



Plasma Studio

Profile



Hotel Puerta America
Madrid, Spain

There are probably not many architecture studios that attracted as much attention with their first projects as Plasma Studio. One could almost say their spectacular designs not only promote a totally new sense of spatial perception, but that their architecture turns all convention upside down – an infinite architectural experiment.

In 1999 – nearly ten years ago – Eva Castro and Holger Kehne founded Plasma Studio together. Like many architects in London they work in the East End, hardly half an hour from the West End. They conduct their architectural experiments on the fifth floor of a gray 1960s industrial building at the end of an access balcony, alongside other artists' ateliers, graphic art agencies and store rooms. From here you can see the joggers on Regent's Canal and the office towers of the London skyline.



The short definition of plasma on their website sounds like a challenge: In physics the Plasma State, or fourth state of matter, describes a unique condition of matter arising at a complex overlay of external forces. Plasma, a charged field of particles, conducts energy. And Eva Castro, Holger Kehne and Ulla Hell have got lots of that.

And together the three of them have a lot to offer: Eva Castro, who studied in Venezuela and in London, Holger Kehne, who studied in Münster, Germany and London and Ulla Hell, who studied in Innsbruck, Delft and Eindhoven, and who now works in northern Italy, whereas, having graduated, the other two stayed in London, where they now also both teach at the AA.

Following several minor projects in London, refurbishment of apartments, an office, and a shop, and a series of experimental residential buildings in northern Italy, Plasma Studio have become known primarily for their flowing spaces, extreme geometry and sharp angles. Their contribution to the Puerta America design hotel in Madrid could be described as their international breakthrough; after all they had to hold their own against architects and designers such as Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel, Arata Isozaki, John Pawson and Zaha Hadid.

Strata Hotel/Extension Residence
Königswarte
Alto Adige, Italy



Their spectacular design of the corridor and the individual rooms on the fourth floor demonstrates that they had no problem in doing so: Non-sealed floor surfaces, the corridor, room walls and the ceilings develop differentiated geometric folds, thereby creating a totally new spatial sensation. After all, hotels in particular are well known for linear repetition and stereotype rooms. When the hotel opened in 2005 the rooms Plasma Studio designed were on every front page, and the architects won prizes and awards. Contrary to expectations, however, there were no follow-up contracts for hotels, bars, and clubs, though Hotel Puerta America made the Plasma Studio brand famous in the international arena.

Esker Haus
San Candido, Italy



Back in northern Italy, though, through Ulla Hell they had an opportunity to continue their series of buildings. Ultimately she was the one, on account of her close contacts locally and with developers, who made these projects possible at all. 2006 saw the completion of the Esker House (in Innichen), and 2007 the D Cube House (in Sexten) and the Tetris House (also in Innichen), all small residential buildings, which on the one hand in terms of shape were in contrast to traditional structures and on the other through the choice of the same local material and flowing rooms blend in with the surroundings. The Strata Hotel (in Sexten), a landmark on the slopes of the Dolomites, was only completed this year. A stand-alone, which reveals how a material as traditional as wood can become the dominant architectural characteristic of a contemporary building, wrote AIT in June 2008. What are peculiar to the hotel are the horizontal layers, which in turn are taken up by the wood lamella texture of the facade. Nonetheless Ulla Hell, the daughter-in-law of the developer, doubtless needed strong powers of persuasion to get the owner of the 4-star hotel to agree to the experimental architecture of Plasma Studio.

So Plasma Studio's work takes place between London and northern Italy. Both offices influence each other and benefit from one another. Their London location has also landed them contracts outside Europe: They are currently working on a master plan for Longgang in China, an area covering nine million square meters. In Oman they are building various, highly individually styled villas, and for a region in the Gulf they have designed two different types of Arab residential buildings, which can be built using local materials.

Hotel Puerta America
Madrid, Spain

Shifting one's glance from their architecture to their studio in London, the latter initially seems very modest: An almost 50-square meter, open-plan room boasting six desks, a few book shelves and a folded-up table tennis table (the bats are more hidden from view at the bottom of one of the shelving units). On the window sills there are stacks of small models, and the toilet is outside in the corridor. The walls are straight, the ceiling low, and the corners right angles: All in all one could describe the office as an experimental architecture chest. This is where we met Eva Castro and Holger Kehne, to talk to them about their architecture, the toing and froing between London and northern Italy and a critical architects' scene...



Interview



Eva Castro, Ulla Hell,
Holger Kehne

London

It is Saturday morning, and provided you are not at Oxford Circus, London too can be pleasantly slow and quiet, like it is in the office of Plasma Studio on Regent's Canal, right on Broadway Market. In their dark clothes Eva Castro and Holger Kehne seem like a typical architect couple: She is wearing high-heels, a body-hugging dress and large sunglasses – he has black trainers and a polo neck sweater on. This is a duo that on the outside at least could not be more contrasting: The bubbly Argentine and the somewhat quieter German from Münster. However, they radiate incredible harmony and would appear to complement each other perfectly. While we talk to them, three of their employees draw plans in the background to the sound of soft mood music. Unfortunately the coffee machine is broken today, so the coffee is from next door. On the table, a folded up white table tennis table, there are a few opened architecture magazines. A double-page spread features the Tetris House in Bolzano in northern Italy. Next to it their youngest child is asleep in his rocker...

London

The view from our office windows in London and Bolzano couldn't be more different: Here the London skyline and there the huge mountains.



You don't work in "New York, Rio and Tokyo", but in London and northern Italy. It's astonishingly quiet in your London office. I'm sure it is very conducive to working here, and you've got London on your doorstep. To be perfectly honest I had imagined it being different, certainly more hectic. You have a second office in northern Italy. What is it like there?

Holger Kehne

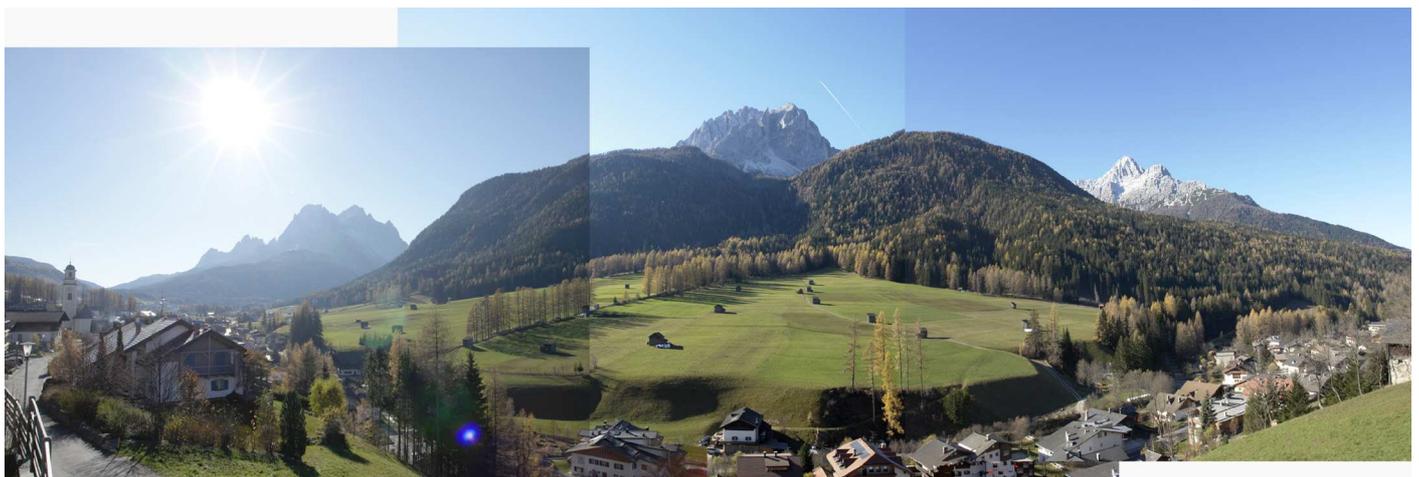
Now there it is quiet, even more than here. The view from our office windows in London and Bolzano couldn't be more different: Here the London skyline and there the huge mountains. The atmospheres are very different. In Bolzano you step out of the office onto the patio, look to the mountains and can hear the silence. Of course there's nothing like that here in London. Sometimes we go down to northern Italy with a few others, got four or five days' peace and quiet away from London. Another decisive difference between the two offices is that most of our projects are located in northern Italy, so the office there is far more integrated than the one in London. Here if anything it is the global context that defines the location.

Since you live in London you probably work more here than in northern Italy. But in fact there are three of you, after all we mustn't forget Ulla Hell, who works in northern Italy. How exactly did you come to be working together?

Eva Castro

You could say that Ulla was our very first real employee. Holger and I were working on a competition in Germany, the Ozeaneum in Stralsund, and she came to us to support us in the second phase. We worked well together, and although we only came

South Tyrol





**3G- Inaugural installation at
Extension gallery**
Chicago, USA

fifth the competition was a huge success for us. Unfortunately Ulla then decided to go back to northern Italy to work. Because we didn't want to let her go we suggested to her that she establish Plasma Studio in northern Italy as well, that she open a branch, so to speak. It was a good decision!

You are good friends with Zaha Hadid. Are contacts like that a sort of stepping stone for you? A good network to the architects' scene in London?

Eva Castro

That is a question we have been asking ourselves for a long time. London is an important location for us – primarily because we both live and work here, but never really had a proper construction project here. It is difficult, and a great shame. Right at the beginnings of Plasma Studio we had small projects and planning assignments, but things never developed further.

Holger Kehne

Through articles in newspapers and architecture magazines we always tried to be seen more strongly as young British architects, so as to get an opportunity to design buildings here. But nothing ever happened. It's a similar story to Zaha Hadid's, she experienced exactly the same thing.

But it is very frustrating; strictly speaking we could work elsewhere, in Berlin for example...



**Ulla Hell, Holger Kehne,
Eva Castro**

Do you have any concrete plans to move to Berlin?

Eva Castro

Well, we're still thinking about it. We like Berlin a lot and have now reached a point where the actual location of our office is no longer the deciding factor. So why shouldn't we work in a city that we can enjoy far more, which offers better conditions and better prices.

So everything is still up in the air. Do you already have any new projects for next year?

Holger Kehne

We can already feel that we are getting more serious assignments, but there is a long way to go. We have published a lot of our projects. It's very important for us, which is why we spend a large proportion of our time on tasks such as making good photos, writing articles, establishing contact with magazines and repeatedly sending them



Strata Hotel/Extension Residence
Königswarte
Alto Adige, Italy

The projects in northern Italy are more reliable.

Strata Hotel/Extension Residence
Königswarte
Alto Adige, Italy

our projects – all this takes up a huge amount of time (he grins). We would like to be just a bit bigger; having a secretary for tasks such as these would be marvelous...

Eva Castro

Yes, we are our own secretary (she laughs).

Holger Kehne

At the moment we are sharing the job. Our budget is relatively small, because we tend to work on unconventional projects. On the other hand we only do things that really interest us. In China we are currently drawing up a master plan for an area covering 19 million square meters. You cannot imagine how big that is, and it's a good assignment. As yet, however, we have not been given the green light for the master plan to be built. For reasons such as these it is very difficult for us to make plans. In that sense the projects in northern Italy are more reliable.

(The baby is slowly becoming restless and making its presence felt. With its big eyes it looks at us full of interest, as if to ask how much longer we are going to be.)

For four months now you have had sleepless nights of a quite different nature...

Eva Castro

I wish that were the case! He is one of those babies who sleep all night and are that much livelier during the day. That makes it difficult to work if you can't show him any attention (she laughs). Now I have to work at night again.

Holger Kehne

Moving close to the office was a huge relief for us, because of course the family also needs a lot of time.



Architects have a different style of working from graphic designers and photographers. They are not so fast and they don't need to worry about being "out of fashion" again next year.



There is a family atmosphere here in the office as well: Not every office has a sofa, a table tennis table and nice music playing in the background.

Eva Castro

For us it's great to get on so well with our colleagues. It's nice, we often go for a meal together, or to bars or parties after work. And our children and Ulla's are about the same age. That's brilliant, because whenever they are here they can play together. Yes, it is actually one big family.

It sounds as if you are a commune....

Eva Castro (she laughs)

No, no! We haven't gone that far.

Have you ever on occasion thought: "Oh no, why on earth did I study architecture?" Despite a nice working atmosphere architecture is ultimately far more than just a job.

Holger Kehne

Of course it's more than that: It's our life, which is why we don't question it. Architects have an important duty and an opportunity to create a basis for something new, to change things. We might well have to find our niches, but everything is always part of a big picture.

Eva Castro

Architects have a different style of working from graphic designers and photographers. They are by no means as fast, but then again they don't need to worry about being "out of fashion" again next year.

How do you go about developing your projects? Where do you get your inspiration for your very special spaces?

**Strata Hotel/Extension Residence
Königswarte**

Alto Adige, Italy



Tetris Haus

San Candido, Italy

**Holger Kehne**

We don't have any specific line in our working methods. We're always working in different ways. We try to develop new spatial continuities and new relationships, to create a new form of openness, to link spaces that are normally divided. But perhaps that is also just a principle.

Esker Haus

San Candido, Italy



It goes without saying that we use specific forms of geometry in our designs, specific continuity in terms of architectural elements. It's probably true to say that we do break with convention if the same element flows from the floor into the wall and then into the ceiling. On the other hand the context is extremely important for us. We design our buildings with the surroundings and the landscape in mind. We work with local materials, but change traditional building types. These materials are mostly cheaper and those involved know how to handle them. We study the local traditions and work with the systems. So our aim is to understand existing processes and come up with a contemporary expression for traditions such as these. *(He shows us a photo of the Tetris House in Bolzano)*

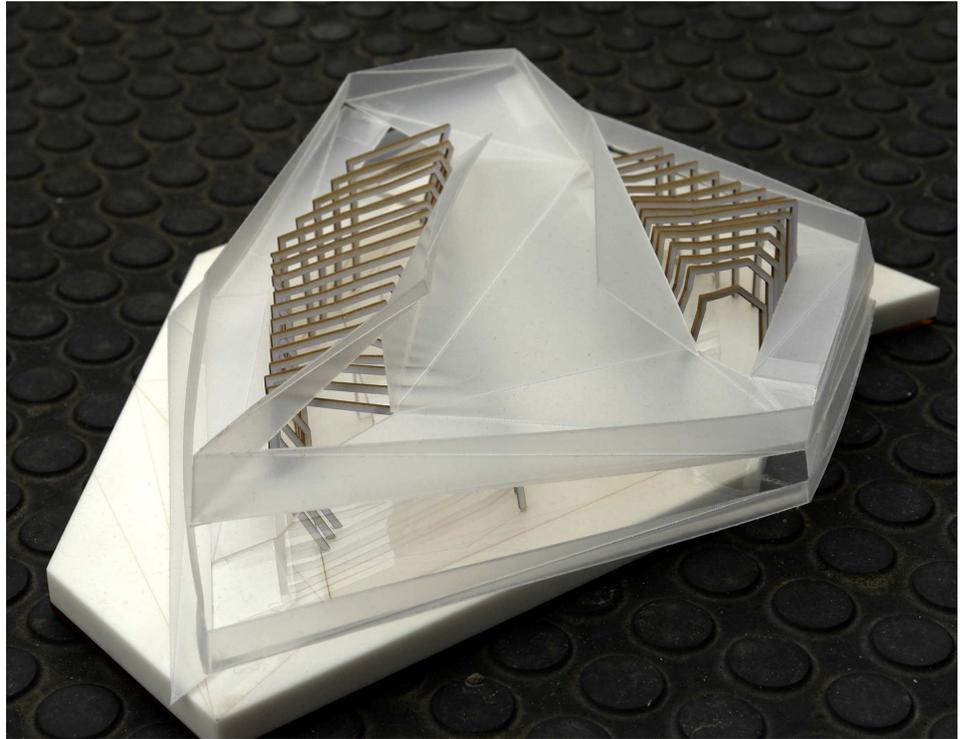
Of course you can only design something like this with state-of-the-art technology such as laser-cutting and information management.

But we have no intention of creating contemporary architecture by, for example, making everything pink (he laughs). The basic idea for the Tetris House was to allow the building to flow into the surroundings. Collaboration with local firms was decisive in this particular project. Using a special computer program a joinery did all the processing for us – we would never have been able to employ so many trainees!

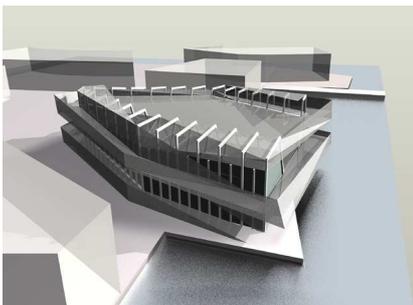
Eva Castro

I think our language is far more decisive than our work process. All our projects have a specific style, specific technology and a certain expression that is evident in all the designs. This is why there is continuity in our work and it is easily recognizable.

XSITE- Entertainment Pavilion
Lido di Jesolo, Italy



And of course the interaction with northern Italy plays a highly decisive role in our way of working. It's like ping-pong between northern Italy and London. The beat of the designs and shapes often corresponds more to that in London, whereas the choice of material mostly references northern Italy. Though we do work digitally, contrary to what a lot of people think we don't just work on a 3D basis, but on a 2D one as well. This is the only way we can check the links between the individual storeys, which for the most part are not visible in rendering. We also work with models, at times several, at others just a few, because it always involves using a lot of time. We're all getting much better and quicker in 3D.



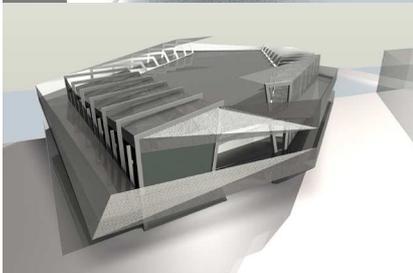
Holger Kehne

Yes, ultimately the way we work on each project depends on the context, in other words the developer, but first and foremost on the amount of time we have.

What are your criteria for choosing or rejecting your projects?

Holger Kehne

Here in London there is a type of project we refer to as our bread and butter. These are projects that pay the mortgage – we don't want to have to do them any more. As we are slowly growing somewhat, we can continue being hard and tough, and just work on projects we choose to. I really can't understand how there can be architects who just design for the money – it's not a good way of earning money: far too stressful and too many headaches!



Yes, at times it seems as if the big architects just copy their own designs and reproduce them elsewhere. With you each individual project has a very strong, unique character.

Holger Kehne

Nowadays someone like Zaha Hadid has more than 250 projects on the go at the same time – in her case that wasn't so ten years ago... in fact back then she had nothing at all. With so many projects architecture just becomes a factory, the mass-production of designs. No one can afford to do that, if so everybody would probably



Tetris Haus

San Candido, Italy, 2007



begin copying and simplifying elements. But at the beginning, when she couldn't really afford to do so, even Zaha Hadid rejected projects if she wasn't convinced of them.

But if you take a look at the major competitions you mostly come across the same familiar five names. Developers want everything very cheap but nonetheless a certain image.

Eva Castro

In my opinion the market is in the process of splitting up into two divisions. In the 1990s there were rather more opportunities, as Rem Koolhaas and FOA experienced. There is nothing like Yokohama any more, it's too big a risk for developers! So now architects like us have to find a way of dealing with this new situation and responding to it.

What work by other young architects do you find interesting?

Holger Kehne

Somehow we don't really have any time to look at what others are doing. In Europe in particular there are a lot of interesting things happening, and there are a lot of good people around. But we don't really have a network, especially not here in London, only a small one at the AA. The architects that spring to mind were as yet unfortunate in that their projects have not been built. They don't have their northern Italy like we do.

Eva Castro

Here in London we actually work extremely isolated. Take a look out of the window: London is chic, hip and super cool, but not in the least critical. If anything the architects' scene is more critical in Spain and Berlin.





For me there are various truths that can all lead to good results.

What would your dream project be?

Eva Castro

A cultural project would appeal to me; though there are strict parameters you can play with the social situation. But planning a hospital can be just as appealing. Any project can have a charm all of its own. I think a good develop is more important than the building assignment. A developer can make working on a project much more awful than the actual design assignment ever could, believe me!

To finish up is there any message you would like to give the next generation of architects?

Holger Kehne (pointing to Eva)

A great question, the Messiah is sitting right there!

Eva Castro

No, I'm no Messiah, I'm a pragmatist. For me there are various truths that can all lead to good results. So one ought not to set out in search of the right way, but preferably start creating a good way for oneself.

Holger Kehne, Eva Castro



Holger Kehne

I always say: If you don't really love what you do, don't bother doing it!

Eva Castro

Never study architecture! I really hope my children don't... (she laughs)

Eva Castro and Holger Kehne were in conversation with Jeanette Kunsmann.

Jeanette Kunsmann was born in 1983 in Dortmund and has been living in Berlin for six years. Last year she was on the editorial staff of Arch+ and has been writing for BauNetz since this summer.

project management: Andrea Nakath

Works

Strata Hotel/Extension Residence
Königswarte
new-built four star apart hotel
Alto Adige, Italy, 2007



Tetris Haus

multi-family residential compound

San Candido, Italy,

Completion: 2007



Esker Haus

San Candido, Italy

Completion: 2006



Hotel Puerta America

Madrid, Spain

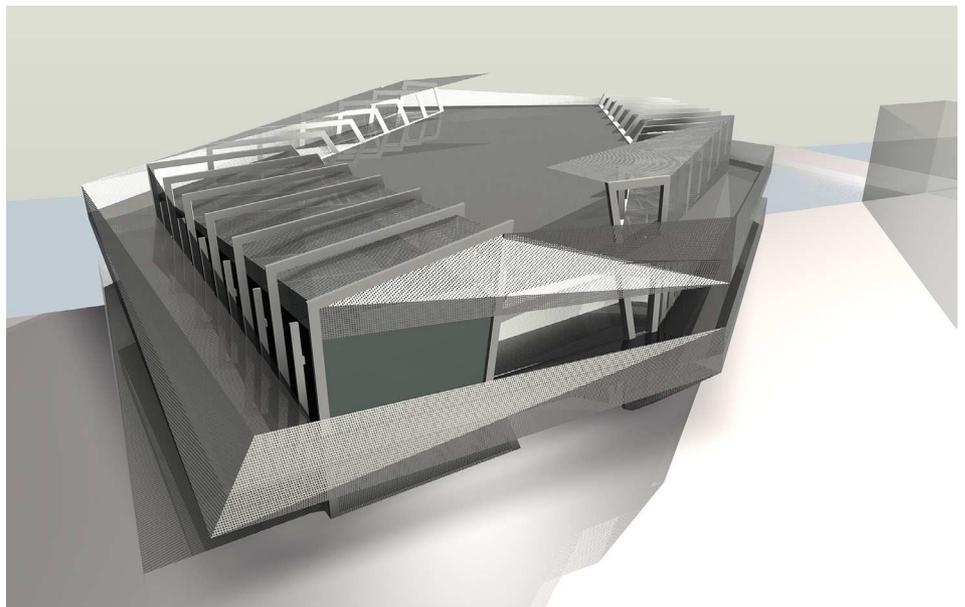
Completion: 2005



3G- Inaugural installation
at Extension gallery
Chicago, USA, 2006



XSITE- entertainment pavilion for
Lido di Jesolo
Commission to complement a
collection of projects by 10 of the
leading emergent European archi-
tects, Italy, 2008



Universitäts- und Landesbiblio-
thek Darmstadt
Limited two-stage competition,
2005

