

# Crisis, Crisis, Everywhere

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In 1935, two years after Hitler took control of Germany, Edmund Husserl delivered a series of lectures in Prague that would form the basis of his final publication, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936). In the text, Husserl defends the relevancy of philosophy at a time of moral, political, social, and existential crises. The diagnosis of crisis, for Husserl, was based upon the reduction of our understanding of the world to an objective-scientific perspective. His critique, in short, is that even though the objective model of the sciences may be “truthful,” they are not able to account for the richness of our shared experience. Husserl proposed that it is the notion of the *lebenswelt*—a shared-relative-lifeworld—that grounds the so-called objective worldview of the sciences. Under this interpretation, there is no clean split between the objective/subjective. When the objective breaks down, in crisis, the prescientific *lebenswelt* remains and, according to Husserl, may recover a sense of being.

The title of Husserl’s final work is referenced in the work that launched Alberto Pérez Gómez’s academic career, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (1983). In the introduction to *Crisis*, Pérez Gómez states that architecture is also in crisis. Deeply rooted in the architectural crisis described by Pérez Gómez is the observation that the conceptual framework of the sciences, upon which architecture had historically relied, is not compatible with our shared perception of the world. Specifically, the relationship between geometry and architecture, beginning in the late seventeenth century and emerging more fully with the work of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand in the early nineteenth century, demonstrates a false rift between

our objective and subjective realities. This false dichotomy, according to Pérez Gómez, still haunts the creation of architectural value that is meaningful beyond the framework of the process by which it was created.

In the opening lines of Husserl’s essay on crisis, he proposes to deal with the “oft-treated theme of the European theme of crisis” and repeatedly refers to the “sickness” that plagues Europe. Arguably the crises of Germany in the 1930s, with the rise of National Socialism and the forced migration of millions, differ from the way in which the term is used in our current context. Our nonstop news cycle, however, provides an unending list of “crises.” We are reminded daily about international crises, environmental crises, financial crises, hostage crises, constitutional crises, and health care crises, all of which are added on to our own daily personal and midlife crises. Pérez Gómez defined the term crisis with a medical analogy. It is “a moment when it is unclear whether the patient will survive or succumb” (4). Over twenty-five years later in an interview in this journal, he was asked if we are still in a crisis. His response was that, yes, the diagnosis was still appropriate. Given that the “moment” diagnosed by Pérez Gómez lasted well over 200 years, and given the relevancy of his argument in the context of our current fascination with performance and parametricism, one might ask, what is the appropriate architectural response in the context of a continuous crisis, philosophical, architectural, or other?

The Greek root of the word crisis offers another reading. The noun “crisis” derives from the Greek *κρίσις*, which refers to “discrimination” and to “a decision,” and is

related to the verb *κρίνειν*, meaning “to decide” or “to choose.” Crisis offers a choice and it forces a decision. It is common to talk about our shared environmental crises, and difficult to argue the import of our responsibility in such crises. It is now quite clear that our technological savvy that built the levees and waterways of the Mississippi River delta contributed to the crises that were/are Katrina and Rita. Indeed, in our anthropocene world, the effects of human action within our environment have made it clear that there is no such thing as a “natural” disaster, even if we frame them as such. Financial crises, from Tulip mania in the seventeenth century, to the Mississippi bubble in the eighteenth century that nearly bankrupted Louis XV (and therefore France), to the market crashes here in the United States through this and the previous century, have, at their core, a framing of value that is at once objective, but also constructed. The recent subprime mortgage crisis, for example, was not a housing crisis per se. It was, as with other bubbles, framed by an objective value system that had little to do with a deeply rooted understanding of home, even as it affected the lives of millions of homeowners.

I would propose that any response to crisis, be it financial, environmental, architectural, or philosophical, must proceed with some awareness that the crisis itself may be the result of how one frames the crisis as well as the process by which the crisis was designed. This decision to rethink crisis, from within, may allow for new forms of architectural agency and perhaps, even, relevancy in a time of our own professional crisis.