



Kenneth Caldwell

Photo: Paul Crabtree

Where the Global and Local Intersect: A Conversation with Enrique Norten, Hon. FAIA

By Kenneth Caldwell

Enrique Norten, Hon. FAIA, spoke at the Monterey Design Conference on Saturday September 13, 2003. Kenneth Caldwell caught up with him afterwards.

Q: In your writings and lectures, you talk about the intersection of the global and the local. The World Trade Organization meeting is taking place in Mexico today and the anniversary of 9/11 has just passed. Can you talk about how the redefinition of globalization impacts your work?

A: First of all, I should stop using the word "globalization." Let's say universal, it is about culture, not just politics or economics. These events show our interconnectedness. Our cultures are all interconnected. The issues of economics and politics are difficult to handle, yes. We are one culture in part because we are so different. It is important to understand that we are a plural culture of diversity. Architecture is not coming from the global or universal or the unique or local, but from the intersection. Recognizing this struggle or tension is what is important. Now it has become more important. I think the voices of individuals and groups are becoming stronger.

Q: In your lecture you spoke about addressing the modernist and older vernacular traditions in Mexico City. The early work seems so rooted in the place. What has it been like to work here in the United States?

A: I believe there is a vocabulary of architecture that draws from modernism [and] that has become universal. A language that we can understand and relate to. This is a vocabulary that is always changing, but we can come to different places and reflect that culture. Our building on Sunset Drive in Los Angeles understands the politics, the economy, and the traditions. Although the traditions are short, they are not weaker. So while there are certain commonalities in all of our projects, we would be proud if the differences can be identified. Working on an urban project in San Francisco, which I would love to do, would have to be completely different because the dreams of the city are different.

Q: What about practice here in the United States? How is it different?

A: Everything! Everything is different. The first thing I found here when I

started is how little responsibility the architect is willing to take here. All the responsibilities we had have been given away. Now there are strong reasons for that--lawyers, lawsuits, and a paternalistic culture. It seems that the legal infrastructure is responsible for your faults. If there is a void, it will be filled in. Others are taking those responsibilities; architects seem less and less interested over time. It is amazing when architects are invited to the project here. The project has been defined, the site selected, the financing [secured], the program and budget determined. Architects are the last one called in to participate. The networks of social relationships are in place and then they call the architect. In many countries the architect is called first, when the client has an idea. My clients come to me and say, "I have an idea, let's start dreaming." This is a basic difference and there are divergences from that.

Another important difference is the different impact of the global condition. There is a growing separation between rich and poor places. In poorer places, like Mexico, the labor is cheap, and in richer places, like the United States, labor is expensive. That defines the practice and the result of architecture.

Q: How do you cope with these differences?

A: First you understand it. If you don't understand it, you cannot deal with it. Different situations, different solutions. Sometimes I associate with local architects because they are teachers. I need to learn from people in the place I am working. I can give something, but also receive and we work together.

Of course, I had to get a license here, insurance broker, lawyer, accountant, you fall into that structure, you cannot change those rules. But I bring my moral responsibility into this structure.

Q: We've been talking about aspects of practicing architecture, but I also want to talk about the comments you made in your lecture about the material and immaterial and about form.

A: The dialectic is very interesting about what is permanent and impermanent, material and immaterial. Traditionally, architecture has been about permanence and materiality; there has been that discourse for many years. Architecture deals with function and social responsibility, but also aesthetics. I strongly believe that the architecture is an art, but the architect is not an artist. Because our responsibilities are different, our interactions are different. There are very important moments where it becomes art, when aesthetics come into it. We have knowledge and control of the permanent condition, but we bring in the impermanent. Certain impermanent immaterial conditions are architectural elements that define space and time [but] that are not always recognized: sensual conditions. This breeze and the noise off the sea make this space different. This would be a different condition without it. [We are talking] about how to work with all of that together.

About form. We are living in a moment when practice is about form. New technology allows us to investigate new opportunities that were not there before. This is not my interest. [For me,] the expression of architecture is about other issues. I don't start by trying to invent the formal condition to investigate space and time. The formal condition will come out of the

guidelines and rules. They will lead to the expressive form.

Q: You mean that form is the eventuality, but it is not the initiator?

A: Not in my process. Many of my colleagues start there and I admire their work. But that is not my where my talent has been.

Q: How many people are in your practice?

A: We have about 25 people in Mexico City and six in New York.

Q: We think of that as being on the smaller end of a midsize practice.

A: We think it is big. There is another difference. This is a country where you think about how big everything is!

Q: Do you think you will be hired to do more projects with a social focus?

A: [We are designing the new Visual & Performing Arts Library in Brooklyn.] But I have not been asked to design large socially oriented housing projects. Because of world industrialization those big international firms that sell ready-made houses--those that are built in two days and planted anywhere--they have nothing to do with the culture of a place but only with the global economy.

Q: What about your own work in Mexico?

A: These structures that you speak of, they go beyond architecture, those projects with a social purpose, they are disappearing. Many of those projects [that were] created in our country received government subsidy. There are none of those left. Banks in Mexico are owned by global corporations. That has changed the urban landscape. I don't have an answer. I see it getting worse.

Q: Yet you talk about the local voices increasing? Where is the architect's voice?

A: I don't know if the architect can be an advocate for the big causes. We can be voices through our architecture. Our role is best seen from our designs. We speak through our work. There are opportunities in the buildings. For example, in housing, by making better civic places. The opportunity is not just in the dwelling itself. Our spaces go far beyond the walls. There is a lot to say in those other public spaces, the civic spaces--to influence and take responsibility in a democratic condition. We can become the advocate for urbanity.

What has happened to public space in this country? There is the new urbanist movement but it is nostalgic; Disneyland for the American city. Urbanity is about looking to the future. The Italian piazza is not the response or answer for the Americas in the 21st century.

Those vast suburbs seem to be a generic condition. You cannot leave that

responsibility [to the civic condition] behind. Architecture as a profession has to take on those responsibilities. As a guild we have to recuperate those responsibilities and deal with it, not leave it to the lawyers and politicians.

The website for Enrique Norten's firm is www.ten-arquitectos.com.

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