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Changing Spatial Practices: Alliances, Activism, and Networks

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Changing Spatial Practices

Architecture is always political. It produces space – and thus relations, exclusions, possibilities. At a time of overlapping crises – ecological, social, and political – we must ask not *whether* architecture can change, but *how* it must change. As change is urgent. Not as an esthetic shift or a technical update, but as a political realignment of our tools, methods, and modes of operating. The myth of the solitary genius will have to give way to practices rooted in collective processes and situated knowledges. If space is central to architecture, then spatial practice must be redefined through the lens of solidarity and struggle.

In this book, we argue for a shift: from architecture as product to architecture as practice. Drawing, building, teaching, writing, and resisting – all these form part of the architectural field, none superior to the other. To address the demands of our time, we propose architecture as an act of alliance, of activism, of networks, not for the sake of collaboration itself, but as a political project. With our call for papers we searched not for high moral ground but for concrete ideas, meaningful measures, inclusive cultural shifts, and creative collaborations. The practices of collectivity portrayed here are self-critical, aware of their limits, and conscious of their position within power structures.

Because alliances can be co-opted, activism can serve reactionary goals, and networks can just as well entrench inequality as dismantle it, we need

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to position ourselves. This is why this book centers practices that seek transformation across the following interconnected fields, which seem equally urgent. There is the intricate relationship of architecture with climate, especially obvious in the destructive ways the building industry hungrily extracts for excessive material use and is responsible for heavy CO2 emissions. Yet, within architectural history there is an alternative thread of diverse and solidarity economies that aspire to more social and climate justice. Also, a central thread running throughout this book is a focus on collaborative and feminist spatial practices, which provided the starting point for our editorial work. Working within academia and professional practice, we wanted to bring to the fore practices and modes of operating that have been seminal for and in our own work: Practices that challenge hierarchies, foreground collective agency, embrace non-linear processes of making and knowing, and demand that we rethink the role of the professional (that is: the expert) in today's complex networks of relations. This of course relates just as much to education and research.

Architecture is based on established forms of knowledge. When we consider the current implications of spatial production, we must think about who produces knowledge for whom, and who is included or excluded, both now and historically. You can observe such empowering practices combining research and education in Alissa Diesch's contribution »*Mapping Territorial Resistance – Transformative Heritage in Bogotá*« examining and mapping Bogotá's urban transformation through overlapping crises, showing how indigenous practices, colonial structures, and urbanization shape the city. Using decolonial theory and participatory research, it reframes crisis as a catalyst and proposes transformative heritage as a resource for community-based urban renewal.

Looking towards architectural education, Changing Spatial Practices builds on inclusive and intersectional practices and on forms of teaching that empower and build up decolonization or rethink power relations. It involves not only rethinking teaching formats, but also knowledge production where the architectural canon, references, images, and curricula, integrate diverse voices, such as those of non-Western, queer, and feminist practitioners, researchers, and thinkers. In »*Spatial Activist Research as Embodied Praxis*,« Esra Can, Maria Alexandrescu, Andrew Belfield, Jakleen Al-Dalal'a, Lara Scharf, and Doina Petrescu examine how activist research generates embodied knowledge that informs architectural and spatial practice. Using feminist and decolonial perspectives, their contribution introduces

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»embodied praxis« as a reflexive method for socio-spatial transformation. In their contribution *»Transing Space(s)«* Vio:la Wagner and Alvie Augustin describe how cisnormative frameworks inscribe binary gender norms into space, marginalizing non-binary identities. Drawing on trans studies, architecture theory, disability studies, and interviews with trans activists, it proposes trans-informed understandings and practices of space to challenge cissexist structures through an interdisciplinary and intersectional lens. In *»Staying with the Trouble: Feminist Spatial Practices and Hybrid Agency in Slovakia and the Czech Republic,«* Lýdia Grešáková explores how collaborations with marginalized communities and non-human actors challenge top-down planning and promote more just, responsive approaches to design.

In architecture, both working modes and working models are changing due to economic, technological and societal transformations. Thus, challenging the overall framework around architectural production with evolving practices that question competitions, briefs and commissions, or that create their own clients, or start new types of civic collaborations. The forms of representation we produce as spatial designers create visions and impact society. The contribution *»Counterproposals in Zurich: Constructive Criticism of Destructive Practices«* traces the history of Zurich's ZAS / ZAS* collective, and shows the groups' use of counterproposals to participate in urban planning. By combining professional expertise with civic activism, they demonstrate how architects can cooperate and reshape democratic processes, resist destructive practices, and foster transformative approaches to urban life amid ecological and social crises. This involves preserving and activating as many resources as possible, using less material and leaving a smaller impact on an architectural, urban, and global scale. In *»Entangled Thresholds: Building Multispecies Envelopes Beyond Human Comfort in the Philippines and Japan,«* Natalya Dikhanov-Juswigg and Sadie Imae examine the building envelope as a threshold where human and non-human collaborations can reshape architecture beyond comfort-centered design. Drawing on symbiotic models, it argues for porous, multispecies, and community-oriented approaches that dismantle extractive practices, expand notions of comfort, and reposition architects as facilitators of ecological and social repair.

In the contribution *»Repair as Practice: Expanding Architectural Approaches to Climate Justice in Southern Africa,«* Jhono Bennett proposes reparative urbanism as an approach to climate justice that challenges Western, extractive paradigms. It frames repair as a continuous material and relational practice – centered on care, justice, and long-term community

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partnerships – that redefines architectural agency through the relationships and systems it sustains.

Thus, by looking closer at alliances, activism, and networks we take these questions along: What are we allying for? What do we activate? Whom do we connect – and who remains excluded? Alliances, Activism and Networks are interwoven concepts – terms that reflect not fixed categories, but fluid orientations for understanding diverse spatial and organizational practices. Rather than rigidly compartmentalizing contributions, we use them as overlapping, interdependent clusters that offer a framework for navigation or points of entry into the rich terrain of spatial and social practices in this book. Collectively, the contributions respond to urgent socio-ecological questions and challenge dominant narratives by proposing alternative models grounded in care, collaboration, and situated practice.

Alliances

The first section of this book addresses these questions: How can architecture participate in building alliances, how can it enter co-working with unexpected partners? What makes an alliance? Political theory – especially the Marxist kind – defines alliances as collective actions of groups that don't lose their identity in the cooperation, which is not based on habitual sameness of interests or similarity of habitus, but serves a temporal strategic goal.

Alliances do not come »natural.« They have to be built; either around moral altruism, which makes one group take a stance for another one. Or, quite differently, around a shared project goal, which can be a common goal but also a common enemy. More soberly explained by use of the »chain of equivalence« concept within hegemony politics theory: A big difference to a shared external adversary can level and relativize smaller interior differences between groups (or interests) entering into an alliance. We encounter such alliances in many cases, of course with neither only left, or radical-democratic projects, nor exclusively with anti-hegemonic projects: Examples include alliances between architects and other spatial practitioners, climate institutions, activists, politicians, government bodies, entrepreneurs and academia, as well as wider society, to address climate breakdown through new policies, just building practices and processes that put an end to extractivist ways of doing.

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Hence, alliances compel us to attend equally to the what of political action as to the how – the process, the composition, the labor of building coalitional structures. As a form of co-working, alliances allow actors to contribute specific expertise, tactics, and forms of knowledge toward a shared undertaking. The alliance, then, becomes a space where contradiction is not eliminated but negotiated – held in tension by a unifying vision, antagonism, or necessity.

Alliances are neither natural nor habitual, but rather built. Therefore, unforeseen, unexpected allies with different backgrounds and typical group interests enter the picture. Yet, when the structural role and embeddedness of architects within capitalist production remains unchallenged, the alliance-building with architects is discouraged. To become an ally architect requires more than ethical positioning; it demands structural realignment. It requires seeing architecture not as an end in itself, but as part of broader social and political struggles.

The contribution »*Becoming Architect-as-Ally: A Conversation on Practice, Definitions, and Privilege with Nature of Hope Participants*« by Alina Paias, public works, Karin Reisinger, Lis-Mari Gurák Hjortfors, and Husos arquitecturas, portrays a group of exhibitors at the International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam 2014 entitled »Nature of Hope.« It highlights common cause-alliances between anti-extractivism activists and anti-colonially minded architects supporting them by contributing what they do well: e.g., mapping, unveiling, exhibiting – in this particular case with regards to systems that displace people, deplete ecosystems, and export environmental harm under the banner of »development.« An alliance and a network at the same time it is calling for a shift from doing-for to doing-with – a redefinition of practice that is grounded in accountability rather than authorship. Beverly Engelbrecht´s contribution »*Counter Architectures of Sex Work: Collective Care Networks and their Spatial Productions along Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin in the 1980s,*« highlights, first, alliances between sex-workers, which resembles the classical class example, i.e., the development of a sense of shared experience and belonging between exploited workers, resulting in something akin to class consciousness and solidarity vis-à-vis pimps, clients, and the authorities. Secondly, there are researchers allying themselves with the sex workers over a temporal and social distance. Lindsay Harkema´s contribution »*Self, Standpoint, Network: Learning from the Autoethnographic Methods of Reproductive Justice,*« shows how reproductive justice activists find unexpected allies in architects. These groups fight common adversaries:

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patriarchy, neo-authoritarian legislature, and agents of an anti-feminist backlash. Ultimately, this alliance allows architects to also clarify their own position regarding notoriously hetero-male normative bias in their practice and its history. In seizing the cooperation as an opportunity to confront their discipline's inherent misogyny, an advance in anti-sexist critical self-enlightenment becomes their proto-political gain from this alliance.

Activism

Activism activates new trajectories of change. It often promotes collective actions that aim to disrupt or change existing paradigms. Eager to explore the potential of activism in our field at large – our call invited views on what activism might mean or make possible today. We sought activist practices that integrated not just mild resistance against certain hegemonic influences, but also offered proactive and projective actions.

The contributions we received begin to outline some possibilities. Participating in mass protests and civic disobedience, as climate activists; lobbying city agencies or trade organizations, as professional architects; advocating participatory design or industrial and legal reforms, as urban and building experts; redefining disciplinary lexicons and pedagogies, as designers and educators, among others. With local case studies and site-specific research, the authors draw attention to depleted rural and urban landscapes, sites of extraction and exploitation, and architectures of urban and social inequalities. To address such pervasive problems, they deploy anti-development schemes, counter-design proposals, and community-engaged design and planning initiatives. Some use their architectural skills to aid public protests, direct actions, or performative campaigns, and bring design agencies to grassroots activism. Looking inward within the discipline, other authors challenge foundational architectural concepts and ingrained knowledge, and mobilize a new language of design, especially one that is based on gender, trans, and decolonial frameworks.

At another level, the essays reframe spatial practices through historic or current geopolitical inequalities. Any scale of architectural practice must negotiate the material, labor and political relations dispersed worldwide. Consider this powerful illustration included in the article »*Reimagining Architectural Practice through Relation: Notes from the In-Between*« by Ana Bisbicus and Sarah Hachem – [habi practice], where the authors describe an

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image, posted on Instagram by the Palestinian Youth Movement, of a drone moments before it struck a building. The image caption, in part, states: »*Every building is a planet*.« That every physical or imagined object or space is simultaneously linked to an elsewhere, is poignantly understood by the youth activists. To make these relations visible, and to make them actionable, remains an ongoing challenge. In »*Architects as Climate-Activists*,« Armelle Breuil foregrounds three spatial practitioners participating in the climate movement in different ways. Analyzing the work of Nick Newman, Tom Bennett, and Léa Hobson, and their practices that range from design work to civil disobedience, the article redefines architecture's role in addressing systemic crises, highlighting new pathways for collective action, spatial justice, and planetary care. Collaboration as a powerful but also sometimes critical and fragile process can be observed in Rui Ferreira dos Santos' personal narration »*Toward Poetopolitics: Attempts at Landing as a Collective in Portugal*.« The article reflects on the rise and dissolution of an intentional collective and proposes poetopolitics – a practice attentive to legality, infrastructure, and reciprocity.

To bring about the necessary change in architectural practices today, insurgent, interconnected, and organized activism is essential. To steer spatial practices towards inclusive climate, social, and political ecosystems, unlearning, relearning, and co-learning is required, by one and all. No tactic, method, or solution is sufficient on its own. Scaling up and speeding up any and all actions is increasingly evident. However, change is a process – it is inherently slow and often incremental. When enacted through planned actions, plural or molecular – collective and organized – it can lead to genuine transformation.

Networks

We understand networks as a particular form of mesh, or web, of different types and forms of organisations, human and beyond-human – more or less structured, more or less connected, more or less defined —, yet constructs that share issues of concern. They are threaded and interwoven accumulations and tangles of allies, held together by thoughts, ideas, and actions, sharing not necessarily a common goal, but an idea of a direction: environmental justice, ecological solidarity, the deflation of persisting myths of modernity and patriarchal strongholds, or the shattering of dominant narratives of heroes and heroines. Instead, they are tools of resistance, trapping

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mechanisms, instruments of solidarity, comfort blankets, powerful vehicles, beautiful, repairable, soft landings, catchers and keepers of dreams – and anything but made of rigid hierarchies.

This third section of our book therefore, draws attention to those works of intentional netting (or: net-making) that emphasize those powers and capabilities that rest in a net's inherent configuration of decentralization, mutuality, but also interdependence: You pull at one node and others will feel the effect. Offering a vision of a cosmos that resists the cascade of concentrated top-down decision-making, the stories that we have collated here focus on types of relations that are fierce because they are horizontal, on powers that are distributed and responsive, and on practices that are rooted in cooperation. What emerges are accounts that shift, sometimes ever so slightly but always decidedly; strongholds of capital and political might, as well as texts that tell different stories through different voices.

The nets that sit at the center of our interest are those that understand a network not as a schematic, anonymous organizational structure or mere matter of pragmatism to ensure, for example, the smooth operation of a system. Instead, the nets are strategic acts of crafting connections between previously independent nodes to build strength (and power) through a deliberate stitching together of alternative economic and social relations. In doing so, these practices contribute with their work to imaginaries that illustrate how other worlds and other futures are not the stuff of distant dreams but are already in the making.

Networks can be material and immaterial and they include actors and actants such as land and rubble. Robin V Hueppe describes such networks in *»From Companion Mounds to Ruderal Ecologies. Reconstructing Land as a Medium of Resistance in Berlin's Housing Estates.«* It explores how former rubble landfills have been transformed into ruderal ecologies that resist institutional control. It argues for a land-centered perspective that highlights how human and non-human actors co-create counter-spaces, fostering social encounters and supporting just climate futures. With *»Urban Mediations and Collective Architecture: Zuloark and the Case of Campo de Cebada, Madrid,«* Enrique Espinosa and Enrique Nieto show how practices of mediation decenter architecture and foster networks with civil society, public institutions, and citizen movements. These processes mobilize »minor knowledges« and participatory practices, opening possibilities for more ecological, inclusive urban futures.

To make the net of the network *is* work. Recognising work (i.e. labour) as a constituent part of the network, it becomes clear that making that net is as

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much about those who forge the connections between nodes as it is about the connections and relations between them, which have to be tended to, maintained, and cared for.

Are we doing the work?

Audre Lorde leads us to the question *Are we doing the work?*[1], that has been a guide and lens for our work on the publication, but also about what the work is that is being done and how it is being done. A radical rethinking of the network as net-work, of alliances as co-work and activism as counter-work accompanies the wider radical rethinking of ethics, politics, and kinship in times of stubbornly persisting narratives of mastery and control. It reshapes how action is conceptualized: No longer as heroic intervention by individual saviours, but as collaborative world-making enacted across scales to create impacts that resist: colonialisms, capitalisms, or heteropatriarchy; while also opening space for something quieter, more enduring: a collective orientation towards interdependence, and transformation.

For all these essential questions, this publication does not intent to offer answers, it rather offers propositions, tools, and reflections – invitations to act. Because practice is not only what we do, but how we position ourselves while doing it. The diverse approaches in this book are not necessarily new, but operate in specific local, regional, and cultural contexts. This is key to their overall arguments. The range of work, while not exhaustive, is multi-dimensional and collaborative. A number of contributions are co-authored or written by collectives. As readers, our task is to reinterpret these situated practices, and to consider how to adapt them to other circumstances, maximizing their potential – to connect them to larger discourses and practices, and to build alliances and networks, as integral to any practice of activism.

The contributions are offerings that differ in strategies, stories, and actions, yet they form powerful connections despite an existing racist, extractive, and patriarchal architecture that seeks to keep us separated. They compellingly demonstrate ways of sharing knowledge and caring for one

1 »Each of us must find our work and do it. […] It means actively working for change, sometimes in the absence of any surety that change is coming. It means doing the unromantic and tedious work necessary to forge meaningful coalitions, and it means recognizing which coalitions are possible and which coalitions are not. […] It means fighting despair.« (Lorde, Audre (1984): *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, New York: Crossing Press, 135.)

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another, attending to our histories while also providing feminist imaginations that make space for other stories, bodies, and spaces. We end here, but the work is of course not done, we leave the work open to us all, to a diversity of forms of collaborations to continue the path toward just, joyful, empowering, and non-extractive architectural practices.

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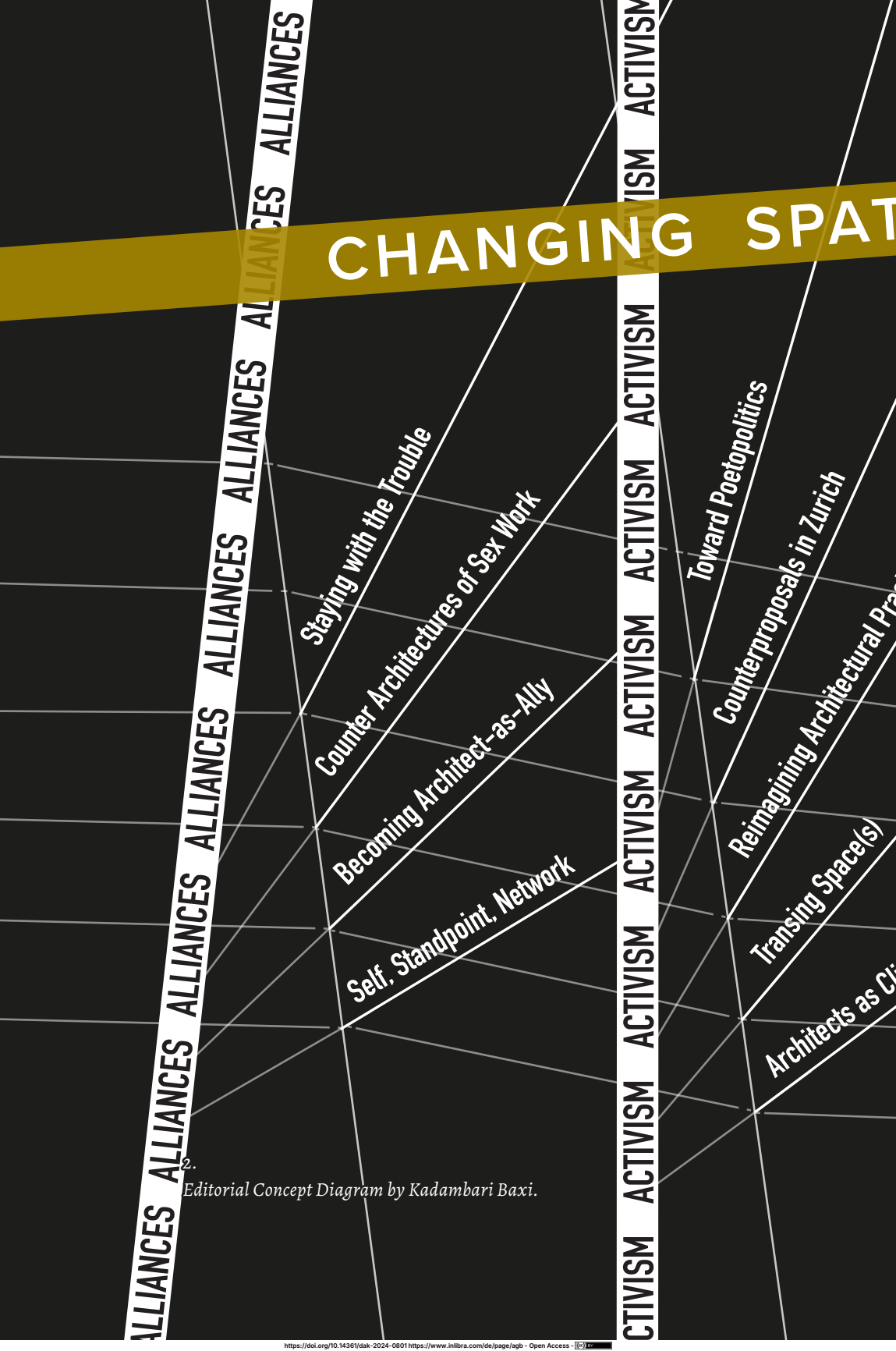

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Editorial Concept Diagram by Kadambari Baxi.

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