We must do our best to Listen...

Sarah Stevens and Charlotte Erckrath interview Alberto Pérez-Gómez

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One wonderful opportunity of deploying this editorship as an explorative tool was the opportunity to speak with people who have been emersed in researching these concerns throughout their careers. We were privileged to have the opportunity to speak with Alberto Pérez-Gómez whose work has been inspirational for both us and countless others. Alberto is an architectural historian and theorist, and Saidye R. Bronfman Professor Emeritus in Architecture at McGill University School of Architecture, Montreal. What follows is a transcript of that conversation.

Our sincere thanks to Alberto for his time and enthusiasm (19th March 2024).

Sarah Stevens (SS): *We have been exploring the designerly implications of an acceptance of our entangled relationship with the world through the editorial process for this issue of the journal. Ideas of embodiment are obviously fundamental to this, so could we begin with discussing why addressing architecture through this lens is so important?*

Alberto Pérez-Gómez (APG): My first contact with a critique of Cartesianism and the resultant issues of embodied consciousness came through the work of José Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish philosopher from the last century who worked with Edmund Husserl. He was a contemporary of Martin Heidegger, but contrary to the German philosopher, he wrote in very clear and simple Spanish prose. That is how I started thinking about this. I came to the realization that crucial issues in architectural meaning would profit enormously from a careful consideration
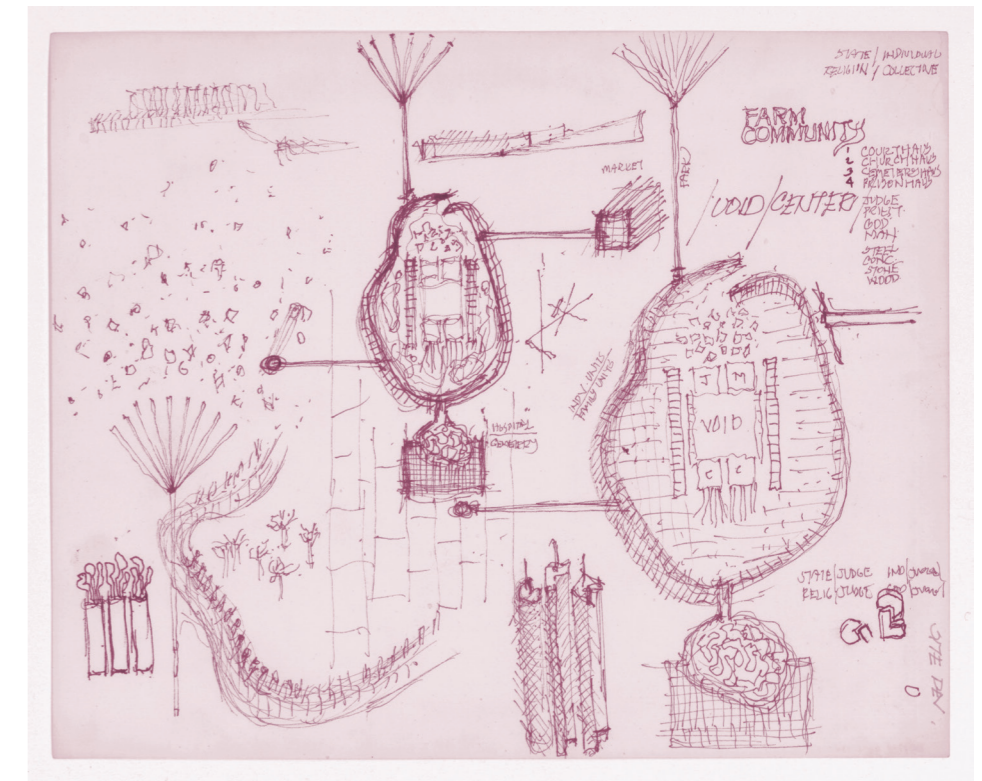
John Hejduk, *Site development* (1980-1982), Courtesy of John Hejduk fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, © Estate of John Hejduk

of these critiques in modern philosophy.

When I went to England I met Dalibor Vesely and Joseph Rykwert at the University of Essex where I studied and stayed to complete my PhD, working in the end mostly with Dalibor. He introduced me to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, crucial for the development of all my later work in architectural theory, and a philosopher that after suffering the critiques of deconstruction, now has been recovered in philosophy and many other disciplines, both in Europe and North America. In my case, that lead to hermeneutics and the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. This is why I have an affinity with this way of working with words. Language is something that architects have tended to misunderstand and have put aside for a couple of hundred years. My other preferred tools, for example hand drawing and model skills, are also to do with Merleau-Ponty's discovery of pre-reflective, embodied consciousness and language.

In this regard, the period of the European 18th century is very interesting, and is an area that usually architecture training doesn't cover well. At that time there was already an early reaction to Cartesianism, and architects trying to understand problems of expression as analogous to linguistic expression. That period ends in the wonderful work of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Étienne-Louis Boullée, but such concerns were generally disregarded after the rise of functionalism. Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand's work on functionalism was then exported all over the world. Now, critically, the principles of Durand's instrumental theory remain implicit in the way that architecture is thought mostly everywhere.

I think the issue for me is if I can recover something of that, of what I think was there as a possibility already in the European 18th century. While classical architecture placed and emphasis on symbolic geometries reflecting cosmological orders, language was always important, and Vitruvius incorporates it into design practices so that outcomes could be appropriate, responsible and ethical. Today, lacking a universal cosmological referent, hermeneutics must become central, important as history, but also as a capacity to

engage ethical and poetic intentions through language, since language tends to be incredibly good at representing quality. Quality is what we are seeking in identifying places with meaning and to propose atmospheres that might be appropriate for human situations, which is what we normally call the 'architectural program', the promise the architects make to others for the common good. The program of architecture. That's more or less what I have instigated in my teaching, and there's a lot of work to be done. There are colleagues working on this in various places in Europe and North America, many former students and kindred colleagues.

SS: *You discuss John Hejduk's work in your book Attunement and how he used language. Could you say something about this?*

APG: Hejduk's work is the most helpful and I certainly recommend looking at this. He was part of a group of architects with deep roots in European modernism back in the 70s and early 80s that also included Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves and Richard Meier. They all eventually became very different and they each went their own way. Hejduk discovered the rich potential of poetic program and he is most interesting in the way that he brings language to bear on his design practices, producing poignant drawings, poems and masques. It is very fascinating also what he managed to accomplish pedagogically at the Cooper Union.

Charlotte Erckrath (CE): *Could you speak about the link between language and embodiment?*

APG: This is a huge philosophical topic that touches upon the very nature of consciousness, so indeed a big problem. I can only provide a simplified sketch of how I see this. Many scholars and philosophers interested in phenomenology are interested in language and hermeneutics and continue to debate the issue.

Merleau-Ponty wrote a little essay, I think it is called *The Phenomenology of Language* and his position, simply

stated, is that language emerges from gesture, it is not something separate from embodiment. So therefore, it is connected to habit. Habit is a very important concept for Merleau-Ponty, and also for contemporary enactive cognitive scientists because habit stands for skillful knowing, for motor skills. Merleau-Ponty and other philosophers have tried to tackle this problem in particular with a marriage of sociology and phenomenology, a kind of sociological phenomenology. They think of language as something that emerges from gesture. Alva Noë speaks about this through relating it to how primates groom each other to establish some form of communication. So, language begins without noises. Then originally polysemic, poetic speech becomes denotative and acquires specific meanings that we try to contain in order to be able to speak like we're doing right now, so that there is as little slippage as possible between what I'm saying and what you're understanding. We constrain the language but, in its origin, it is like gesture and it is therefore poetic and is fundamentally polysemic rather than denotative and univocal. Many philosophers have talked about this and how language is contextual and situational, but that's the way that I understand it. Language is really part of gesture and it has to be understood as emerging from the bottom up, rather than something that is independent or codified, arbitrary or imposed and kind of operating top down.

Therefore, poetic language allows me to express something to others that might bring us together rather than pull us apart. The obsession of linguists has generally been to constrain language so much that we speak some kind of universal Esperanto. Their hope is that such language could bring us together, yet history seems to suggest that such tendencies, perhaps best exemplified by the 'languages' that enable technology, are rather pulling in a completely opposite direction. Despite obvious difficulties, it is rather our quotidian polysemic languages that

enable real communication, not to say poetic speech, and this has enormous ramifications.

Someone that writes very eloquently about this problem is George Steiner. You may know his books, such as *After Babel*. He doesn't call himself a phenomenological linguist but he deals with the problem of language very much from that perspective. It's very different from the conventional understanding of language. The argument is that languages have diversified with our human species, which is in itself quite wonderful and mysterious. We are unique precisely because of the plurality of our languages. If you think for example that birds of a certain species may be able to have limited communication. How as one animal species we have so many languages is very unique. According to George Steiner, in the nineteenth century there were probably around 5,000 different languages spoken on our planet. Of course, they seem to be dwindling, but that's also a mystery because some linguists in this line of thinking would argue that languages don't die, they just transform. So, in a way regardless of what language we speak around the world, somehow, paradoxically, we may also be speaking the same language.

Thus, I understand that language is deeply connected with our human embodiment, and just as in embodiment we are very diverse, language becomes diverse. But there is also the hope that if we communicate poetically, we can talk to each other. This of course is the hope of architecture, that it might bring people together, even in our world of terrible, perpetual conflict.

SS: *We have been thinking about embodiment and atmospheres in relation to situatedness. When it comes to architecture and designing space how might we think about this in terms of the body and space? Might we be inhabiting event and constructing our environment through this?*

APG: I do talk about situatedness, but perhaps in a different sense than other disciplines. Instead,

I use situated as in the making of situations, architecture being fundamentally an event to be lived by human beings – more than a question of touristic visits or aesthetic judgement. I think you could say the physicality of architecture contributes to the possibility of the event. So, the architect who designs the building that becomes an environment for an event has to be mindful of these things.

You're absolutely right that the event is actually made by us who inhabit it, particularly by our capacity to communicate and be together in relation, whichever kind of programmatic situation we may find ourselves in. It is a little bit like the problem of encountering a poetic work that you actually make when you read or say it out loud. It doesn't exist without that condition. So, I think that is one of the biggest challenges in this approach that I think we share. The difficulty is that whatever we do in the world, however good we are at conjuring up the possibilities of events that may bring people into communication, which is really what makes us human, is that we still have to design in a world that is fundamentally reticent. People who live in their screens and their phones construct space where this public dimension tends to be put aside as if it's not important. So, whatever we do in the world, however good we are at conjuring up the possibilities of events, we face this challenge. I think communication is crucial to being human, we are only complete by communicating with others, and I mean of course embodied communication, which is more than information conveyance, and is perhaps the only possibility to find some purpose in our life.

This is a very important issue to discuss for creation and performance. Even if we are very aware of the situation and we are very talented, we can do things that are fantastic and yet people really don't live in space properly. This is because we construct a place as geometric space, and basically don't see any difference between

being behind a computer and sitting around a table with somebody, or having a nice meal and a glass of wine. It is a real problem that we have to face, because you need the reader to make the poetry alive. Take the example of Hejduk who we discussed earlier. He never was interested in building anything. His designs were sometimes built by others and he was OK with it. But he was never very invested in such operations, for being keenly aware of the fact that if you construct a theoretical or critical project as a real building in the hedonistic world of technology, it will likely lose its value. He thought that paradoxically architecture could not 'exist' in the consumer world that we have created. I choose not to be so pessimistic. I'd never talk to students like that for example, there is good architecture happening in the world, but it is difficult.

I think that is the real issue when one thinks about events. That the experience of the event often happens in situations that are not part of the artist's or the architect's palette. There is a nice book titled *All Things Shining* by a couple of phenomenological philosophers, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, about how literature can bring us together through this kind of spark that unites. They talk very nicely about how sports events bring people together, through experience which parallels ritual from religion when it was powerful and brought people together. This is the kind of togetherness that one talks about as an event that makes you whole, where you tend to perceive that the meaning of your life is connected with a public act of participation. It's not something that happens privately in your house, it blooms when you participate in the public event. That's hard to find in architecture programmes, and it is not often that one has the opportunity as an architect to engage with this. The nature of the event is that it's ephemeral and architecture provides a setting for it.

CE: *In an MA Course we ran in Bergen we were exploring how we might design if we considered as a starting point the body in movement*

through space. One of the things we were concerned with was the potential of this temporal perspective of architectural experience for evolving multiple readings. Might you share your thoughts on temporality in design?

APG: I write about temporality, which I take from Husserl and now also from neurophenomenology. Philosophers and scientists have been looking at the question of how we actually perceive time through both, phenomenological, first-person accounts and by studying how our neural networks fire. It is very important because a lot of architects have understood, I think even from the 18th century, that physical movement is an issue in design. Particularly through the 19th century and even in the 20th century, architects like early Corbusier for example, tended to conceptualize this question as a kind of linear, almost cinematographic montage, where the temporal experience is made up of discrete instances that themselves are nothing. What we now understand better is that when we talk about motion and kinestesia together with cross sensory perception, we are actually dealing with a mode of temporality that is not linear. A metaphor for the present moment often used is that it is like a ship with a prow and a bow, and so there is a kind of thickness to the present, effectively making presence possible. So, it is a hugely important issue.

My students in the 80s or 90s always confronted me because Derrida, whose work was fashionable in architecture at the time through deconstruction, was critical of the question of presence. They pointed to his essays on art and Van Gogh, or even when he tried to tackle Merleau-Ponty, which he couldn't really as Merleau-Ponty was one of the few people that could not really be deconstructed so easily. This perspective is really critical in terms of an understanding of temporality that missconstructs time as a point in the present, a point that doesn't exist. A lot of the philosophy and human sciences have taken from deconstruction

and in fact, sometimes even take it on critically as a position these days, and hence really misconstrue things because of this fundamental misunderstanding of temporality.

When Heidegger speaks about the peasant's life in Van Gogh's shoes, Derrida makes fun of it. Heidegger's essay is called *La verité en peinture*, which means truth in painting or truth through painting. Art, poetry and painting for Heidegger, become the places where you can have access to human truths. Derrida makes fun of it and calls his essay *La verité en pointure*, in French pointure is the size of the shoe. It is very clever: *La Verité en Pointure* to *La Verité en Peinture*. Because he's trying to say that the only thing that you know for sure of the shoe is when you measure it, that there's no truth in a way that Heidegger describes truth appearing through Van Gogh's work. Only when one understands properly how temporality works can one grasp and grant that the arts open up to truths in presence.

The Gate of the Kiss by Brancusi in Targa Jiu, Romania, part of a "trilogy" of sculptures that marks the city, including one of his infinite columns.

So, to go back to your question and understand movement properly, it is necessary to have the right understanding of temporality. Rather than a linear route through a building, such as Corbusier's ramp through Villa Savoy, which is fine, but when you actually live in architecture, motility or mobility is something else. It's not just this kind of track that you take through the building, and to understand this requires the right understanding of temporality.

CE: *... we were looking to the English Landscape Garden.*

APG: ... that's very much the beginning of that.

CE: *Might you say something about phenomenology and the subjective?*

APG: There's a wonderful Danish philosopher who writes very well against object-oriented ontologists who are very critical of phenomenology. They basically argue that for them ontological is objective and phenomenology,

according to their reading, is subjective. Merleau-Ponty insists that the position of phenomenology is really cosmocentric, it's ambivalent, because it inevitably involves embodied consciousness (originally pre-reflective), but the ambivalence really can be understood much better. That is why I sometimes quote some philosophy of mind from Hindu or Buddhist sources to argue for co-emergence. In our experience of the world, ultimately if you push things to the limit, you cannot give priority to the subjective, to the objective or to the action that connects the subject to the object. Everything ultimately emerges together. It is not the case that the truth of the world is either subjective, from Descartes where it's all thoughts that I think, or it's objective and it's all in the stuff of the world. It doesn't do justice to reality and ultimately you cannot decide. In fact, it emerges together, and we're always confronted with this enigma which is human consciousness.

Phenomenology talks about human consciousness but never assumes it to be the ego of Descartes, because of the question of embodiment, which is also in the world. If consciousness is also in the world, it cannot be purely subjective, that's the argument in cartoon sketch form, that could be made against the object-oriented ontology. They would basically argue that you have a concept in your head, you design with it, you bring it to fruition and then it acquires meaning by the virtue of being out there. This is really the license to Zaha Hadid and so many disciples to make funny buildings that happen anywhere in the world, regardless of place qualities. Ultimately that's why there is a kind of allegiance between this philosophical position and these very extreme formalists I am skeptical about. It's not untrue that anything that exists in the world has a meaning. Merleau-Ponty says that perception is already meaningful, but this doesn't mean that the architect has a license to do whatever without being responsible for the potential meanings that are already there. That's what

phenomenology emphasizes, that there are potential meanings embedded in habit, in the language of others, in the stories that others tell, and that's what we must be careful about. We must do our best to listen, to be humble to understand, to engage in dialogue to situate basically, in order to be able to make work that is more meaningful and appropriate to whatever the task is.

SS: *You mentioned how there are potential meanings that reside in our ways of inhabiting the world. As architects we work with drawing tools founded within a Cartesian understanding of the world. Do you think that this is problematic?*

APG: That's one of the big issues, that we're handed tools and we hand our students tools that are not innocent. Therefore, it takes a lot of effort to establish a critical position vis à vis those tools, particularly the digital tools. But also, the conventional drawing tools are not innocent either. It depends what questions you ask and how you use them. This is a big issue, because the software is inherently reductive and it's very easy to think, once it has enabled formal complexity for its own sake, that these shapes are 'neat' or interesting and there is no problem to build them.

I think to uncover those potential meanings there are many attitudes that one could take. There are a few architects that are very radical and say no computers, deciding to draw by hand. It's true that developing the motor skills of hand drawing and sketching, effectively changes one's perception of the world. It is clearly different if you instead go around the world with a mobile phone photographing things. We know that if we depend on GPS the world suddenly becomes less interesting and you see less features of the world. That's one aspect, that the more skills we have, the better our capacity to understand the qualities of things.

When I was a director of a school of architecture I invested in a wonderful workshop. People don't prioritize that anymore. Today everybody works in computers,

few work with their hands to develop artisanal habilities. That is one aspect that is very simple. I still believe in it. Some architects in Spain, Flores i Pratts, work only with hand drawing and they teach their students only hand drawing. You really need guts to do that as paradoxically the question arises 'what kind of preparation is that for the students?' That would be one attitude.

The other possibility is to develop your intellectual skills to understand critically the tools and what is actually happening when you are designing with rhino or other software. Michael Young has written a book on using digital tools very critically, and something like that I respect very much. I think the important thing is that in school we have very few years to teach people to be critical about these things, and we should use every minute rather than pretend to simulate practice. That for me is a pedagogical issue because you can develop this criticality either through working by hand or by doing interesting theoretical projects. But you have to do it in school so that people go out into practice truly well prepared, rather than simply having the skills to use software to produce nonsense.

CE: *You have written about how the drawing is often understood as an abstraction of a thing that then starts to exist in the world. Jonathan Hill wrote of how the drawing itself could be much more the place where architecture emerges. We have been thinking about this in terms of dwelling in the drawing as a way of inhabiting drawing. Might you reflect on this?*

APG: That is also a very interesting possibility and it's really the question we were raising with Hejduk earlier. I became very fascinated with where all this comes from and the earliest instance that I could find of an architect that deliberately believes that the drawing is the architecture, that you can dwell in the drawing, is Piranesi. He has opportunities to build buildings but he doesn't take them, he prefers to work as an architect

through etchings. Particularly in the Carceri series, and the way that the first stage becomes the second stage, I think there is the beginning of this possibility of the drawing becoming the work of architecture itself. And this is instead of the drawings acting as a study for something other, which is precisely due to the problems that are emerging historically at this time in the 18th century, which became our own problems later. I think this is still a very interesting question, that as a result of these transformations it brings us to this point where we have these reductive tools, but that we also have the possibility of understanding the drawing as the work itself.

In school, when I was director for a few years, I always emphasized this possibility of the work of architectural design, particularly to the final year students. We had a very nice five-year programme where we could use a whole year to do something very interesting at the end, and the projects became very speculative. A lot of the work was like that, to be dwelled in the drawing with many modalities. I remember someone started working with a classical Chinese garden and developed a scroll and explored perception of depth. I think the students learn a lot from that. It becomes a way to develop this criticality about the tool that then serves them very well when they practice. I'm seeing this as not an end in itself but rather somehow a step that the production of architecture shouldn't bypass. That would be a good point to make. It's something that you have to convince the practitioners.

The practicing architects that actually deal this way with the design process like Peter Zumthor or to some extent Stephen Holl are taking that very seriously as a point of the departure for the work. For Holl, it's always imperative to design through watercolour in the beginning of a project.