

Juan Herreros: Everything is a Project

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# Juan Herreros: Everything is a Project

## Interview by Ernesto Silva

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The Spanish Architect Juan Herreros has been a Guest Professor at institutions like the University of Princeton, the Institute of Technology of Illinois and the Architectural Association in London, among others. He is currently Professor at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid and Director of Columbia GSAPP Advanced Studios. His works have been awarded and displayed at individual and collective exhibitions in several institutions, amongst which stand out the MoMA (New York) and the biennials of Venice, Istanbul, Spain and Ibero-America. Estudio Herreros nowadays has projects in Spain, Norway, France, Morocco, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay and Argentina.

Juan Herreros's work merges, in a constant negotiation, the exercise of his professional practice, teaching and research, as it is evident in this interview, in which he stresses that work strategies are an important part of the design process, constituting subject-matter of the project.

*We often describe design strategies as a system of operations and relationships that allow orienting the complex and sometimes unknown process of decision taking that sustains the project. Can we start talking about the role played by the project in the discussion about design strategies – a topic you have been dealing with simultaneously at the seminars you teach and in the framework or action of your office?*

It is quite right to associate the act of projecting with the establishment of a series of strategies to deal with questions about the discipline that each project wants to discuss. In other words, the project is a way of thinking that looks for the synthesis of a series of physical, urban, architectural or social matters that construct the present. In order to do so, each project has to produce its own discourse that leads the selection or invention of its topics and methods of work and the establishment of what for some time has been called 'the project's project'. Understood in this way, every project has to respond to three different intentions: the first one refers to the specific case that deals with or guides the effectivity of architecture to solve what others identify as problems; the second refers to the biographical role the project wants to play in the daily conversation each architect has with his work and the ideas of evolution that feed him; and the third one refers to the confrontation of that conversation – regardless of how anonymous and removed from all media focus it may be – with the discipline world, something that allows any colleague to understand where his work is in the discipline map.

*When we speak about project strategies, how do you think the three aspects that to a great extent characterize your development as an architect relate to one another: profession, academic work and research?*

The easy answer is to say that everything is related, but in the course of time I have come to the conclusion that each of those three worlds is autonomous enough to be a privileged observatory from where to interrogate the other two and, in that sense, I think its isolation seems positive. Professional practice is full of contingencies and renunciations that have to be incorporated into the project in a juggling exercise searching for the best possible balance, something that is not always achieved. The academic world functions away from reality in a speculative and ideal environment that invites reflection, concept argumentation, experimentation and enrichment of the design process with many and varied ingredients. Its educational grandeur is based precisely on that separation from reality and that is why I have a critical position regarding the pedagogical system that proposes training students in situations that they are supposedly going to live in their professional life, reducing the project to a mere solution of problems without any critical or creative sense. To sum up, research is an even more isolated, pure and protected territory. After all, the Greek root of the word "theory" means "contemplate" and, by derivation, "speculation obtained from observation", something like looking

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## Theory needs isolation to build the environment in which speculation can contribute with more radical and unexpected readings of all-time issues.



*Dialogue Architecture* (La Oficina, 2013) collects material presented by Herreros Arquitectos at the XIII Venice Architecture Biennale. It presents forms, constructive details and letters without any reference to the buildings they belong to. The intention is to open a dialogue for new explorations. Source: laoficinaediciones.com



Jens Richter (1977) is an architect and urban planner of the University of Kassel, Germany. He has worked with Herreros Arquitectos since its beginning in 2006. In 2014 he became First Partner. Source: estudioherrerros.com



Casa Garoza is the prototype of a 75 m<sup>2</sup> extensible modular house. It was nominated for the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2011, and was a finalist for the Architectural Review House Awards of 2012 and the XI Bienal Española de Arquitectura y Urbanismo of 2011. Source: estudioherrerros.com



The corporative headquarters of Hispasat (2,300 m<sup>2</sup>), which dates back to the late 70s, was completely remodelled by Herreros Arquitectos in 2010. Sources: estudioherrerros.com; collectiveblog.net



The Munch Museum, located in Oslo and currently in progress, is a 16,000 m<sup>2</sup> building with a full transcendental urban role. Source: estudioherrerros.com



Ágora Bogotá is an international convention center designed by Estudio Herreros in collaboration with Daniel Bermúdez Arquitectos. The building, of 70,400 m<sup>2</sup>, fulfills a symbolic function.



Cedric Price (1934-2003) was an English architect who founded the Polyark network of architecture schools. He studied at the University of Cambridge and the AA. His most famous work, Fun Place, has been described as a giant toy and as a transformable machine the size of a building. Source: cedricprice.com

from outside in order to understand better. Theory needs isolation to build the environment in which speculation can contribute with more radical and unexpected readings of all-time issues.

*The words 'dialogue' and 'conversation' are omnipresent in your discourse. In fact, one of your most committed projects is not a building but the book Dialogue Architecture that collects your studio's contribution to the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. You seem to want to complete this coming and going from academy to practice and from practice to theory with an expansion of architecture outside its frontiers until it has become an acknowledged element of importance in the construction of a work programme. How do you transfer this to your projects? Could you give some examples?*

*Dialogue Architecture* was a clean copy of our work method based on the dialogue that stages the transformation of my studio into a working group which Jens Richter joins as a necessary partner or interlocutor. When we spoke of dialogue we referred to the meeting with the company of modular systems that built Casa Garoza; with the users of the recycling of the headquarters of Hispasat who claimed for a very environmentally demanding building capable of constructing the image of the company; with the social and political activists who surrounded the design of the Munch Museum in Oslo; with the consultants of various countries insisting with us on making a building of almost 80,000 m<sup>2</sup> without air conditioning in Bogotá ... But it is also a review of our project routines that made us understand that the way in which we used to draw diagrams of the equipment or systematically suggested a constructive drawing of the façade that tried to summarise the whole project were already ingredients of an established schedule.

*Radical and experimental are two attributes that are always mentioned when discussing the project strategies that I would like to relate to an architect that you knew well and about whom you have written; I refer to Cedric Price, who oddly enough was in contact with conservative clients for whom he developed projects we could define as radical. In your case, how could you define radical design strategies in architecture, understanding that along your career you have created a discussion of the frontiers of the discipline working from its canonical subjects?*

Perhaps the words 'radical' and 'experimental' have been exhausted by repeating them so much and we should redefine their meaning fifty years after they came up in the discourses of the '60s. Experimenting has to do with exploring an unknown territory with an essayistic attitude in what refers to the premeditated use of the project tools: representation, construction, technique, and so on. Defining what is experimental as an essayistic way of thinking supposes uncertainty – and failure with it – as an ingredient of the project process.

Radicalism consists in removing things from their comfort zone to take them to a limit beyond which we do not know what there is. The intention is to go back to the roots to understand what is essential and what are those superfluous adherences that have been stuck to the nucleus of ideas in the course of time. Cedric Price enquires into the roots of architecture asking with a certain severity how to be a necessary architect in his time. This denies the committed and radical condition of the figure of Price, but it moves away from the simplicity with which his dangerous fans often describe his radicalism.

*If you had to venture a genealogy of architects that have made it possible to redefine certain aspects of the discipline, a topic that this issue of Materia intends to discuss, how would you describe the capacity of practice, academia and theory to act from the periphery to influence the canonical – and therefore central – aspects of the discipline?*

It seems to me that the moments when practice and its technologies dominate, alternate with others in which academia or theory occupy the scene. Thus, we can understand whether Cedric Price was important in his time, then the AA of Boyarsky may be relevant, and afterwards the appearance of Aldo Rossi or Venturi may be influential, making room for the 80s with an intense built production, and so we could successfully speak of replacement by institutions like Columbia, architects like Koolhaas or theorists like Mark Wigley. And I believe that for us, architects who build, those periods when practice takes second place behind theory or the academic forum of discussion are very important, because the capacity to influence of architects who practise the profession is much reduced when it is not implemented by those who do the external reading of what is produced.

Returning to Cedric Price, we can add other heterodox architects like Fuller or Alejandro de la Sota, but the truth is that, even though they were mythical at the time – and perhaps not as leading as we want to imagine – they were not essential for the account of architecture for decades, a situation that was extended until several people brought them to the present, building a pertinent description of their meaning, which supposes accepting that the genealogy of ideas is a very interesting mixture within the actual productions and successive readings we do of these productions.

*This seems very interesting and reminds me that one of the most direct meanings of the word 'research' is precisely re-search, to search again under new conditions that are being re-made in each case. Then, in your view, what would be more relevant to associate with research and academia, a redefinition of the same subjects that are transferred in time or an isolated experimentation of issues of the moment?*

★ Alvin Boyarsky (1928-1990) was a Polish-Canadian architect who directed the AA School of Architecture from 1971 until he died, transforming the institution into an important international cultural model. Boyarsky did not believe in a study plan and gave freedom to tutors to establish their own programmes and follow their own interests and manifestos. Sources: [aaschool.ac.uk](http://aaschool.ac.uk); [architectural-review.com](http://architectural-review.com)

★ Aldo Rossi (1931-1997) was an Italian architect and theorist. In the 50s and 60s he was part of the team of editors of *Casabella-Continuità*. He is the author of *Architecture of the City* (1966) and *Scientific Autobiography* (1981). He won the Pritzker Prize in 1990. Source: [fondazionealdorossi.org](http://fondazionealdorossi.org)

★ Robert Venturi (1925) is a North American architect and theorist. He is the author of *Complexity and contradiction in architecture* (1966) and co-author of *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), written with Denise Scott Brown (his wife, with whom he worked from 1969 to his retirement in 2012) and Steven Izenour. He won the Pritzker Prize in 1990. Source: [pritzkerprize.com](http://pritzkerprize.com)

★ Rem Koolhaas (1944) is a Dutch architect and theorist who worked initially as a journalist and script writer. In 1975 he founded OMA (The Office for Metropolitan Architecture) together with his wife, Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis and Zoe Zenghelis. He is the author of *Delirious New York* (1978) and *S,M,L,XL* (1994). He won the Pritzker Prize in 2000. Source: [pritzkerprize.com](http://pritzkerprize.com)

★ Mark Wigley (1956) is a Neozelander architect and theorist. He is currently Professor at Columbia GSAPP, where he was the Dean between 2004 and 2014. He is the author of *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (1998); *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (1995); and *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (1993). Sources: [moma.org](http://moma.org); [arch.columbia.edu](http://arch.columbia.edu)

★ R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) was a North American architect, inventor, theorist and visionary. He worked to solve global problems of housing, transport, education, energy, environmental destruction and poverty. He is author of 28 books, amongst which the following stand out *Utopia or Oblivion: the Prospects for Humanity* (Bantam Books, 1969) and *Critical Path* (St. Martin's Press, 1981). His best known 'artefact', the Geodesic Dome, has been produced more than 300,000 times. Source: [bfi.org](http://bfi.org)

★ Alejandro de la Sota (1913-1996) was a Spanish architect who promoted the industrialisation of architecture in the 70s. His works are characterised by a marked constructive approach, among them stands out the Maravillas College Gynasium (Madrid, 1960-1962). Source: [alejandrodelasota.org](http://alejandrodelasota.org)

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The experimental, essayistic condition in research, mainly for those of us who cannot be considered professional researchers, is basic. The essay, understood as a risk pill that includes a remarkable possibility of failure, but its mere attempt may nourish a material with which others, who are true researchers and can dedicate time to developing these suggestions, may accomplish important things.

The mythology that has introduced the word 'laboratory' into the architectural discourse has reached the mantra status which is repeated without paying attention to its meaning, because a laboratory is, by definition, an isolated place, in which disconnected variables of the external world are identified and analysed, then to be reinserted into the original body or means. This association between isolating ingredients and experimental condition may help architecture look for a balance between positions that are too contextualised and that ignore every local condition. The academic environment is ideal for understanding this approach, especially in globalised schools in which project topics travel around the world in the hands of young people with different education and origins, generating a surprising wealth of interpretations.

*How do you relate this experimental condition to the immediate future of students who face a labour market that does not seem to be looking for this type of skills?*

Undoubtedly, one of the major difficulties in the preparation of our pedagogical programmes is establishing the portion of the connection with reality and the experimental portion. I am very fond of the European education of techniques as support for more creative ideas, like design tools, like systems of problem invention and not as systems of problem solution. In this sense, I always argue with those who concentrate the teaching of architecture exclusively on the capacity of future young architects to solve known problems because it is supposed that with that identity card they can get a job in any studio. My conclusion is that the most coveted profile by architecture studios is a healthy mixture of technical knowledge as a support of creative ideas with creative, experimental and risky capacity of design.

*European schools of architecture with a technical, professional approach have had an evident influence on the Latin American academia. I would like you to deepen more into this aspect in relation to the constructive detail and its capacity to encourage dialogue, creating problem invention, because I believe there is a wrong intention in the transfer of this technical knowledge, understood exclusively as a practical professional skill.*

In architecture and the Spanish schools of the '80s there was a passion for the constructive detail. In Madrid, as well as in Barcelona, a new generation of excellent construction professors with a very good architectural training and

great capacity for design built the substrate for this new constructive culture, but also for the disbelief of its sublime condition and the appearance of a sector that rejected detail as a tool for project validation. In a certain way, I have the feeling that the Spanish architecture of the last 30 years lives an interesting division between the project as an eminently constructive fact, understood as an heroic process with a desire to remain, and the project as a process of selection and assembly of dissimilar and unexpected resources that assumes the fragility of the present as an exciting condition.

*You wrote a very demolishing text entitled: Detalles constructivos y otros fetiches perversos (Constructive details and other perverse fetishes)...*

This text is a literal transcription – and, therefore, disappointing – of a lecture with all the typical blunders of oral communication, but it states with clarity my opposition to the idea of projecting from the general to the particular to end up engrossed in the details displayed like a fetish collection and, so, its perversity. Understood like this, constructive detail reveals the handling of materials, the tactile fascination for surfaces, and the entertainment in the complexity of encounters, generating the extreme Mannerism that characterised architecture in late 20<sup>th</sup> Century reaching its paroxysm with the wrongly called ‘minimalism’. I must confess an almost funny animadversion for the rescue of some principles that art had abandoned twenty years before and that served to develop an elitist, very expensive, repressive architecture, pretending to be eternal again. In front of this position, it is easy to understand the desire for freedom in the use of materials and technical resources and the options offered by the industry in the use of resources that hardly need transforming, foreign to the pretence of durability of the last years. In this sense, it is necessary to progress in the teaching of construction as a territory for creativity as open and generous as design itself.

*When speaking about design or cognitive processes associated to design, there are three words whose meaning is frequently confused: ‘concept’, ‘argument’ and ‘strategy’. And it seems that their definition might be nowadays the real ‘DNA’ of any conversation about design processes.*

This is a very difficult and apparently key subject, because the three are words continuously and almost simultaneously used as if they meant the same, without considering the difference between them. What is clear is that the three words refer to acts of invention – definitely, they are designed – specified for each occasion by every architect. In other words, there is no previous menu of concepts, strategies and arguments in a pure state, ready to be used, until we make them our own by means of the creative act of naming or describing them.

We can agree that the project moves on those three levels as if they were three layers that slide among one another: the concept level selects and

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**The project moves on those three levels as if they were three layers that slide among one another: the concept level selects and names the ideas on which work needs to be done regardless of the physical conditions; the argument level constructs the explanation, the communication and the transmission of what the project wants to be; the strategic level, in turn, establishes the mechanisms of work activated in each case.**

names the ideas on which work needs to be done regardless of the physical conditions; the argument level constructs the explanation, the communication and the transmission of what the project wants to be; the strategic level, in turn, establishes the mechanisms of work activated in each case. The three levels form an open system in permanent evolution during the process of work and design decisions are taken in all three. And, in a certain way, projecting is repeating a vast number of times the same questions about pertinence, failure or review of mobilised concepts, arguments and strategies.

*And in that sense, what would be the negotiation or friction that in your opinion the work methods or procedures in this triad of concept, argument and strategy must play?*


Although I will repeat myself if I say that each project has its own concepts, arguments and strategies, it seems important to stress it so that it is more evident that the method of work is part of the design and that it has to be faced with a profound critical conscience, without previous judgements. The contemporary project has multiplied its complexity exponentially and deserves more than ever a previous discussion on the most pertinent method in each case: what team? what consultants?, what information resources?, what confrontation routines?, what systems of time control and expenses?... These issues seem too pragmatic, but if at the same time we ask questions such as why we want to do this project or participate in this competition, what opportunity or benefit we expect to obtain, what other matters —social, technical, energy, political – we want to explore through them, what theoretical questions are involved in this case, we will be showing our own methods of work and, in a certain way, designing the architect we want to be, perhaps the most profound intellectual construction, the most ambitious and most difficult we face every day, and also the legacy that may serve others in very different ways. I dare say that neither Rossi, nor Koolhaas, nor Venturi will be significantly remembered by their works but rather for the importance of the way in which they work, by the way in which they have produced the crisis of certain untouchable ingredients in our profession for the benefit of all of us.

*I would like to finish by asking you about your global practice. You have insisted on saying that you are not interested in international architecture understood as an export of autistic models, when they are not obsolete, to contexts that receive them with a certain naivety accepting the annihilation of their local conditions. However, your studio works in Norway, France, Morocco and the whole of Latin America. What are you looking for in those contexts? Can you give some examples?*

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the big professional offices invaded the cities of developing economies with models that were in crisis in their countries of origin, creating something like a surplus sale, orders came up to design the

progress symbols of the Middle East and Southeast Asia, creating a market apparently reserved for the celebrity stars of architecture. What we call the internationalisation of architecture reaches that far. However, in the latest years, a line of work consisting of lower scale orders has emerged, carried out by smaller studios, capable of tuning into local conditions and taking the trouble of doing their best and reinterpret specific variables of the context in which they operate, creating a valuable synthesis of their own and somebody else's ingredients. This careful and indulgent look of the external observer is what we have wanted to display in our **Korea project** which builds a kind of open air living room for individual use, active during 24 hours, and, incidentally, pays tribute to the forgotten activists that mobilised to demand democracy for the country; or in the **Panama coastal parks** that allow residents to find that they were living in a city without a public space; or in the **residential complex in Marsella** that deals with an impossible climate in which the most unpleasant winds coincide with the best views, and so on. In every case, our work is based on the lines we have explored in this conversation: reading the context, choosing the ingredients that interest us, re-describing the starting point through these elements to generate a zero point that is already a design act and operate with it to reinsert it into the city or territory. Thus, a piece that can initially seem odd, ends up, in the best of cases, revealing latent aspects of the means in which it operates or ingredients already invisible for the residents, who recognise them in this strange object that appears in their environment.

### *What has this global thinking to do with your work in emerging practices?*

Our students and young architects of today have, in front of them, a very different scene from that of previous generations. Beyond the necessary reflection on how to adapt our pedagogical systems for a practice in which design and constructing buildings will not be omnipresent, it is important to open the door so that very young architects can expand their notion of project to any design action, widening their field of action without the size of their studios being determining for them to work away from home. For this, well understood global thinking will make it possible to establish alliances and diversify practice, renounce total control or ambition to design to the last screw, summon the best for occasional collaborations. In several courses and seminars like those you and I have shared in Columbia, it is evident that there is a prevailing need to blow a fresh air of optimism to students who find that they cannot take the practice of their professors as a model, that they will rather have to design their own work agenda. That will be their first big project. 



Communication Hut is a 460 m<sup>2</sup> public space built in Gwangju, South Korea, in 2011. It is defined as a simple manifesto of contemporary architecture. It has a room that lights up and heats, informs, emits sounds and smells and facilitates Wi-Fi connection. Source: [estudioherreros.com](http://estudioherreros.com)



Parques Litorales is a 261,430 m<sup>2</sup> linear public space that runs along a motorway, increasing the value of decayed neighbourhoods in the City of Panama. The park won the 2015 Engineering News-Record Prize. Source: [estudioherreros.com](http://estudioherreros.com)



EcoCité is a 23,300 m<sup>2</sup> residential complex located in Marsella, whose architectural argument is the succession of noisy street, dense garden, collective rooftop terrace, private loggia. Source: [estudioherreros.com](http://estudioherreros.com)

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