bit about that partnership. How do you, on a day-to-day level, divide responsibilities between the two of you?

KERSTEN GEERS: I think in a sense we try not to divide things. But of course, we're two different people. I think it's true that in terms of, for example, teaching education, I tend to teach a bit more than David. But it's also something which we try to keep a little bit in equilibrium because we have seen many practices of two people.

And very quickly, one becomes a cartoon and the other one as well. So say the one is the one who executes the building, the other one is the one who, I don't know, thinks the buildings. And we always thought that it would have been a very bad idea.

So perhaps based on a fictional version of Ábalos and Herreros, the practice, as we thought, it was like in the '90s. We thought it was important also for us to be in a way sit in front of each other at the table.

And to decide for the projects together, not because you share exactly the same reasons for why you like something, but let's say the drawing that was on the table is something, at a certain point, you both really very much like.

So in terms of the decisions to make in the project, that's how we have always been working. So I think there has never been a project which left the OFFICE where only David or only me worked on. That is simply not OK. Even say, if somebody is gone for a week to teach, or I don't know, maybe on holiday, I feel that you need to send something.

You need to get feedback, even if that makes things more difficult. Even if you have something, you say, oh, it's not so bad. And you know that the moment you open the conversation, things will change. But this change is necessary in order to truly feel that the project is there.

GRACE LA: I can appreciate that a great deal because in my own practice with my partner, we always have a rule that we each come to the table with our own pencil. And you cannot take the pencil from the other.

It's important that you each have a voice, and that's through the drawing or through the artifact. It's of course, less efficient at some level to be duplicating a lot of energies. On a day-to-day basis, do you find yourself, though, having to extricate, let's say, for a built project?

KERSTEN GEERS: Well, it depends really. But you see, the design can go very fast. What I think also became clearer over the years is that in a way, the design phase, if you can even call it a phase, is often a few moments.

I remember yesterday, before coming here in the morning, we went to two or three projects together. One project took probably no longer than half an hour with the project architect and the two of us. And we discussed, and I had the feeling that the project which we left on the table after our conversation was a fundamentally different one.

And we really both had the feeling we made a move. It's very good. And what's important, I think, for us, is that all projects belong to the family of the projects. And that's, of course, a very critical thing to say.

But I believe what ultimately is the result is that when the project all of a sudden seems to present itself as a family member, somehow it starts to belong to all the other projects. All of a sudden, you see the drawings and say, oh, wow, sure.

Now that makes me think a little bit of that project, but also not really because it's also a little bit like that, what we used to do in the past and so forth. And all of a sudden you think, yeah, it's a family member. And then we're both happy.

But it's very strange because I think we never start with a project saying, let's do the project like we did that project again. I think we always have this bizarre ambition to do something else. But the funny thing is that the project only starts to exist the moment we realize it is not something else anymore. So it's adopted.

GRACE LA: Yes, that it has its own individual character. When I look at your work, there's an absolutely consistent quality to it that does feel, though, very efficient in some ways. By efficient I don't mean frugal, I mean that with minimal means, you are trying to create maximal effect.

But at the same time, one would say that the work is ascetic in its character. And I think by that I mean that it has a quality of being very self-disciplined. It abstains from self-indulgence, if you will.

And do you think that that has something to do with that early training with Iñaki and Juan? Or where does that derive?

KERSTEN GEERS: I think that Iñaki and Juan had a big influence. It's true that when we look back at their projects, for example, we were invited by Giovanna Borasi of the CCA to curate one of three shows on their work when their work of their joint office arrived at the CCA and became part of the archive.

And then we looked back at that work, which was, in a way, very much part of our, say, upbringing. I think it is true, and I hope I do not insult neither Iñaki and Juan with that. But I think we both looked at the work and said, whoa, it's sometimes very clumsy, the work of Ábalos and Herreros.

It's even sometimes a little bit ugly, and perhaps consciously so. And I think we both realized that there's an aspect of their work, which really is not in ours. I think our work is far more aesthetical in a certain sense.

So I think the pragmatism we probably took from there, maybe not only from there, but certainly from there, I think there's another aspect which has maybe to do more with our interest in, say, contemporary art or perhaps yeah, the interest in the object, as a very precise thing, which makes us then also a little bit walk away from there.

Because their system, at least until the mid '90s, I believe, Ábalos and Herreros was very system obsessed in some sense, their system is an important layer in our work. But then almost in the way, I would dare to say Mies was always a specialist in showing a system, but in a way finding a very complicated way to represent it.

Because I would argue Mies's work looks systematic, but it's totally not systematic. And I think that is something which I do not think we ever consciously took from him, but which I start to see now is something we somehow share in a way, a rectangular roof or a square roof looking extremely simple.

But in a way, almost in a classicist manner, is made with all different custom-made elements so that it looks systematic. But it is not. I would say the ambiguity of architecture, where architecture looks simple but is complicated.

GRACE LA: That leads me to a statement that you made a while back. You said that a great number of buildings do not require an intricate development of the plan in order to be either socially viable or economically interesting.

You also said that architecture cannot be too ambitious, but has to be smart. It cannot be too sophisticated, but it has to be intelligent. Can you elaborate on this?

KERSTEN GEERS: I would agree with that person who said all this. But no, I think architecture is a complicated profession. I think on the one hand, the architecture we all practice, in my opinion, in our opinion, is a cultural profession.

If it does not understand that, I think it's mistaken because there's hundreds and thousands of buildings built and they have very little to do with architecture. So architecture is always, I believe, in this place where it somehow negotiates between that what it would like to be and that what it is. That's unavoidable.

If then architecture has to be smart, yes, that's true. It has to be smart, of course. It has to be economical. It has to maybe try to reduce the intervention to sometimes the envelope, the threshold. We believe it has to do that because it has a certain, I would say, responsibility.

Because as a cultural profession, as a cultural practice, sorry, it has a responsibility, but also it has that responsibility towards society. It has to do something with very little. But even if you say this, I think it always does that in full conviction, or it has to completely understand that it does that knowing that it will not really succeed.

I think architecture in some sense is the promise of the best answer, but it can not provide that answer. And I think that's very important to a certain extent, especially so when you build. You build a building and the building is the result of, say, a plan or a section, a set of very simple designs.

At the same time, the moment you build that building, the building always becomes somehow complicated because reality is complex. Places are either hot or cold. The aspects or the ideas of comfort are endlessly changing.

Something extremely simple to build turns out to be very complicated to build because what is simple or easy, or a simple construction method turns out to be a method which nobody practices anymore. So there's this endless negotiation.

And since it's already so difficult, we believe we have to make an architecture which in all its form making appears almost evident. And at the same time, and maybe that's also what I was referring to back then, it has to understand that life itself is very complex.

So we are convinced that you're unable, as an architect, to give a specific form to a specific function, to a specific use, to many things specific because they change all the time. They change because technology changes quickly.

And as an architect, you're always behind in terms of technology. But also it changes because the way people live changes quickly. It also changes because in a way, if you're ambitious about your buildings, they survive different kinds of use.

And also perhaps because we do not believe that as an architect you should manipulate or you should push or block people to use things in a certain way and not in another way.

GRACE LA: What you're saying does begin to underpin maybe some of the qualities that we see in your work, that architecture is a frame for life.

And you had mentioned that architecture without content, which is one of the themes that you've been exploring in the academic settings, starts with an ambition to investigate the possible strategies left to us when we accept the limits of our field of operation.

You have been thinking about this, I think, for a long time. But I would be really interested to understand what you construe are the limits of our field.

KERSTEN

GEERS:

Maybe it's important to give a little bit of context on how this initially silly exercise architecture without content came about. I think on the one hand, there has been always a little bit of a parallel road between the production of our office and the teaching.

I think it was important that the teaching allows for some space where in a way, an office production as experimental as you would like to be, you have to sometimes give answers very quickly. And you also work within a certain economic context. And so academia or teaching, in general, allows you to explore a little bit more.

And so this, without content, I think initially was an attempt to redefine the architectural tools, realizing that the generation before us seem to have claimed, at least that's how we felt it, that everything was possibly architecture. And it's funny because we even made our own books and our exhibition called everything architecture, but there's a word choke on this.

But this generation, which I would dare to say started with some kind of journalism and then through diagrams and all kind of promises to society in a very liberal, positivistic way, seem to embrace any possibility and say, oh, this could be architecture and that.

And I can make a reportage, and I can show this and show that. And that was very much, I would say, the Holland of the '90s and the early 2000s. I worked myself in Holland between '99 and 2005. It was very much also a sensation shared by a group of people.

And weirdly enough, we felt that the only way out, so in other words, to make architecture be interested in itself again, was perhaps to say first, if it would like to be busy with itself, maybe it should acknowledge that it's a much more narrow operation, that architecture in itself is maybe not everything, but it's only something specific.

Architecture is, in the most extreme sense, only the perimeter, or only the envelope, or only a set of aspects of the building. So the typical question being, where is the project? If you say that the vehicle of architecture is the project, but then that project itself, you have to design without compromise.

But there is always a compromise. As I said earlier, in architecture, in the actual building, there is a compromise. But the compromise might not need to be there where you intervene. But in a sense, you say within the totality of the project, of the building as such, this is important for me.

And so this idea of imposing a hierarchy in where it happens and where it doesn't happen is extremely liberating because from that moment onwards, there where you want to focus on, you can put all your energy.

GRACE LA:

So that might explain why for you there is a quality of absolute resolved, very elegant, very beautifully detailed kinds of spaces that do, in my opinion, operate at the level of frame that are about bounding spaces.

And maybe that again, that's for our audience to understand a little bit what you're trying to do with the architecture without content because you've pressurize the envelope in a way because it is the domain that the architect does control. Maybe one could say that is our finest moment of control.

And then you allow us to use that frame for, let's say, for life. This shows up in your drawings. This shows up in the collages that you make. It seems to be thematically driven through the work.

And I do think you're right that somehow it is in dialogue with certain types of challenges that we face as a field, especially coming out of the times in which you and I were both educated, which is like mid '90s and onward.

Can you elaborate a little bit on what you see as a critique of architectural education now? I'm curious because now you're running a series of studios and this theme is growing.

**KERSTEN
GEERS:**

Yeah. I think a lot is changing now. But at the same time, I think even say 6, 7, maybe 10 years ago, there was an obsession with, I would say, the virtual tools of architectural design.

In a sense, I never had much of attachment to that for the simple reason that I didn't know how to do it. So I have to be honest about this. I think ultimately, everybody is a pragmatist. You sell what you know. So we did not know 3D rendering, so we made 2D collages.

We did not know complex computer drawings, so we make simple buildings. There is a truth in there. At the same time, and that goes back to this debate about architectural culture, I believe, on the one hand, architecture, at least in my opinion, should be aware of the fact that it's, as I said earlier, it's part of a cultural legacy.

It makes a building today in relationship to every other building which has been built in the past. It's unavoidable. In the same way that when somebody makes a painting today or makes a sculpture or video art or whatever, an installation, an artist understands that she or he operates in the cultural realm of all other cultural objects made before.

You can then say these things exist. I disagree. I make something else. But even renouncing it is forging a relationship with it. And I think in architecture, it's not different.

When I was working in the Holland of the early 2000s, and also when I looked around in the schools around that period, I saw a bizarre obsession with giving solutions to problems, very often through diagrammatic gestures, then maybe mutated into very complicated virtual world.

What we believed was that-- and again, that's not just us. There's really a generation, I think, of all our friends at *San Rocco*. To name a few, Pier Paolo Tamburelli, amongst others. I think we, on the one hand, we were very much fascinated by old buildings, buildings of 20 years old, 30 years old, 100 years old, 500 years old, or even 2,000 years old.

We were wondering, but isn't it strange that in the one hand, we know very little about this? If we learn about this, it's in history lessons. It seems to be part of a general layer of cultural history, even if it's then specifically for architects. But that material seems to be totally not operational.

Whereas if you look at the work then and the work now and then talking about a span of 200 or 300 years, but also much longer, you see that much less has changed than what has stayed the same. So in a way, many of these figures, these types, these ideas are still extremely contemporary.

So for us, if you then bring that back to the question of education, what has been important, and of course, not in every studio in the same way, was to embrace what we often called, say, the ancestor as an active element.

And also, if you think about the near past, you think in the writings we did altogether for *San Rocco*, you're able to look at, say, a riser bureau, a small project by Hans Hollein. And maybe Hans Hollein has plenty of ideas about why that building was built that way.

And perhaps 20 years after the fact, said all kinds of things about that building. And maybe five years ago, well, I think he died about five years ago, but just before that he would have made a lot of claims.

And we all know authors typically endlessly revive their own or change their own appreciation about their own work and the why. And we say, no, in a way, we can just look at this object. We can see what this object is about. We can appropriate it, so to speak.

And as an appropriated object, it becomes an important element for our own thinking, our own work as a student, as a practice. And from there onwards, we can start to build up again, something. So it's a very literal, in a way, gesture.

But it's a gesture in which I think the past and the present of architecture are much closer to one another without turning into a, I would say, sometimes sickening activity of quotation. I think we overcame the generation of the '70s and the '80s too.

We do not want to revive. I'm quite critical towards what is now happening rather quickly, this neo-pomo type of idea. We used to not be able to look at Venturi-Scott Brown production. We used to all collectively not like his mother's house, but now we all like.

And so now let's quote that house. But that's not interesting. It's interesting to understand that house, to deal with that house, and to make another architecture.

GRACE LA: That's an interesting question. In some of the commentary that you've made on your own work and/or the work of studio, you've said that in a world of rapid change, the new tools might even look surprisingly like the old ones.

And here you're discussing the appetite for certain kinds of, let's say, the project of Venturi being accepted and rejected and then accepted again, and going through these kinds of cycles. What are some of the old tools that might, in fact, be new today?

**KERSTEN
GEERS:** If you look at already the last 15 years or so of architecture or even 20, I don't know, and try to see the period in which we were also active as an office, you see that with the computer around, and that maybe is even more than 20 years ago.

First, the computer was somewhere put in a room on a desk. And that became, for a while, the computer room. And in offices, became the computer floor or the double ceiling and things like that. So there was a lot of cabling.

There was a lot of technical solutions for, in a way, a new member of the family at home, but also a new device for work and so forth. And then you see that in the last say, maybe, what do I say? 10, 15 years with the advent of the iPhone and then the laptop and the way we know it today, or even the iPad.

And then Wi-Fi. And in a way, Wi-Fi is almost old because everybody does 4 or 5G or whatever it is. That very quickly the cabling disappeared, the computer room disappeared, the computer floor disappeared.

And in a way, the building today looks more similar to a building of 50 years ago before the computer came or even hundreds years ago than it looks like a building of 20 years ago, which is in a way closer to our present.

So if you look at a plan of say, a villa in Pompeii and at the hypothetical ideal house, maybe it would look similar because the rooms are now simply rooms. I can use my laptop wherever I want. The kitchen is close to nothing and is hardly different from any other room. It's fascinating.

GRACE LA: It's almost as if you're seeing a kind of folding of the space from hundreds of years ago.

KERSTEN Yeah.

GEERS:

GRACE LA: And then becoming contemporary now. And I think it maybe underlies some of your interest in a robust, enduring timelessness for the architecture to have a life beyond.

KERSTEN Yeah, sure. But of course, at the same time, I think we are both aware of the fact that this is, of course-- partly
GEERS: this is ambiguous.

Because if we would like to build buildings which would survive for the next 200 years, probably we'll have to build them in natural stone. I don't know. We should not build them out of steel because they will not survive, or they will only survive with endless maintenance.

GRACE LA: So why the orthogonal plan? What is it about the abstraction of the box-like shapes that would seem to be recurring in your work? What is it precisely then that draws you to that kind of language about the perimeter wall, about certain kinds of surfaces? Is it this vulnerability?

KERSTEN The pragmatism we talked about in the beginning is an important factor. I think there's pragmatism and there's
GEERS: control, and it's a very silly reason. But I believe that for us, the platonic form, if I could call it like this, is a completely controllable figure.

We know its geometry. We can organize it. And it's already so complex the moment you make one or two transformations of that figure that we do not see a reason to make it more complex than that, really. It has also to do, I believe, with this desire to make the spatial figure independent from the way you use it.

And so not to be influenced by the use, or at least as little as you can. As a result, there's no reason to make a space more difficult than that. I know it's a silly answer, but it's really how it works in our mind in a sense.

But at the same time, of course, sometimes this results in strange spaces. If I think of the Soho House in Matarranya in Spain, which is this very big, circular in a way house. It's a circle of 45-meter diameter. And essentially, you live on the edge of that circle in a roofed space, which somehow makes that perimeter.

The spaces themselves are circle segments because we cut out in a square manner a space inside that circle. And all this leftover space is on the edges, which become livable spaces. But these spaces have a very strange geometry.

Now, this geometry, I think, came about because we wanted to put these columns somehow in an echo of, I would say, a square courtyard, you could argue. And so somehow you could say we sacrificed the spaces proper in which you had to live.

But now exactly these spaces turned out to be very successful in being sometimes very narrow and sometimes very wide. I think there's also an aspect of experimentation, which I think you cannot purely explain from a rationalist perspective.

It has a lot to do, really, with a fascination with certain kind of art, which I would say is very often art from the '60s and '70s, or '70s and '80s, Robert Mangold or something like that, or even Ellsworth Kelly, who managed with a minimum of deviation to change an otherwise extremely simple platonic form.

GRACE LA:

Well, with that house in particular, what I find so fascinating about it is that the superimposition of geometries on what is essentially a circular plan provides a kind of infinite variation of the psychological boundary of the space, which I think is super compelling because again, with a very simple, very restrained set of moves, you get an incredibly diverse range of effects.

I think that this is interesting. And even in some of the, let's say, more square plans where you, let's say, tilted the roof plane. And underneath in the plan making is, again, a series of orthogonal moves. The boundary is what is shifting, even though the geometry is actually at face value very simple. And I don't know if this is the right meaning.

**KERSTEN
GEERS:**

No, no. That's true. But I like very much to say conceptualize, if I can call it that way. I practice as a dialogue between two people, two architects, two individuals. And what I very much about it is that I think, for some reason, we seem to share a certain aesthetic, David and me.

So if then all of a sudden this square with the tilted roof is there, we all seem to be totally satisfied. Whether that is because we like both the same art or object, or have the same frame of reference, I'm not always even sure.

But for some reason, this simple figures which are always more complex than they at first glance appear, they work for us. But at the same time, this place, I believe, is a vehicle for many influences.

I made, at a certain point with Jelena Pančevac and Andrea Zanderigo, I made this book on Venturi, Scott Brown, or more specifically, about the difficult whole about the first era around complexity and contradiction.

So when that book came out, many people asked me, but wait a second, you're not allowed to make this book because you make that architecture. And I was a little bit upset. I thought, wait a second. So we are considered minimalists, and Venturi is, I don't know, something else apparently?

So I'm not supposed to talk about this? Whereas I always thought that our work also is very much within that lineage, the complexity and contradiction lineage, but only in this geometrical way, as you just have been describing.

We've been working now forever on a book, which is still not there on Rossi in the '70s, his architecture, let's say, when he was making these schools, which I think is very fascinating.

But I think this very simple, geometrical, almost abstracted architecture, which was somehow the result of his obsession with lows and then became also something else, I think it's not so far away from us. As at the same time, a certain thing is almost very simple, very grid like, very rigid, very important.

And so all these things, they somehow make together with us this plan. But then the plan itself wants to be pragmatic, wants to be economical, wants to be all these things. So it's getting simplified in that process. So that's the ambiguity I like about that practice.

GRACE LA:

So I would like to ask you, if we could just dial to the very pragmatic question, when you're working within the formal language that you have embraced or these certain motivations, and in your mind you are bringing to the project references and other meanings, how are you communicating this to clients?

Because most clients, at this particular moment in time, they want architecture with content, even content that does not belong to the discipline. And you are thinking about architecture without content. You are talking about architecture as a frame, as a boundary. How do you communicate that at a practical level to clients?

KERSTEN

GEERS:

I think, quite frankly, everything we just talked about, the whole cultural desire of a project, I think is not important in the communication with the client, or at least with some exceptions, of course, because there's always people who approach you because they have a very specific idea about acquiring culture.

But in general, I think the argument for a certain architecture and for our architecture is a very different one. And in a sense, I think it's closer to without content you mentioned. And I think it's a topic we haven't really so much talked about, and it's very important for us in our practice.

I think ultimately, we would like to make, and I hope we sometimes or often hopefully succeed, we would like to make spaces which are simply very good spaces to live in or to use. And so then you talk about very different things. And that's the conversation we have with clients.

It's about, how high is the space? How big is the window? How wide is the space? What is the sequence of spaces? Do you need a corridor or not? We don't think you need a corridor. Why don't you need a corridor? Wouldn't it be nice when your kitchen is the same size as your bedroom or as your living room?

Why would that be nice? Can you imagine that now this kitchen where you now currently live is actually very narrow? Why would you see this space as a different space? Do you still live today in a way that the kitchen is somewhere on the side and the living room is just a big space, which is only there to show to visitors?

No. Perhaps everything is of equal value. So in houses, these are typical conversations to be had with clients. In other projects like, say, the crematorium, which is the tilted roof you mentioned, it's about other things. It's about the fact that you tilt the roof because you can explain that the machinery of the cremation and the cleaning of the air needs a lot of space, needs a lot of air.

And the moment of arrival needs a lot of intimacy. So it needs to be very low in a certain sense. And that the spaces where the service is happening, these spaces need to be generous, but not too monumental because then people would feel not at ease and in a way very difficult moment when they're there.

For us, ultimately, despite all the other cultural ambitions, I believe we are very interested in making an architecture which is extremely, you could say phenomenological. But OK, the whole theory of phenomenology is very specific to which I rather here would like to focus on the aspect of how spaces are, how they are lived, what their proportion is.

When there's a lot of air in these spaces, a lot of light, not so much light. When the relationship with outside is very direct, not direct. And I think that's really the conversation we have with clients always.

GRACE LA: I think that's very refreshing to hear because it seems that, well, in the Academy, but also in practice, there's a tendency to, maybe this is also an overgeneralization, but you are working with the very medium of architecture.

To me, what is so clear about the body of work that you've produced, first of all, the proportions are absolutely beautiful. I can tell that's something that you study, that you are looking at very carefully. The quality of proportion, how it works in terms of your body and space is very difficult to teach.

KERSTEN Yeah, sure.

GEERS:

GRACE LA: You really have to think very carefully about that. And it's not something that we actually talk about. Strangely, it's almost as if proportion has become a kind of dirty word. Nobody discusses that even in architectural school.

But I think it reveals a kind of, again, set of enduring values that you are pressing through the work and acknowledging that the architect actually does not control the space once you've designed it.

KERSTEN Yeah. No, absolutely. It's again, and it's strange, but it's again a story about me. It's a very well-known story, the story of the Farnsworth House. I've always been very fascinated by, let's say, the first incarnation of that house, when he built the house and he and the client got somehow in conflict.

GEERS:

And there's a few pictures of that, when she used the house with her furniture. And it that looked like such a beautiful idea because the space is marvelous. If you go and visit it today, you can only acknowledge the space is absolutely beautiful in its proportions, its size.

But at the same time, now you see it and it's very museum. You see all these in a way. I don't know. For me, apparently it was very important, these very specifically-composed pieces of furniture of himself, always slightly too large in that space.

Whereas if you see these casual pictures of her in that house and her-- I don't know. It always to me looked like a whole set of Tune furniture. And I don't know what. I think for us, that's what you would wish for, that you were very careful in the frame, but you're equally happy to let go.

Of course, then you hope that the furniture is Tune and not something else. I don't know. But you know that there's a kind of casualness and life because otherwise, I don't know, you can become so easily a victim of architecture. Yeah, you see that with people. It takes so much energy. That would be a pity.

GRACE LA: I agree. That's very well said. As a practice, you take quite a clear position on representation. And many of your orthographic drawings are absolutely precise. The image-making with the computer-based collages are often taken as single-point perspectives.

And of course, they do reference the artists that you had mentioned. There's quite a parallelism between the way that you're thinking about things, the framing of the projects, the framing of architecture for the space. And as the framing device for the activity of a scene, how are you making those drawings?

KERSTEN

GEERS:

Since we're talking today about practice, I think I should be very honest and open about this to say that I believe in our office, there has always been, in a way, two stages, if you want, or two in a way, slightly overlapping worlds.

Of which, on the one hand, there's the drawing, the perspective, the argument of a project, the visual argument. Not a clear cut argument, but an argument made out of a set of documents, whether it is in a competition or sometimes maybe when you do a commission for a private client.

Maybe in the first pitch you do to that client. There's a set of drawings, which is more, I would dare to say, summarized that what you would like to do. It's like the intention. The perspectives do that too. And why is that like this?

Because in a way, these collage, but indeed computer-made views, they do not have to resolve the whole project yet because you say, look, the project we have in our mind looks or would like to be like this and like that. And these two or three plans and this section is how we think we can achieve that, how we could get to that project.

Sometimes we make a small model, which shows things, but in a way is not sufficiently detailed that it would say too many things. So in a way, I would dare to say, the summary of our intentions.

When a project moves towards, say, execution phase, I believe that these perspectives, they help us to remember what we thought was important, what we know. But they also somehow define what we do not know yet. And a project, of course, has many aspects, many facets.

It's much more complex than that. Say the crematorium we talked about earlier in the competition, it had a view from a distance, which showed the idea of that roof. And it's say--

GRACE LA:

Through the trees.

KERSTEN

GEERS:

Yeah, through the trees. And then the still life kind of composition, which we developed together with the Artist Richard Venlet, which had to somehow convey this problem of representation of this type of program, this kind of building.

And then a set of perspectives from the inside, which showed the most important spaces you would experience. And then a simple plan, a simple section, which showed the ideas of that building, the tilted roof, the different heights.

But then, OK, you start to build this building and/or you're preparing to build that building. And then yeah, you make many, many plans, many sections to solve many corners. You have to think about many things you have never thought about earlier.

And then I believe that the initial drawings, whether it's now the plan and section drawings or even the perspectives, they give us a direction. And it comes back to a very earlier part in our conversation where we talked about the question, where does the project happen?

In the totality of the building, where is the project? And where is the project maybe also a little bit, but less so? And I think the drawings and the way we make them and the way they guide us in the detailing of it is fundamental in this.

GRACE LA: My co-curators Amy Kulper, Jeremy Ficca, and I have put together a show on drawing, which is at the Roca London Gallery. And one of the drawings in that show, of course, is a collage of the crematorium that you're describing.

As I analyzed that image, I thought it was fascinating that in the foreground of the image, you're very careful to pull out the detritus on the forest floor, the leaves from the trees, and things that appear in some ways might be inconsequential for the architecture.

But for that image, it's important that it frames, and in some cases even let's say, masks or is more primary than the building itself. So somehow there's a conflation and relationship of its site in nature that is more important.

For those who don't know the drawing, there are actually trees which are in front of the building as well. So it reveals a lot about your position, the way that you're thinking about the architectural act that would follow from that drawing.

So to me, it resonates with what you're saying about how you're imagining that this kind of initial collage drawing would then be able to sustain the project for five years while it is in development.

KERSTEN GEERS: No, absolutely. I like that you mentioned it's a little bit like a MacGuffin in a sense. The trees and the foreground makes you look at the building and not really look at the building. And that's a little bit, I guess, also metaphoric, if you could say it like this, for this complex relationship between life and architecture, in a sense. Absolutely.

GRACE LA: And then in other drawings, other collages that you've made, the building is very abstract and is quite stark. And the only thing that's saturated in the image is the actual content of life. And so that's also a very specific trait of yours. And I think it, again, it reveals your agenda.

KERSTEN GEERS: Thank you. I think so. Absolutely. If that's so, so much the better.

GRACE LA: Kersten, thank you so much for joining us today and giving us such an intimate look into your practice with David Van Severen.

KERSTEN GEERS: Thank you very much.

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GRACE LA: I'm Grace La. And you've been listening to *Talking Practice* from the Practice Platform of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced by Ronnie Saroff and edited by Maggie Janik.

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