DeeDee and Herb Glimcher Lecture: Ahmed Belkhodja of Fala Atelier

Ahmed Belkhodja of architecture and design firm Fala Atelier visited the Wex on April 4, 2024, for the DeeDee and Herb Glimcher Lecture, an annual series featuring the world's leading artists, architects, and designers.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use.
Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.

Transcript

Dionne Custer Edwards (00:00:00):

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the 2024 DeeDee and Herb Glimcher Lecture. I'm Dionne Custer Edwards, Head of Learning & Public Practice here at the Wexner Center for the Arts. I use she/her pronouns. My hair is pulled back in a bun. I'm wearing a cream-colored blazer with a dress, some silver heels. I'm joining you from the stage in our Film/Video Theater, which is set for our lecture tonight with a podium, a large screen, and four chairs. Before we begin and introduce our speaker, I would like to acknowledge and thank our generous donors. This lecture is made possible by the DeeDee and Herb Glimcher Program Fund, which supports presentations by distinguished speakers in the fields of art, architecture, and design at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Heartfelt thanks to DeeDee and Herb for their trust and generosity. Thank you.

(00:01:26):

Tonight's lecture was developed in partnership with our colleagues at the Knowlton School at OSU. As such, I would like to thank our colleagues, Dorothée Imbert, Phu Hoang, Ashley Bigham, and Erik Herrmann. Thank you for your partnership and your collaboration. This evening is organized by Learning & Public Practice Department and made possible by the support of the American Electric Power Foundation, Cover My Meds, Huntington, and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation. Please join me in thanking all of these incredible donors without whom we could not present these thought-provoking programs and lectures. I would be remiss in not thanking everyone at the Wex that makes all of our programs possible, including our executive director, Gaëtane Verna. Thank you, Wex team. We couldn't do it without all of you, all of us.

(00:02:19):

Following the lecture, Ashley Bigham, of Outpost Office and assistant professor at the Knowlton School, will join on stage for a conversation before opening up questions from the audience. If you'd like to ask a question, you could raise your hand if you're in the theater, and then someone will find you with the mic. It'll probably be Jess. Hi, Jess. Or you can text the Wex hotline at (614) 813-3416. Again, that number is (614) 813-3416. I'm going to give you a pro-tip. You can text us at any time during the program and we will get your message and you can get a head start. So if there's something that you hear and you're like, "Let me just text this right away," go ahead. Text whenever you feel it.

(00:03:07):

And now it's my great honor to introduce this evening's speaker. Ahmed Belkhodja is an architect and co-founder of Fala. Born in Switzerland, he studied architecture at Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne, and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich. In addition to working at Fala, he has taught at the Royal College of Art in London and the University of Toronto, and currently teaches at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Geneva and the National School of Architecture, City, and Territories in Paris. Please join me in welcoming Ahmed Belkhodja.

Ahmed Belkhodja (00:03:43):

Well, hello. Do you hear me well? Okay. First, I would like to thank Dionne for the introduction and Emily and everybody else that has made this lecture possible. It's huge pleasure and an honor to be able to show you a bit of what we do in such a remote place from where we practice. And also, the building in which we are, let's say, has been important also for us on some level. But I will maybe just start by introducing us. I mean, I will do it again. Well, I will do it along the introduction. You will see I call this lecture "The Domestic and the Distant." I hope that this title will become a bit clearer along the way, but I organized it in four parts. Essentially, it's going to be a quite asymmetrical thing. I'm going to be talking mostly, and you're going to be perhaps listening or doing whatever you want.

(00:05:11):

In the beginning, this is just in a few seconds, I'm going to surprise you with an introduction that is talking, also, about another architect's work, and then I will address a few of our first-built works and gradually bringing it to more recent-built work and then to stuff that is being designed or being built at the moment. And in the end, as Dionne has mentioned, we will have a discussion, so this is where we can, a bit, balance the scales and we can have a proper exchange. So what I call the triangular flashback is a reflection on the work of a Japanese architect. She's named Itsuko Hasegawa. And in the 80s, she did these quite enigmatic images. These are negative films actually that are stored in the collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris that show a few of our projects. And these are all projects that have just been finished when she did these images in 1985. But there is a weird inclusion there, which is this project that has a triangular section, which is a house from the 70s actually, so it doesn't match the others in terms of chronology.

(00:06:50):

So I found this extremely puzzling. And at the same moment, she also looks back at her projects of the 70s, which are all houses that reflect on what she calls, "the long distance." And so she writes that this long distance is, in her words, "a mean of separating human beings as subjects from the physicality and newness of architecture, thus keeping them both autonomous." And I was wondering what she meant by this because there are many questions in her architecture that I think are relevant to ours. This is one of the houses of the seventies, and you can see that it's basically a blunt, concrete box on two levels in which there is one diagonal wall that splits the space in two. And her goal there is to emphasize the feeling of distance within the house and to break any type of expected domesticity or the texture of that domesticity.

(00:08:08):

And so she writes a few years later, reflecting back on this project, that, "It was not about theatricality or fictionality, but about breaking the rectangular box imposed by the norms, that is, as an institution." So the point is that through the handling of these long distances in this project, she tries to reshuffle the cards within a house to question the hierarchies that are expected within the house. And within these houses, there is that one, which is the one that was included in 1985 in the computer images, which she starts by sketching. These are the early sketches of the house, and this is a quite cheap construction in which she has only some members of wood. And she speculates that because a wood construction needs bracing, so diagonals, maybe if the whole building is diagonal, it can be more efficient and bring a bigger volume to the space.

(00:09:18):

But what matters to me here is that this becomes a rational system that she keeps developing in this manner. So this is what she built. It's essentially a wooden grid in which life can find its way. And maybe I'll just show you this last sketch, which I think is extremely important because this drawing here shows that basically this form—the external form that this takes—is not so relevant because the whole system could be repeated, potentially infinitely. So this is, in a way, within what is a very humble house, there is already the seed of a system that could become plural, that could become housing, that could become something else, and this is how she built that house. So it's just one slice of that potentially infinite system with that triangular section.

(00:10:19):

But the tension between this and the idea of something potentially infinite was what was central to her and probably the reason why she came back to it a few years later. And so when she did the computer images, she showed that project or the structure of it nestled with structures of other projects, and she called these images, *City*. So the idea is that the city, especially the Japanese city with its famous so-called chaos, is an accumulation of fragments that each have their own rationality, but in the end, they're all fragile and they make sense as a group. As a group, they become a city. And our office started actually 10 years ago now within such an urban landscape. So this is the chaos of Tokyo once again, more specifically the area of Ginza in which my two partners in founding the office, Filipe and Ana, lived in this quite famous building for one year, which is called the Nakagin Capsule Tower. It was demolished a few months ago. There were a lot of debates about if it should be demolished or not.

(00:11:41):

But our first endeavor in the office was to conceive an exhibition in which we documented the life of the people in this building, the contemporary life, so in the early 2010s. And this became this exhibition in the Lisbon Triennale of 2013 that was reflecting on that historical piece of architecture, also by reusing some of its principles. So the contents are hanging from that metallic structure in the same way that the capsules were hanging from a superstructure of the Tokyo Eight building. And well, the whole spatial system was also based on the same metrics as the Tokyo building, but the point was that we were fascinated by the tension between the intimate space and its physical reality, its lived reality, and, on the other hand, if you want the architectural utopia that is behind such a building.

(00:12:57):

And I think this influenced a lot of our early projects, which were, most of them, competitions for big, public buildings that we were losing in series. For this one, we got a mention, this was a kiosk in Chicago. And also, then, it influenced the first few buildings that we built. So those are very modest constructions in, let's say, banal areas of Portugal, but the idea that behind any… even in the most humble domestic space, you can inject some of a bit of utopia was something we were very interested in. And so gradually, this became a whole array of projects. Now we have designed around 200 projects. The vast majority is not built. We have built around 50 buildings in those 10 years. And in the end, all of them are fragmentary. They are imperfect statements, but they make more sense as a group, as a whole. I think this is something we discovered along these 10 years.

(00:14:21):

And so we are a small dozen of people. Now, I think, we are nine in the office. And of course, every project is looked at by everyone and all of that collectivity of projects is also the result of a collective work. And the first autonomous building we built—the first freestanding, new building— was a house in a village in Portugal. It's this building. It's a very simple, one-level, family house, and it was made for a family that included three generations. So there was a daughter, two parents, and two grandparents that would live under the same roof, and they wanted as much distance from each other as possible. That's how they framed it. And we thought, "Okay, let's build a quite simple form, a big square. And in that square, three of the corners would be occupied by each generation." So I think the parents, they chose in the end, which ones would be where. The parents are in the quarter circle, the grandparents are in the square, and the daughter is in the triangle.

(00:15:44):

But in the end, what mattered most in this project was the space that is resulting, the negative of these units, if you want, which is living, dining, kitchen, basically. And there is, in the middle of that space—not exactly in the middle—a column, which is almost a symbol of the whole house. It's also square in section. And we wanted that column since the beginning, but the clients didn't want it. But we basically discussed with them that it was a structure that could allow to close the kitchen from the rest of the living space if they ever wanted to in the future, which they actually wanted, but we were against, of course, because we thought it's important that this space is one thing. It's the common space of the family.

(00:16:42):

But in the end, this act of punctuation becomes almost a symbol of the whole house. This is how it looks like. So it's very thin, as you can see, because it's not structural. There is actually a big concrete column hidden in this wall. But because of that column, this one doesn't need to hold anything. So this is why it was also difficult to convince them that it was necessary, but we thought it is necessary not on a structural level, but for other reasons. And because of that, it doesn't touch the ceiling. Well, I think it's still there, but in some other cases, let's say some of these columns have been removed.

(00:17:30):

This is another small house that we did a few months or years after, which was a transformation of a garden shack, a quite typical thing in rural Portugal, made of a massive granite. This is a place in which the owners used to store potatoes and other vegetables, but they wanted to

transform it into a small house for the son of the owner. But it was a bit too small to be a proper house, we thought, just a bit too small. It's actually, if I'm not mistaken, 18 square-meters per level, two levels. And it had no vertical circulation on the inside, and we had to add that. So we thought, "Okay, we need just to add maybe two, three square-meters on each level," so we made it a proud thing, this object, which might appear as a chimney or as a weird column, but actually it's just functioning as a sort of backpack with what cannot be placed within the volume.

(00:18:36):

And because the building is so small, we could actually build the whole roof, we needed a new roof, in one piece, so it was one sheet of folded metal that was brought by truck and just stuck on the building. And so in the end, the new building is also fragmentary. It's just a coexistence between something historical and that new object that affirms that there is a new life here. We realized only after building it that it might recall the electrical pole that is behind actually, but this was something that either was unconscious or just a coincidence. But inside that space is actually a shower on the top floor, which, in the end, is a six-meter tall, I think, shower with a skylight. So even within something as humble as a one square-meter or two square-meter shower, we try to bring in a bit of something cosmic or utopian if you want.

(00:19:41):

And this is another house that is, this time, in a more urban area in Porto. It's this one here. So you can see that it's in the middle of quite big apartment developments, but there are still a few single houses in that urban texture. But we thought, "Okay, this is a new building. It probably needs to find the language that talks both to the old houses and to the bigger urban blocks around in order to exist there." And it's an extremely simple house. I mean, formally it's four levels with simply rectangular rooms. That was a bit of request of the client. The entrance is on this middle level because there's actually a drop on the site. This is the kitchen, living, dining that is opening to a garden in the back, and there's one floor above the entrance level. So each room has a different function. They are just rooms, but these functions could almost be swapped if you want.

(00:20:55):

This one is a bit more fixed because it's a garage, and these two are bathrooms. This one is always the staircase, and then you have bedrooms or offices in the last room. The plan is basically a cross with a knot in the middle. And that knot, it could not be just a simple cross because of regulations, actually. The bathroom has a specific width that is minimal. The staircase has also a minimal width that is different. And so this misalignment basically became the heart of the project, and so there is that element in the middle that is essentially a column, which brings all these things together so all the doors close on it. And we brought all the formal intentions of the project around this column, so the profile that you see in each of the rooms when the doors are closed is different and it makes this weird section for a column. And this column crosses through the whole building. But again, because the building is only five meters wide, it doesn't need to be structural, so the doors are closing on it.

(00:22:13):

This is how it looks like on the two upper levels. But on the lower level, which is just one space, because it's not structural, we realized it could be lifted from the ground. So it's essentially a flying column, which is very practical because you can sweep the floor under it. It looks like this.

And the good thing is you can be under it, you can take photos of the underside of it, and this is basically the favorite place for the cats, actually. And so this is the lower level, which is that quite deep space that doesn't have an opening in the back because it's buried on that side, but on the other side it looks towards the garden. But what we thought was important was that this object becomes the conceptual heart of the project, but it also becomes almost a character in the space. If you remove that thing, there is no more architecture there. So is it a column? Is it not a column? Is it defined by logic around it or does it have an existence of its own? Those were all questions that were in our mind in this project.

(00:23:20):

Another type of project that we did quite a few versions of, if you want, first in Lisbon and then in Porto in Portugal, is what we call garage houses. The first one is the one on the top left here. We were approached by clients in Lisbon that told us that within their budget, they couldn't find an apartment large enough for them in Lisbon. And so they had bought a garage on the ground floor, and they asked us if it was possible to make it a livable domestic space. I mean, it's what is simply called a loft in the US maybe. So it means that here, the car lives in the same space as the ... I mean, the whole house is one space, if you want. So within such projects, you cannot just impose a normal domestic typology. You have to play with the weird constraints of the space that was not designed for that at first. And so it makes, sometimes, these super deep spaces. Putting bedrooms is very difficult, but we try to find strategies to make it livable and a happy space still.

(00:24:36):

This is maybe the most extreme of them in which a client of ours bought what used to be not just a garage, but a space where cars were being repaired and so on in Porto. And so this living room is just insanely big in the end, I think around 300 square meters or something like this. And then we populate it also with a few objects that, because of the scale of the space, need to find a different kind of expression than, let's say, a normal kitchen counter or a normal chimney, which would not even exist in such a big space. So the domesticity finds a different kind of texture. And this is, well, the last one of these that we finished a few months ago—It's in this plot, which is between a quite big street and the inside of the block, which is a gigantic courtyard. This is how it looked like before we intervened.

(00:25:43):

Usually, these are spaces that are abandoned for decades before we intervene. And this where the interior is. Yeah, there was already an outside space in the back, but quite claustrophobic surrounded by big walls. And this is what the interior looked like. So this is the plan as we found it. There is just one piece of structure in the middle of the space that we couldn't remove, which is basically a pair of columns, almost like an inverted U, if you want. And this is the plan we proposed. And once again, the big question was how do you put a bedroom in such a space without killing the room for the rest of the livable space? And here, we try to play with the tension. Is it one space or two? I mean, you will see it'll get clearer with the images, I think.

(00:26:39):

So here, you see the section. There is a very tall building above it. And there's the street on one side, and this is a new garden that now exists in the back. This is how it looks like. Again, the sort of illusion of infinity of the utopian visions. Here comes in the ceiling where this pattern is

multiplied by the mirrors around it. And the ambiguity is that all the doors feel also as if they were hanging from that ceiling, so there is a sort of architectural knot in these moments of reflection. Because if you take a photo at that level, you have that sort of illusion of infinite space. Inside the bathrooms, you have a bit of the same game with smaller pieces of mirror. The bathroom, so there's only one bathroom.

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And then this is what I was meaning by the ... Let's say there is a bedroom, but it's also the same space as the rest at the same time. I mean, it plays with that ambiguity. So here, you have a door that slides that totally disappears within the wall and plays with that system of the mirrors and so on. And these doors with a quite bold, yellow pattern… I mean, they become also quite proud elements in the space, but they actually come from the existing facade of the building on the outside, which had these weird yellow glass moments, which we played with. Basically, we made a wooden, more graphical, maybe, version of it on the ground floor, so we tried to bring the logic of what is above down.

(00:28:23):

So here, you can see on the street side. And on the back, the building functions more as a plinth for the rest. So in a way, it tries to dialogue with what is above it, even though it has a totally different logic of course. This is the relationship with the existing around it and this is the garden in the back. We thought, because it's quite claustrophobic, there is no neighbor, which is a quality on some level. But also, we thought maybe it would be good to bring some sort of vis-à-vis so we have two eyes, well, those are mirrors, that look back at you. Well, now the garden is growing, so more and more they will be hidden behind the greenery, but as almost a kind of savage beast looking at you from outside.

(00:29:17):

So then ... Let me look at the time. I will try to go much faster. So this is a house we built in Lisbon. It's this white rectangle here. As opposed to Porto, in Lisbon all plots are different sizes, but I will not go in details about this. But basically this was our plot, a very difficult plot because there is an extreme slope and then we have to follow the alignments of the neighboring buildings. So this is what was meant to be the garden in the back. Well, it is a garden, but we had to put retaining walls there simply to avoid landslides. So it looks very, let's say, mineral and concrete like that, but the garden is going to grow on these terraces and swallow the concrete progressively.

(00:30:14):

But the only thing that mattered to the municipality was the facades, so they imposed us that the rhythm of the windows would have to follow the rhythm of the windows of the neighbors, which meant basically to do a grid of holes. So we accepted that, so we designed ... Oh. Okay, there's a slide missing. Well, both sides of the building have the same facade, which is this, a grid of windows, but that has a slightly different rhythm as the neighbors. As you can see, the building feels extremely big, but this is a three-level building. This one as well. This is the same size of building, but it feels like a five or six-level building. And this is an actual six-level building with its proper size. So we totally broke down the scale of the imposed grid, if you will. And then we also played on the limits to sort of challenge the edges of the building with mirrors.

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So this is the grid of windows that was basically a requirement of the municipality that we appropriated, but we also did that because it was a need coming from the inside. So the clients wanted three bedrooms, a big kitchen in which you could dine, a living room, a garage, and an office, and all these things put together could not fit on the three levels we were expected to build here. But we thought, "Okay, maybe we can gain one half-level because of the slope of the site." So the garage is accessed here, so this is the garage, then you have three bedrooms, so each a half-level above each other. No, sorry. There's an office and three bedrooms, then the kitchen, and then the living room. And behind these spaces, you have bathrooms. So what seems like a very simple grid on the outside is coherent with the system on the inside.

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This means that everything relies on each other. Well, I'll not go into details about this, but basically you have different sections. But what we found was beautiful with this system is that it meant that every single room in the house, including the staircase, the bathrooms, had two facades. So natural ventilation, lights from both orientations, and at least four windows. So these windows, of course, are smaller, but this is a kind of generosity that comes from, in the end, programmatic and legal requirement. So here, you can see the system of split-levels. So what is a top window on one side becomes a bottom window on the other side. And then we played again with glass bricks to make the whole system readable from the inside, and so it means that everything is the size of the glass brick, because one doesn't cut a glass brick, those dimensions define the whole project, if you want.

(00:33:32):

So these are the plans. I will just go a bit faster. This is a study we were doing at the same time about some older Japanese houses of the '60s to '80s with the University of Toronto that probably, maybe even a bit unconsciously, was influential on that project and we made a small publication about it. And then we tried to refine the whole constructive system in relationship to this idea of interior transparency that we were looking for. So this is the top floor. Here, we are in the kitchen. This is if we go a bit above.

(00:34:15):

Of course, in such a system, the system is so rigid that all the exceptions are taken as advantages to make the project a bit lighter. And so this is the kitchen hood, the hood extraction. And so here is the end of the system, and above this there is a vault. And so this is the living room that is quite compressed on the other side, and you only have the lower windows in that space, so this is looking through the whole thing. So in the end, that top space brings together the whole house. This is how it looks at night.

(00:34:57):

Another project that is also domestic, this time in Porto, is this small apartment block. It's three apartments. The particular situation was that it was between two public spaces because there is the street on one side, but in the back there is a garden, a public garden that is actually part of one of our previous projects. It was a total coincidence. But this is actually a public space, so we thought because of that, the street facade and the back facade should have no hierarchy. They should have the same language, be as proud as each other because they both face a public

space, as opposed to our neighbors which have different languages. For example, you can see here in the front and in the back. And also in this project, we thought the sidewall, which usually they look like this in Porto, was also extremely important because it would actually be the most visible, so we thought, "Okay, this should also have the same language."

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And so we played with local marble, I mean marble is actually quite cheap in Portugal, to make this pattern that uses the minimum amount of material to the biggest effect. So there is actually maybe ... I think there's only 10 or 11 square-meters of marble in the whole project. But because it's used in thin, very small pieces, we can make a big effect with it, and so the facade wraps around the three facades of the building. This is the system, so it functions as a sort of cage, if you want. And within it, there is a system of staircases that is actually the most efficient possible, even though it seems a bit frivolous at first. These are the plans. I mean, maybe I will not explain it in detail, but basically that staircase allows to use space under the staircase, above the staircase, et cetera. So in the end, it's much more efficient than if you had a staircase going above itself, which is a discovery we made when designing the project.

(00:37:05):

This is the staircase space, the common space, here with colors. And so it's stuck on one side of the building, on one long side of the building. And we also agglutinate, on that side, all the other necessities. So the kitchens, the bathrooms are all playing with the negative form of the staircase, so it makes these kinds of emergences in the space. Sometimes you have an exceptional height in the space, sometimes you have a staircase form that comes towards you. This is the space that you gain under the staircase in the bottom apartment. And in the end, this makes up the texture of these apartments.

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And on the outside we played also, again, with the mirrors because we thought that facade, with its autonomous logic, it needs to feel paper-thin in a way, even though the construction is extremely simple, humble, and normal for Portuguese standards, so we played with mirrors to break down. Here, you can see that the reflection of the glass and the reflection of the mirror come together and the hole feels like as if it was cut with a cutter. And for us in such a project, it's extremely important that it tries to be ambitious on some level, but at the same time it's not trying to throw shade or put into shame the neighbors in a way. And so it's different, it's a bit more exuberant, it's maybe happy, but it still feels like a part of the city that belongs.

(00:38:56):

How much time do I have left? So now I'm going to go into a few things that are being built now or being planned. This is housing, but also a retreat in the countryside in Portugal, which was in this green piece of land. Quite beautiful. And the clients wanted three buildings there, but we thought, "Let's try to hide them, to not touch too much the space or to leave as much green space as possible on the site." And so this is the section of one of them. I mean, this section is valid for the three buildings that are the same in principle, but they have three different sizes. So the three plans are these half-circles, which are then cut differently, a bit like a cookie cutter or something like that, because they have different programs simply. One is a tiny house, one is a housing unit for a few people, so a bit larger, and one is the sort of space for events and the yoga and things like this.

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And we thought, because there is this clear form of logic of the perimeter and, let's say, the cookie cutter thing, "What happens within those spaces?" So the rest of the plan needs to come from somewhere else in a way. It cannot be a grid, it cannot be any kind of form that would be submissive to the other two formal gestures, if you want. So we chose, simply, three iconic houses from three different continents and we just placed them there, but then they become just abstract when cut like this. But it doesn't matter so much where they come from. What matters is that simply those are spaces that work for the functions they are asked to fulfill, and so you have three different buildings that share a logic.

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So this is if you want the whole system at once. And from the outside, they all look the same, if you want. There is always simply a kind of big chimney/skylight block that brings light and air through the greenery and a glass facade that emerges from the ground, three different sizes. And then there's quite simple materiality on the inside. So this is how it looked like a few weeks ago. And this is ... Well, you can see that these forms that come from other architectures in the end, their origin totally vanishes when one is in these spaces, but I will move a bit faster. So this is how it should look like in the end, hopefully.

(00:41:53):

And then another super important endeavor of ours recently is that we have won three competitions for social housing in the south of the country in the last couple of years. They have different sizes between 50 and 150 apartments. This is the first one that we won, which is made of two volumes. Actually, they were expecting one, but I think we won partially because we made it two volumes that have slightly different logic. But the goal here was to make typologies that have two aspects so air and light can flow through. And in the end, those are rooms that can be appropriated in many different matters, so one can decide if this becomes a dining room or a bedroom or an office. And these are all interchangeable, at least on some extent.

(00:42:46):

And so in the end, the goal is to make them as appropriable as possible to give as much freedom to the inhabitants. This is how it should look like, hopefully soon. This is the largest one of them, which is made of three volumes which are identical on a quite strongly-sloped site. So there are two levels of parking space, a bit of a commercial space on the ground floor, and then apartments above. This is the plan of one of them, so it's a bit of the same game, giving as much qualities as possible to these apartments, and this is how we envision the interiors. And also, because these buildings are so big, we try to break down their scale through patterns and the finishes of these buildings, which this is one of them, but there will be three so it'll look like this. And this is the last one of them, which functions with gallery circulations. And again, the same thing, trying to make as much light in there go through.

(00:43:57):

And if you want, for example, the lone wall that was in the garage space, that subdivides the space, but in an ambiguous manner. This is a bit of what we find back here, right? So one can circulate all around these walls. We try to make these spaces as open and to make their appropriation as unexpected as possible. And of course, well, light and air going through. In this

case with the galleries, it was very important to find the right amount of shades in the apartment and also to be able to build this with relatively cheap means. I mean, this is social housing, which is very, let's say, constrained in Portugal. Well, this is what this one will look like, hopefully.

(00:44:43):

But what I want to stress maybe with these is that we did many competitions of social housing before these three that we lost, one after the other, because we were trying to find projects that we thought had a chance of winning, but that we would also find good and that would always fail. So with these three, actually what we did is that we proposed this. So this is actually what we submitted in the competitions, which we find much worse, and also especially on the typologies because all these apartments have very strict hierarchies and the very strict separation between a common space, business of the program is sort of discarded in a way. There's another factor in the back. This is a closed facade, bathrooms in the back. Very simple, a bit of storage in between. And then you have all these other gestures that make these apartments unique. Yeah, so this is what the plan looks like. This is the long section. Here you can see a bit of the diversity, but here it gets a bit clearer.

(00:45:58):

In some cases, you have two apartments on top of each other. In some cases, you have apartments that are seven meters tall. There were two apartments that were seven meters tall that were identical, so we added a hanging column here. Some have a rooftop terrace. Well, it becomes a whole system of diversity. And so these are the 15 apartments, all different, let me go through this a bit fast, and then the hole like this. And then there's a quite simple material palette that brings all of this together. So the end walls are always dark, the side walls are white, the concrete of the ceiling is exposed. This is the hanging column. This was the site, so after the demolition of the ruin of the factory. You can see our neighbors, and here's the domestic buildings next to it. And so this is how the whole system looks like in 3D. And so, when you are within it, this is being inside the computer, if you will. And then, now the construction site starts to feel a bit like that as well. This is the flying column.

(00:47:21):

This is our whole team, more or less, almost. Actually, these photographs I received this morning, so extremely fresh. So some of the exceptions that make the project I was mentioning, like rooftop terrace here for one apartment, another one here for another apartment, which opens to that side. Also, the expression of the whole building then tries to find the sort of hybrid qualities between industrial architecture and domestic architecture. So on some aspect, I mean, it becomes an ambiguous object in a way. And this facade in the end is the most visible actually because there is actually a highway here and we decided, therefore, to make it like a cat. So this is the face of the cat with the big ears. This is what you would see from the highway. Yeah, a cat factory, if you will. This is how it looks like now. And here, you can maybe see it a bit there. And that weird form of the cat is also a necessity to give that view to one of the rooftop terraces.

(00:48:43):

And very quickly, I will go through one last project. This is something we did a few months ago, which is a scenography for a theater piece. The theater piece is by an artist named Marco Martins. He's a very interesting playwright from Portugal who only works with people that are

not professional actors. And while there are many interesting topics in his work, this play was centering on the experience of migrant workers in Portugal, mostly domestic workers and cleaning ladies from the former colonies. He asked us to conceive a scenography for that theater piece, so it would have to somehow evoke the kind of spaces in which these people normally work. And at the same time, it would have to travel between different theaters, so that was a bit of a big challenge. But what we thought was very interesting is that we played with normal construction materials.

(00:50:00):

This is what you see from the backstage, basically, so this is what a wall is made of. And then this is how it was confronted with one of the most beautiful theaters in Lisbon. And we thought, "Okay. As opposed to what we normally do, here it's not only about what we are for. It's also, at least partially, about what we are against, or spaces that we wouldn't find attractive normally," so we had to reflect on that while still trying to make it beautiful on some level. It was a very interesting exercise for us and this is what it looked like. And in the end, trying to find ways in which both happiness and sadness can exist within this space, which is one space.

(00:50:50):

And here, maybe, I will go back to what Hasegawa was saying about it being not about theatricality or functionality, but maybe somehow in architecture, there is always a kind of mise-en-scène, or let's say, it is a rational product on some level, but also it shapes the texture of daily life, including domestic, residential life, what is the most intimate. And that rational product could be called architecture and it holds, as Hasegawa showed, a potential for something much grander or utopian than daily life is normally thought to hold. And this is all for me today. Thank you.

Ashley Bigham (00:51:45):

I want to start with one, Ahmed, because of something that you mentioned in the very last project specifically, but also runs throughout all of your projects, and that's the concept of joy, which I think also your practice has written a little bit about architecture and joy. And joy is different from playfulness, and it's also slightly different than optimism. And I wonder if you could talk about joy. Is that something you see in your work through the process of the architecture? Is it something you're trying to create with the architecture? Is it an end result? Or is it all of those things or none of those things?

Ahmed Belkhodja (00:52:38):

Well, let's say the problem with joy is that one, I'd say it's difficult to assume that it's shareable. Maybe the difficulty is that, I think, there are two levels to it. The first one is that for us, it's fundamental to make the office itself joyful. I think that's really supremely important because architecture is a sometimes very boring job with huge responsibilities. It can be extremely tiring and it pays very badly, at least in Portugal, for those responsibilities. So finding ways to actually have fun and to create an environment of joy for us and the people that work with us is absolutely fundamental. And that means also, we hope that a bit of that spreads in the buildings, and we are attracted to joyful architecture maybe a bit because of that. But for us, I

don't think doing a joyful building can be an objective, but I think it's something that if it happens, it's good, right?

(00:54:07):

And at the same time, we're not trying to do an architecture that dictates how you should feel when you're in that space or that space. I think the difficulty is to make something that is joyful on some level, but that joyfulness should be accompanied more than something that is, let's say, imposed on you. You should be able to be sad in a joyful space somehow. So I think this is a bit of what we try to ponder sometimes and the mess of life should be able to exist within such a space still. Maybe that's one of the reasons why architecture is sometimes quite graphic or it tries to find other ways to be joyful than telling you how to live in that space.

Ashley Bigham (00:55:02):

Yeah, I thought that was very beautiful. I mean, a theater has to do that so specifically. A theater, by its very definition in typology, has to facilitate the actors to have a wide, wide range of emotions, right? So you're saying joyful, sadness, et cetera. Architecture does that naturally, right? We can't or don't want to suggest how people should feel in our architecture. But I see that kind of joy, in the way that you're describing in the work, also in the kind of care, maybe. Maybe there's a kind of visualization through the work, at least when I look at it, that there was a particular kind of care taken. Maybe it's the interest in detail or materiality or something like the floating column, which is a different kind of almost humor, which is also kind of tied to a sort of joyfulness.

(00:55:54):

So I think maybe, for me at least, looking at the work, there's a kind of joyfulness to the work, which is, again, not about the way anyone should or shouldn't feel at the end of it, which is very beautiful and maybe kind of leads me to another phrase that you used a couple of times, which was "utopia." And I think some of the housing you talked about kind of "inject a bit of utopia," was something you said, and I wonder if you could also kind of elaborate on that. I have a feeling that utopia is a word that means something slightly different to everyone, and I'm kind of curious what it means to you when you say that about the housing.

Ahmed Belkhodja (00:56:33):

I mean, for us, it's quite simple. It just means something remote from the expected, the normal texture of daily life. That's how we would define it. And so utopia in our eyes, and I think this is maybe related to the experience of the Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, is not necessarily a promise of a brighter future, but it's simply signs that life can take many forms. So in a way, without wanting to use trendy words, I think it's quite inclusive in a way. The idea is that we try to make architecture in a way that is open to any kind of domesticity that would want to take it over. So I think that's how we see utopia, when a project invites you to rethink things. I think that's what we aim for.

Ashley Bigham (00:57:52):

I want to shift maybe a little bit to talk about the use of materials, also maybe the relationship between material and color, which I think is incredibly striking in your work, in the built work, in the representations of the built work, in the collage-style drawings that you do, even in the collages, I think texture maybe as a kind of stand-in for an idea about materiality. And maybe you could just talk about the relationship or, let's say, what you are thinking about, what your practice thinks about when you begin to specify or imagine materials for your practice and what's the end result?

(00:58:33):

I think the one project that stood out to me that was quite specific and beautiful, you were talking about maybe the economy of using marble, right? So take a very expensive... Well, maybe not so expensive in Portugal, but something that we maybe identify or kind of signals a kind of exclusivity or an expensive material and then use it very, very strategically, so use it as a kind of accent. So that was one example, but I guess what are the ends that you're looking to achieve when you think about color and materiality?

Ahmed Belkhodja (00:59:07):

Well, actually a vast part of what could be described as a language is actually an accumulation of very pragmatic decisions. So as I mentioned, marble in Portugal is extremely cheap. There are villages are entirely clad in marble simply because they have a quarry next door. I mean, of course it's more expensive than, let's say, just paint. So we try to use materials in a very strategic manner and they're all very mundane materials in Portugal. So it means that what we do would be very different if we were doing it, I don't know, in Switzerland or in the US or somewhere else. And a lot of the things, yeah, that have been described as a style are actually just that.

(00:59:59):

So for example, you have seen some projects that they are striped patterns on the floor in wood. The first time we did one of these was simply that we wanted to do a dark floor, but it was too expensive. But we managed to convince the client that we could use one quarter of darker wood, which was because the lighter one is cheaper, and so we made a pattern out of it and then it became something we reused. And one of the reasons why we use colors like bluish colors very often is also that it's probably the most easy color to convince a client. It's like if you want to convince a client to have some color, try blue because everybody likes blue.

Ashley Bigham (01:00:54):

I'm going to write that down. I need that tip.

Ahmed Belkhodja (01:00:56):

No, but it's statistical. If you ask 100 people their favorite color, 80 will say blue, so then we try to find the blue we like. I think, maybe I should've said it, but it's very important to understand that almost all of our clients are not coming to us because they like what we do. Probably the majority of them don't even know that the office is named Fala, actually. They are just told by

someone, “Yeah, contact Ana or whatever because they are cheap and efficient.” I mean, now it’s slowly starting to change because of the public projects and so on. But it means that every project, we need to find strategies and to convince the client that there’s even a need for a project. I mean, most of the material specificities of our work are related to that process.

Ashley Bigham (01:02:17):

So I want to take some questions from the audience and I already see one right here, if we can get the microphone from Jess. Yeah.

Audience 1 (01:02:27):

Hi. You had mentioned the two projects with different clients that were adjacent to one another. Does that create any kind of contradictions, either philosophically or ethically, to the design of the previous project, and how do you resolve those contradictions?

Ahmed Belkhodja (01:02:46):

I mean, I don’t see really a huge contradiction, but it’s true that we are used to the project in the middle of stuff that is not designed by us. So in that sense, it was quite special. At the same time, the buildings are not touching each other directly, but it has happened to us another time that we had designed the building right next to one of ours. But in the end, we would never design a project next to one of our projects as a continuation of the first one. They remain autonomous projects. Yeah, so I don’t see a contradiction really.

Ashley Bigham (01:03:38):

Other questions?

Audience 2 (01:03:43):

(speaking softly) I want to go back to the injecting utopia and a little bit about the public housing projects they were showing in the south, and the idea of what you presented and what your secret ambitions were for the project…

Jess Xiao Long (01:04:01):

I’m so sorry. Can you just summarize it into the mic?

Audience 2 (01:04:01):

Yeah, sorry. I’ll start again. I want to go back to the question of injecting utopia and those public housing projects in the south, and maybe what your secret ambitions were versus the images that you showed. I think the residential projects have kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms that we sort of start with and use to describe the buildings that we’re doing, but the spaces that you’re doing start with another ambition, and then even the way you explain them to us, at least

initially, “This is the bedroom, this is the bathroom,” so you’re explaining it through the logic of program. So I’m wondering, apart from the sort of simple dichotomy of public housing project where this is what you want to do, if there’s a tension in the office or a tension in your design process to try to inject utopia versus recognizing the norm or designing with the norm.

Ahmed Belkhodja (01:04:59):

Yeah, I mean, to be perfectly honest, the word “utopia” is not the word we use very often in the office. No, but it was important to frame simply where we come from with the Nakagin, I think, utopia seemed relevant to these people at least. But the question of breaking with the norm is fundamental to us. Yes, there is a tension within the office, but I think the tension ... When you ask for an architect to design a building, you should demand more than a celebration of their signature, so you should demand a certain kind of intelligence that is about the purpose of that building. This is why we are very critical of many of what has been called “Starchitecture” in the last decades, which felt a lot like self-promotion, in many cases, without grounds and hands in the reality of the people that were going to live there.

(01:06:27):

On the other hand, if it’s just to resolve the square-meters of the program, a computer could do that very well. The projects we actually did to win the competitions, I mean, the ones that won the competition, I think a well-trained computer could do them. So in a way, what we try to fight for, and this is why there is a tension, it’s something that is in-between these two extreme poles. This is where form is important. So form should not be just something that is used to celebrate a signature. It should be used as something that can change the visibilities within, yeah, the texture of life, so visibilities, hierarchies, all these things. So this is where the intelligence of an architect is useful in our eyes.

(01:07:29):

So you are between these two poles and, of course, because we are there, there is tension because sometimes the cursor should be placed there, sometimes it should be a bit more there, and there’s this question that comes back with every decision. So of course there is tension. I think we would almost define architecture as this state of tension, because I think the other two hands are dead in our eyes. What we gave to win the competitions, we find zero interest in and we don’t think there’s much architecture there. On the other hand, if it was just frivolous stuff to do frivolous stuff, I think I wouldn’t see the point either. Yeah. I mean, I don’t know if that answers your question.

Ashley Bigham (01:08:25):

There was another question back there. Perfect.

Audience 3 (01:08:27):

Well, actually I have two things now. Was the word you used “starchitecture”? Because I’ve never heard that and I think that’s so clever.

Ahmed Belkhodja (01:08:39):

Yeah, it's a word architects use. No, no, I'm joking. In the last couple of… no, two or three decades, there have been what some people have called "starchitecture," which is a field of the scene made of an aristocracy of very smart geniuses, and then peasants below that would do the uninteresting work, so we are a bit critical of that. Some of these people are real geniuses, but sometimes it's just a bit phony, I think.

Audience 3 (01:09:22):

And kind of, maybe not, when you mentioned there was debate about tearing down the two buildings in Japan, what do you consider your longevity for your buildings? Do you expect them to last because of your flexibility, or do you think they are impermanent?

Ahmed Belkhodja (01:09:53):

No, I don't think they're important, but I hope they last as long as they are loved or cared for in a way. Yeah, we build with very standard, relatively cheap means for Portugal, so it's not in the resistance of the materials themselves that is the promise of longevity. But I hope, or we hope, that people appropriate them, maybe that even that it transforms them. But if there is a longevity, it has to be because people care about them or like them, and so it doesn't depend on us. So in the end, it's not a central preoccupation in our daily work. Because if the building is demolished in 20 years, I mean it depends on the cases, but it'll mean that those people at some point desire something else. If it happens six months later, six months after construction, we will be a bit worried.

(01:11:13):

In some cases, for example, the Nakagin Tower was demolished not because people didn't like the building. I mean, it was problematic on a technical level for many reasons, but the main reason it was demolished is that the price of land meant somebody could build much more there and make a lot of money. And reasons like this are just beyond the power of an architect, I think.

Ashley Bigham (01:11:43):

There's another question here.

Jess Xiao Long (01:11:47):

All right, we got time for one last question. Oh, wait. Wait.

Ashley Bigham (01:11:53):

If you ...

Jess Xiao Long (01:11:53):

Excuse me. I'm so sorry.

Ashley Bigham (01:11:54):

Yeah, just so people online can hear us.

Jess Xiao Long (01:11:56):

Yeah.

Ashley Bigham (01:11:56):

Thank you.

Audience 4 (01:11:56):

Thank you. I'm particularly curious about your comment regarding your clients coming to you not because of who you are. Of course, probably there's some learning in their interaction with you, but I'm curious what type of feedback do you get once they actually live in the spaces, once they're interacting. How do they react to the experience?

Ahmed Belkhodja (01:12:32):

Well, it's complicated because there are 50 different cases, but we had some clients that came to us because somebody told them we were efficient and cheap. And after doing one project and living in it, they asked us for another one, so I take this as a good sign. I mean, we quite like going back to some of these projects and discovering the way people use them, and sometimes it's shocking in a good way and we discover things that we were not expecting. That's a precious moment, I think. But yeah, there are also some clients in which the story is not as nice, but of course that happens. What matters to me most is the very vast majority of people that we did the project for, meaning they built it for themselves to live in, they are quite happy with it. Because also, there are many projects in which you do three apartments that are then sold and then the people that bought them maybe didn't want us. They just wanted an apartment on that street. So these cases are very different, of course.

Ashley Bigham (01:14:05):

Thank you. I think that's all the time we have for this evening, but should I turn it back to the Wex?

Emily Haidet (01:14:10):

Yeah. I just want to say thank you to you both. Maybe we'll give everybody a quick round of applause. Thank you, Ahmed and Ashley. And thank you all for joining us tonight. I'm Emily Haidet, curator of public programs here, so I really appreciate you all braving the weather to

spend your evenings with us. We hope to see you back at future public programs. Have a great night.