



— INTERVIEW WITH
ALBERTO PÉREZ-GÓMEZ
BY SAUNDRA WEDDLE AND
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THE ROLE OF HISTORY

The image of history is often communicated to us as something fixed, as if historians have somehow been able to determine what “was”. In this interview, Alberto Pérez-Gómez, professor of architectural history and theory at McGill University, emphasises the discursive aspect of history.

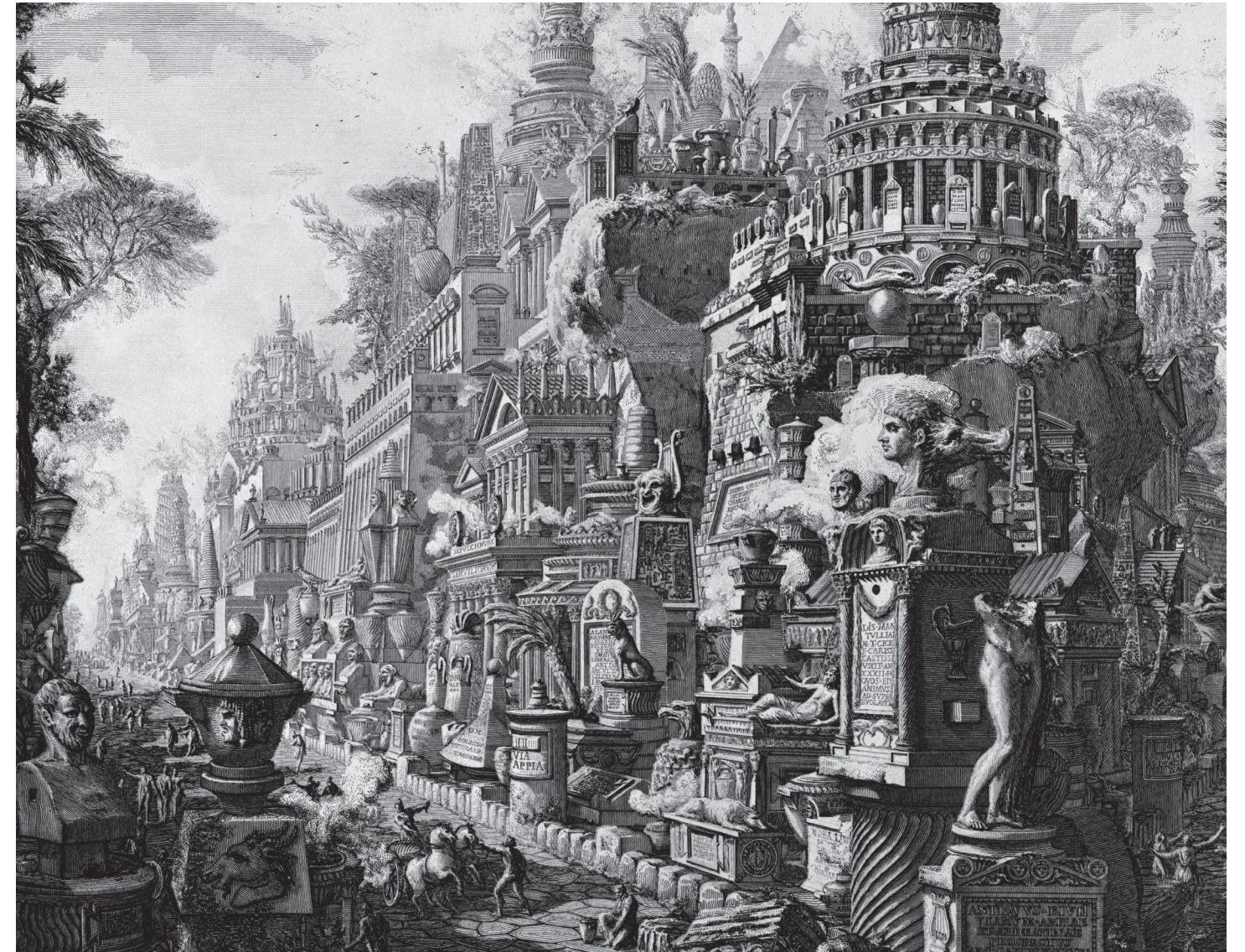
Marc J. Neveu: One premise of a discussion of the role of history for the contemporary practice of architecture is that the relationship between history and design should be activated. Implied in this premise is either a complete abandonment of history, or general dissatisfaction with approaches to history that focus on a canon that is considered as little more than a pattern book organized by typologies or styles. How would you characterize the relationship between history and praxis?

Alberto Pérez-Gómez: There is some real reason for the dissatisfaction that exists. It stems from a general misunderstanding of what history can provide for the future or practicing architect. The origin of this problem can itself be pinpointed historically. This is useful because it means that the situation we face has not always been the same and may indeed change.

There are many aspects to this. The first issue is that our understanding of history as styles or typologies comes from the beginning of the nineteenth century. One can find the origins of this understanding by tracing its precedents. Knowing this, we

are not condemned to understand history in those terms. That moment reduced the field of architectural history to a history of buildings organized according to formal taxonomies or stylistic characteristics. This was very unfortunate but it has stuck, generally, in the teaching and practice of architecture. When one understands the history of architecture in those terms it becomes easy to dismiss it because we don’t actually pursue it very far.

There is another aspect to this issue, which is that prior to the 18th century, architects had relatively little use for history because, generally, western culture (as well as other cultures, but certainly our own western culture) believed that architecture’s meanings came from an almost direct mapping or reflection of a cosmic order that was trans-historical itself. The use of history for someone like Palladio or anyone prior to that time was limited. There were chronicles, myths and stories, narratives that modulated appropriate actions, but practice was not “historical” in the sense that it built upon the past towards some progressive future, potentially becoming prescriptive or instrumentalized. So this creates the pro-



blem. In a certain way, the understanding of history by historians has been problematic since its inception. So that is one of the major tasks that we have to try to grapple with.

How, then, does one go about reconnecting and finding appropriate ways to connect history to design? One must start by understanding the proper nature of history as hermeneutics. What is at stake is more

is much more about the appropriateness of our actions, which is probably much more important than the specific formal problems we usually identify as architects.

Saundra Weddle: Why do you think the 18th and 19th century mode of engaging the past has persisted? Does it have something to do with the way we use history, culturally,

“Appian Way”, Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s frontispiece for “La antichità romane”, 1784.
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than form. Architectural programs have political consequences. What one learns from historical precedents, from the stories we tell about the stuff that we admire in the past, is that they can be translated into our own questions and allow us to act in an ethical way. History does not orient us very much about what forms we should use. It

or the way that architects in particular use history?

APG: From the beginning of the 19th century the relationship between the thoughts we have as architects and our actions have been construed instrumentally. This is something that was not always there. While

this possibility was prepared through the history of western philosophy since Plato, it only reaches practical fields like architecture, engineering or medicine in the beginning of the 19th century. Instrumentality dictates that we also find instrumental ways to connect to historical precedent. Thus, all technological disciplines become more efficient, but they also tend to ignore their foundation in relevant human questions, often failing in their tasks (like medicine that cures disease but becomes incapable of healing, or architecture that provides shelter but is incapable of providing for dwelling). In the end, instrumentalized history is futile because its intention is basically resolved

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in technology, and there are usually more expeditious ways of dealing with these questions than historical narratives.

MJN: What do you think is the best mode of delivery so that these questions you’ve talked about can be asked, for example in architectural education?

APG: Well, the first thing is for the teacher to identify those questions for himself or herself. It is always very personal. Identifying those questions is crucial – much more than covering material or simply conveying information. One way to get at the questions is to filter our heritage through the professors’ fascinations, through the questions that really matter to us, so that the historical topics are delivered through these questions rather than in an anonymous way as when one simply conveys “facts”.

However, to do this effectively one must acknowledge that the disciplinary boundaries between architectural history and other aspects of historical phenomena, including the history of science, the history of philosophy, the history of mentalities, and material histories, are not solid. One of the big problems is that even among architectural historians there is the sense that one has the “right” methodology; that this may be

the only one that is valid and somehow this excludes other things. I vehemently support breaking down these barriers.

For me, it has been crucial to connect the history of religious ideas, the history of science and the history of philosophy to thinking about architecture and to the thoughts of architects throughout history. That is the only way one can articulate the questions of our predecessors that resonate with our own questions and that make history relevant. Otherwise it is always history becomes truly and always a thing of the past. Methodologically, it is not a bad idea, for example, to structure lectures where you deal with historical material and connect it,

even force it into connections with present questions and open up the debate and try to understand how this historical background gives guidelines and sets precedents on how things are not as new as they seem to be. This is always the big problem. We think we have to re-invent the wheel and we don’t. There are thematic connections but there are also questions that show how things are resonant and how one can learn from these historical examples. Demonstrating the “resonance” between Hans Scharoun’s amazingly inventive Berlin Philharmonic Hall and a Greek amphitheatre in the mountains, for example, might be invaluable to a young student who believes in the unqualified merits of novelty.

I do believe, however, that there is something to be said for chronology, for knowing that Gothic comes after the Romanesque. As a student I remember getting lost if I didn’t have this basic information. It is a negotiation. The professors should find those resonances, even if we are not completely sure about the connections. Even merely opening the questions can be an excellent pedagogical tool.

SW: In your view, are there fundamental, non-negotiable principles of architectural history that anchor the discipline and distin-

guish it from others?

APG: Yes, I think there are, but this is a long lecture as well would merit a longer conversation. Architecture does offer something specific. It has something to do with us finding a place that is ordered, that speaks back to us, that allows us to dream, that orients us, as I often say, like a metaphysics that is made into material, that allows the inhabitant/participant to find his or her own place in the world in relation to an institutional framework, wherever we may be in time and space. It is important to remember, as Merleau-Ponty suggested and as has now been corroborated by subversive neuroscientists like Alva Noë, that “we are not our brains”, and our consciousness is literally enacted through our bodily actions in a given world. The natural and built environment matters immensely. There is something very basic that architecture does offer and has offered throughout history because the questions that architecture addresses are resonant with the Big Questions of mankind. There are resonances with religion, with science, and particularly with philosophy. Architecture does address those questions, and it provides answers that are particular to specific times and places and that allow humanity to live well, let’s say, and pass on to others the *savoir vivre*, a kind of wisdom that we may profit from as the heirs of these traditions and that we often disregard completely, particu-

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larly in modern times. This, of course, begs questions.

As modern individuals we are all very arrogant; we feel that we can live in our own universe and that we are almost unaffected by physical environments. We think we can live in and through our computer screens. But in the end, the physical spaces that we make really do matter. They contribute to our well being or our pathologies. That is where history matters. If we don’t learn from those our precedents, we have now-

here to look because we have nothing else that we share today. We have all of our little beliefs and half beliefs. We don’t share a cosmology, we don’t share a religion and so we inhabit a fragmented and cosmopolitan world. The only way to find appropriate ways of action is by looking at history carefully considering the ways that architecture has facilitated humanity’s potential to dwell, more or less significantly, in past epochs.

SW: You mentioned that architectural history has an obligation to provide a kind of framework or orientation that we can use to compare to our experience to understand it more fully. I wonder about the practice of the architectural historian. Do you think there are guiding principles that are non-negotiable for the historian?

APG: Of course, I believe some history is better than other history. Histories are stories after all. Histories that try to be objective and factual can be useful, but I always miss the dimension of interpretation. I don’t know if I would call this “non-negotiable,” but my preference is to frame architectural history in terms of hermeneutics. A way of looking at history that comes from the philosophical tradition of the 20th century, particularly Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, who help the professional historian write a more helpful history. Why? Because in this kind of framework the issue is to foreground interpreta-

tion. Interpretation is basically how we get at truths. And interpretations mean that we valorize the questions.

We first find the questions that are important to each one of us and then we understand their importance in terms of their cultural significance. Other kinds of stories, particularly found in literary works, are very useful for this purpose, and have been particularly so since the early 19th century (Gadamer goes as far as saying that literature inherits the task of traditional

philosophy in the modern period). Then we look at the material and interpret it through these questions so that it can speak to us. It This is what [Gadamer] calls a “fusion of horizons” bringing that which is far, near, while understanding that you can never be a Roman, that you can never be a Greek, that you can never be monastic. There is always going to be this distance, but this distance should be celebrated and used to foreground our questions so that the

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material becomes useful for us. Of course, this is very much at odds with the idea of a historian who thinks of the discipline as a scientific endeavor that is going to find the objective facts about one thing or another. That is futile waste of time (even though I use many of these books because people do some very serious work and spend all of their lives working in archives and this is very, very useful.)Factual compilations and archival work may be useful, B but in the end, for me, as an educator of architects, what matters most in architectural education and in our praxis is this interpretative framing of the historical material that connects in a dialogue with present questions.

SW: An issue that interests us is that the discipline of architectural history is not autonomous. Increasingly, as you’ve said, it relies upon and appropriates from the resources and methods of other disciplines. What, in your opinion, has been gained by architectural historians appropriating from other fields of inquiry?

APG: For me, this is simply real architectural history because if architecture is a manifestation of culture, then you cannot parcel out these things and consider that the history of architecture is simply the history of buildings and leave out gardens, and leave out the history of stage set designs, and leave out the history of ideas. It is kind of obvious, but it is very demanding. For architectural historians of an art historical bent, let’s say, there seems to be resistance

to opening up the field like that. Of course it is difficult, but we have no other option. Otherwise we are condemned to irrelevancy.

MJN: Although much of historians’ work seems to have little to do with contemporary issues, there is that great possibility that history might matter, that it might be relevant. So rather than being operative and rather than disappearing into history, is there a way of making history relevant?

APG: The way I see this problem, the issue is to preserve a rationality or objectivity of the historical narrative, and this always led to a suspicion about hermeneutics or foregrounding questions that forces the connections to the present.

For me, the way to deal with this problem is rather to disallow that there is a rationality at work in historical processes, or a dialectic at work in historical process, and to understand that in this mass of material, evidence and touching moments that we get from the past, there are connections that are self-evident for each of us, which we have to learn to cultivate and from which real questions that matter in the present could stem. There is this a close connection between hermeneutics and phenomenology. We must learn to recognize the importance of what matters to each one of us, questioning “common sense” skepticism that always defers to the opinions or the objective facts of others. Believing in the evidence of your experience. This, for me, is very crucial. It is also at odds with the homogenizing that happened in the aftermath of deconstruction, when historical narratives and valorization were taken down to the lowest common denominator. The fact is that certain artifacts move you and bring forward questions and connect in an a-historical way. We all have access to this. It is a question of exposure. This is part of what good architectural teachers should do for their students. It is important to understand that these moments of epiphany matter, to

cultivate them, and to valorize them. Then we can construct stories that are incredibly valuable. I don’t think that the past is valuable just because it is past. This connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics is very important.

SW: Traditionally, the product of the historian’s work has been the publication or conference presentation, sometimes a book review; today, the historian’s work also finds an audience in the blogs, which are becoming an important component of architectural discourse. There may be images or drawings, but the essential product of the architectural historian’s work is the text. What other forms might the work of history take? On what terms should these forms be evaluated?

APG: History is basically stories; otherwise maybe we are into some other forms of expression. Maybe some historians want to make documentaries, to use other media; it yet history is basically about telling stories. What is most important, however, is dialogue. Part of the problem with the media that you mention is that sometimes it is forgotten that the moment of communication is really essentially dialogical. This is crucial.

In my academic work I have tried very hard to engage people students and colleagues in oral communication. Here at McGill we write a little bit, but not as much as students do in other graduate programs. We are always talking, always presenting, always discussing. Plato is, for me, crucial here. He is at the beginning of the technology of writing applied to philosophy in the dialogs, and yet they are dialogs. He says on more than one occasion that we have to be careful with the written word because it is an instrument of forgetting, and that the written word is not real knowledge. Real knowledge happens in the dialogical moment, in the moment of assent when we meet to communicate face to face. The historian must not forget that dialogue is where history “happens”. Whether we tell stories or write or read history, the dialogical unveiling that originates in speech has priority since it, where you makes present

what is important here and now. The other forms of writing are very interesting, sophisticated, and crucial in a way. I am not claiming that we should get rid of books. What has priority is the oral, the word as spoken. Or alternativelyConversely, for the student of history must be prepared, to receive the written word dialogically, not passively.

Saundra Weddle and Marc J. Neveu



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Marc J. Neveu is an American who studied architecture in French Canada before moving to Italy to read 18th century architectural fables. He has recently moved to the West Coast of the USA to teach architectural history and theory.

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