

Play Is All about the Interplay of Chance and Rule

An interview with Rodrigo Pérez de Arce by Ana Maria Zahariade and Radu Tudor Ponta

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Rodrigo Pérez de Arce is an acknowledged Chilean architect, professor, and author regarded as one of the most active actors in the essential change that occurred within architectural thinking in the 1980s, a period when the doctrines of Modernism were fundamentally questioned. His texts and drawings developed during his stay at the *Architectural Association* in London (1973-1989) have been published in several forward-looking magazines of the time (*Architectural Design*, *Lotus International*, *Architectural Quarterly* ...), eliciting a vivid interest, as they were opposing the schematism of the functionalist city through a nuanced understanding of the city as historical accretion of forms and lives. His theoretical projects of "reurbanisation" had the particularity of being audacious as critique, but deeply "*raisonnés*," analytical, and anti-utopian — invitations to other ways of planning the city, as well as invitations to reconsider the profession as well.

Since his return to Chile in 1990, Rodrigo Pérez de Arce has been involved in many public projects (Estación Mapocho Cultural Center, remodeling of the Plaza de Armas and Crypt of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Santiago, remodeling of the Mercado Puerto and public spaces in Cerro Artillería in Valparaíso, etc.), but also in architectural education. He taught at the universities of Bath, Pennsylvania, Cornell, Harvard, the Architectural Association, among others as visiting professor, but his teaching activity mostly developed in his own country, at the Catholic University in Santiago.

Apart from the seminal texts and drawings issued in the 1970s and 1980s, eventually grouped under the generic title *Urban Transformations and the Architecture of Additions* (Routledge, 2015), Rodrigo Pérez de Arce has published in various national and foreign media, including books such as *La Escuela de Valparaíso: Grupo Ciudad Abierta Valparaíso School: Open City Group* (Birkhauser Publishers, 2003), *Domicilio Urbano* (Ediciones ARQ, Santiago 2006-2012), *Hecho a Mano* (Ediciones ARQ, Santiago, 2016), and *City of Play* (Bloomsbury, 2018). Valparaíso the Urban Balcony (ediciones Universidad Católica, Santiago, Chile, 2019.)

In 1982, due to unexpected chances in those political circumstances, the "Ion Mincu" School of Architecture (presently UAUIM) had the opportunity to organize an international event in Bucharest where Rodrigo Pérez de Arce presented his "reurbanisation" projects.¹

Ana Maria Zahariade: *We met in 1982, on the occasion of that quixotic international seminar we had organized in the School of Bucharest. When I look back, it seems an unbelievable moment; that you came to Bucharest in those times — in the immobile atmosphere installed by our Communism that seemed unending — and that you lectured in our school also frozen in a late, rigid functionalism, an "official" functionalism, which had lost its liberating dimension long before that, its explosive romantic utopia or any capacity to inspire; we were stuck in the object fixation, which was maybe the only way to evade the surrounding rigidity. I remember the icy, disapproving silence wrapping the conference hall when you presented your Reurbanisation of Chandigarh (of Dacca too, but Romanian architects were more affectionate towards Le Corbusier).*

¹ The Second International Seminar of Architecture organised in the Ion Mincu School was a remarkable architectural event, under a highly politicized title: "Architecture – Modality of Expression of the Youth in the Spirit of Peace and Civilisation."

At that time, you were teaching at the Architectural Association in London. You were closely involved in the transformation of the architectural thinking, in a harsh critique of Modernism. “Modern architecture is dead” was frequently said in certain architectural magazines of the period. That claim seemed to have an even stronger impact in Romania, where they circulated as samizdat.

Many architects, at least in Romania, thought that that moment of critical change, generally known as Postmodernism (I am cautious when using the term, because it quickly sends to formal historicism), would be transitory, a sort of capriccio, something ephemeral ... However, only the stylistic formalism was quickly exhausted (happily, I dare say); what has lasted is the new understanding of the city and of urbanity, in which you were particularly involved.

In a way, we can see your ideas concerning the city as a return to the perennity of the city as sedimentation, as overlapping strata of intervention that enrich the urban spaces and life. It is a strange type of perennity, isn't it? An ever-changing persistence? How did you arrive at these ideas? Can you describe what led you to the idea of the Reurbanisation (of Chandigarh, Dacca, ...)?

Rodrigo Pérez de Arce: There was no single source, rather a series of disparate ones, including some firsthand experiences in my home country, Chile. Urbanism in Latin-America embraced certain planned districts as much as an extensive mélange of areas where small scale building activity seemed relentless. There, an emergent scenario was taking shape as the result of a myriad of small-scale initiatives. As if a very large building site, the rhythms and sounds of simple tools the hammering and cutting of basic building materials largely defined the prevailing ambiance. In these mostly precarious districts, the inhabitants were intending to sort out their urban needs directly, shaping the urban fabric day by day, but the urban result could not be but molecular, handmade, technically precarious, formally diffuse, and temporarily, short lived. Those spaces that submitted to just one type of temporality largely excluded the monumental, the singular, the iconic and the long lasting. Such initiatives were simply unable to address the provision of large collective spaces, with the exception of the sports field, particularly the football pitch, which thus becomes recurrent in many cases.

At a broader level, enough evidence was gathered by the mid-seventies to prove that the master plan was an instrument that could only exceptionally guide the process of urban growth and change. Our cities could be read as a collage of aborted master plans. Certain architects were moving away from the idea of the finite project into a process-oriented notion

One could sense a shift in sensibilities between the idea of buildings or districts as closed systems and the notion of open endedness. The experience of PREVI Lima, certain Metabolist schemes, certain appraisals by Team10 particularly with the notion of the mat building pointed to this direction. So called “megastructures” were obviously dealing with dynamic, responsive and ever-adjusting urban scenarios and investing them on a heroic scale, only with all the shortcomings of a master narrative and a master builder who required even more powerful forms of control than the master planner’s whose experiences it intended to eradicate. One case is the almost forgotten Arcosanti project by Paolo Soleri whose materialized fragment is just a particle of an almost incommensurable fabric.

In my view the issue was nevertheless one where the question about the role of form was central, therefore drawing important differences with many action-based appraisals, such as for example Price’s, which placed little regard to the formal and the morphological aspects. Having gained some access to the kinds of transformative processes I describe above, in my coming into Europe I was seeking to find out more about the complementary one, the *longue durée* as embodied in so many European monuments. Here I could grasp first-hand the fate of very old structures in continuous use.

AMZ: *Was the European experience so important for you? We know that many European architects and theorists were passionately advocating for new ways to understand the city and its life, and to surpass the schematism of the functionalist city—you relied on these precedents in your writings; we also know that many of them gathered around some “revues de tendance” and/or academic milieus—as was the Architectural Association School where you worked. I presume that meeting that catalytic*

atmosphere was highly stimulating for you. However, it seems to me that your ideas had much to do with the Grupo Ciudad Abierta (Open City Group) that you knew before coming to Europe. Maybe I am wrong, but can you, please, tell us a little more about this very particular group and experience that seems to have planted the seeds?

RPdA: Europe was in my experience a multicultural scenario where apart from Europeans of all backgrounds and places, I confronted for the first-time people and ideas from the Middle East, Asia and to a lesser degree Africa. The Architectural Association was a veritable melting pot and the cross-cultural exchanges there were quite fascinating. This occurred also long before architectural education became so obsessed with the toxic considerations of output, productivity and impact which have become so paramount nowadays. Universities were not captured as yet by the neoliberal templates where knowledge is measured in numbers and the excel table replaces the discussion of ideas. Of course, in being an independent school, the AA bypassed some of the strictures imposed upon most other schools.

As for the Valparaiso school (strictly speaking the school of architecture of the Catholic University of Valparaiso) otherwise known abroad as “the Open City Group,” it was quite independent like the AA, but in a different way. I did not study there but was much stimulated by many of their ideas and experiences.

In fact, it was in the AA files where — to my knowledge — the Open City was first exposed to the English-speaking public in an essay I wrote together with Chilean architect Enrique Browne. It displayed the Open City and its publication coincided with an increasing interest in certain deconstructivist trends, which were then capturing the attention of many architects. In their formal complexity and a certain casual quality, many Open City items seemed fitting for the deconstructivist canon, but aside from formal similarities there were no significant conceptual liaisons.

***Radu Tudor Ponta:** In the small square catalogue of your AA exhibition in 1980, which you left after your visit in Bucharest (a publication that we used for our courses, certainly, after 1989), the Peristyle of Diocletian’s palace is illustrated using Charles-Louis Clérisseau’s drawing of 1757. It shows striking similarities with the contemporary condition of the same space, but I agree that it does bring into a sharper focus architecture’s long duration versus the actual everyday use of the space — particularly visible when one looks at the users and their provisional objects or secondary structures.*

Was the relationship between architecture’s claim to endure and the everyday an important element in your critique?

RPdA: I have been pondering more and more as to why our discipline becomes so fixed upon that most evanescent moment in the life of buildings, which coincides with their inauguration.

Till then, and whilst navigating through the uncertainties of the design process we architects are bound by the conditional what if, but once the building stands on its own feet the most interesting question is what happened, for only then its fabric will be submitted to the rigors of life, which is by the way, the very fundamental purpose of the architectural project. The inaugural moment is no less than a brief rite of passage that celebrates the accomplishments of certain type of authorship whilst delegating the fate of the building to others, yet the architectural media propagates the virginal and immaculate image of a still born bunch of spaces that are just awakening to a fascinating entanglement with real life, opening up a never-ending process which might or might not validate the original design assumptions.

Rarely we get glimpses about what happens once buildings are occupied. The insistence upon this virginal form draws attention upon issues of authorship, style, and so on, whilst detracting from the notion of architectural form as something that human experience validates. The art of painting may have no business with time and aging, but our art is made to confront time — and contingencies — at every single level. It is interesting to consider in this respect the landscape designers’ position, where time both in its cyclical and its progressive sense becomes so critical.

RTP: Let me insist a little more on the relationship between architecture's claim to endure and the everyday. Do you consider it a topic of interest either to contemporary architectural culture or to contemporary pedagogy, or both?

RPdA: We often ask our students to search for the present-day situation of once famous schemes: the results are sometimes depressing sometimes exhilarating but always illuminating, yet it is fruitless to expect from the media to deliver such simple insights. A good Venice Architecture Biennale call would be “fifty years on.” Such time-lapse allows us to understand the always surprising interplays between the architectural object and its users.

Cases such as Diocletian's palace are so fascinating also because their sheer longevity. Such longevity ensures that the dialogue between inheritance and the present-day urges will derive into a direct confrontation with the building fabric itself and its inner sets of rules. In the flow of events, issues such as “who made it” and “what was the original agenda” may recede to be supplanted by others pressed by the logistics of the particular action envisaged upon the inherited scheme. Conservation has changed these perceptions, as is the case with Diocletian's Palace and so many other “listed” monuments creating an impasse, which is sometimes deleterious to the very survival of the elements it aims to preserve. We would simply not be allowed today to do the things our antecessors did when operating upon inherited structures: our view of the past is — at least in these matters — often conditioned by deep anxieties about loss. Rossi reminds us that it is form rather than function that prevails in the *longue durée* and his observation validates the idea that continuous inhabitation and usage is the best guarantee for the care of old buildings. Of course prolonged use also satisfies the criteria of sustainability.

RTP: Returning to your critique of the functionalist city, in the new urban environment that surrounds Le Corbusier's “monuments” in Chandigarh, several types of structures coexist: permanent/long-lasting/stable ones (among which Le Corbusier's own); other structures that seem to grow and decrease gradually, determining the slow development of an urban fabric; yet other structures that I would call objects of medium duration. The latter conceived as “standard” elements of the city, where the characteristics that define the urban fabric last longer than the constituting elements. Is the duration of an architectural object somehow determined on its conception? Is it a right to be earned? Or is it subject to chance?

RPdA: Chandigarh was a good option if one wanted to question the assumptions of the master plan, and the notion of a single master planner ruling all future events. Its choice was strategic as proved by the widespread reactions my essay provoked in the most diverse scenarios. This choice was neither intended to undermine the authority of Le Corbusier, nor did it question the power of his vision, rather it was an attempt to put into question a guiding principle such as the idea of the master plan. The issue was of course whether the urban plan, like a work of art — a painting, say — was there to remain forever untouched by events and life.

Le Corbusier's semi-sacred plateau responded to a rather extreme vision about what the urban arena should be, whilst being at the same time exceedingly inspiring in view of the quality of its monuments and the subtleties of the layout. All things considered, the idea of keeping such a vast seat of power so bereft of vitality when thriving life was just round the corner was very odd. Moreover, this scenario which was supposed to embrace the new tenets of an independent and democratic India seems to correlate with other traditions and ideas about power such as embodied in certain ritual grounds belonging to societies ruled by high priests and a superior caste of officials.

The Capitol area as we know was made of few, large and lasting building blocks. The overall use of concrete made it clear that these were all destined to last — even if notionally — “forever.” Ageing would occur there with all buildings at the same compass as in a community of healthy individuals all the same age moving through life. Of course, behind the scenes retrofitting ensures a certain level of performance, and a myriad adjustments ensure the updating and upgrading of such a complex requires as a matter of course, but as if were built in granite, Chandigarh celebrated stability rather than change.

The scenarios I formulated could be understood in different ways: one was a small-scale reappropriation of public land as one finds in so many cities, another more hypothetical could surge from political change such as a massive onslaught into these ill-defined territories. A third scenario could be more deliberative with the authorities engaging some carefully considered plan of devolution... all of them assumed some level of incremental rather than one in all change. Time, perishability, rate of change, upgrading would have been part and parcel of such enterprise. At a later stage I elaborated an alternative proposal whereby trees and enclosed gardens would fill the voids anticipating gradual urbanization.

RTP: *Teaching is at the same time one of the more transitory aspects of architectural culture, depending on the evolution and circulation of ideas, on words, on drawings, and on people and their interaction. On the other hand, it also seems to leave one of the more lasting effects on others, for better or worse. In a way architectural pedagogy is susceptible of easily being either radical and revolutionary or conservative and inertial. What was your pedagogical experience? What did you aim for?*

RPdA: I have been teaching for about forty years in diverse scenarios and across diverse countries: each experience is unique and in each case one must establish a common ground with a particular community of students who may happen to be culturally more or less homogeneous, or else extremely heterogeneous. I often taught in places where almost everyone used English as a second language, a kind of Esperanto that kept all of us busy searching for the right word.

I regard teaching a privilege: right now, our inaugural studio aims at enthusing students to act, think, imagine, and observe as real architects do. Sometimes we look into the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt intensive surveys as a magnificent enquiry into the real world. We are interested in the quality of the survey – a quality shared by many 19th century expeditions, obviously not in its imperial overtones.

Slowness helps in this interlocution between reality and drawing one experiences in surveying. The one-to-one tracing of a building upon an alien site also requires a slow and progressive appraisal and it brings perhaps in a more intriguing way the poetry involved in recreating a plan — the building trace — upon alien grounds. This is an inaugural exercise we have been realizing with first year students over the last years, sometimes within a racecourse oval, sometimes upon an abandoned airport, both offering perfect *tabulae rasae*. We make the students aware of how in the one-to-one tracing of, say, St Marks Basilica, they are actually replicating step by step the original procedures, and that in translating a floor plan into a system of full-scale traces they are redoing what was once done for the purpose of building, with similar tools and confronting similar problems only many centuries away. I like the archaism attached to these procedures and I feel the kind of on-site involvement they require offers profound and lasting lessons in architecture.

AMZ: *Speaking of teaching and “archaisms,” I see that drawing, the hand-drawing, is indispensable in your teaching. Drawing was/is for you an essential research instrument. How is it perceived by your students who belong to the Y or Z generations, born with a computer in their hands? How do you convince them that hand-drawing is nevertheless perennial for the work of an architect?*

RPdA: Hand drawing is I believe a healthy practice which I personally endeavor to keep but mine is not a doctrinaire choice, less so a choice against digital drawing which is certainly, and for good reason a prime tool.

We do however impose hand drawing to our first semester students, the ones who are just joining the school. We do so, as school policy, because it is a good practice anyway (and it is all you can do when your battery runs out). It is the only chance they will have to confront these procedures collectively, but also for epistemological reasons for, only when you draw, say, a building plan or section or elevation by hand, you understand what it means to change scale. Protocols are much clearer in hand drawings. Drawing by hand is also slow and less cumulative than with CAD. We regard slowness as highly beneficial and highly didactic against the fast and indifferent consumption of images and ideas that we now take for granted.

Only through that practice you realize how such a simple and useful tool it is, always at hand, and how effective it becomes as a communication device even when scratching a sketchy figure during a meeting. Hand drawing often attracts the attention of the public: one can see this as a powerful and perhaps unique tool for communicating ideas. More importantly, through it we acquire the profound sense of drawing as a form of critical thought.

AMZ: In the article on “Brief History of Amnesia” that you sent me, and also in your projects — for instance, The Necklaces of the Cerro Isla (Los collares del Cerro Isla), your entry for the New Observatory Urban Park Competition in Santiago — one notices your concern and subtle work with ever changing, hardly controllable, untamed, materials: trees, vegetation, water... They are not considered typical architectural materials; they do not seem to possess the lasting solidity architects are generally looking for; students are not always instructed on their particular architectural potential (our generation, yours and mine, certainly were not taught about this). How did you come to use them? How do your students come to terms with this softer, less “demiurgic” facet in architecture?

RPdA: This is an interesting point and yes, it definitely has become one that I very much emphasize to my students. The issue is why architecture, urbanism landscape architecture and a bunch of considerations have been drawn apart into their narrow niches. I find corporate clients — and by this, I mean both public and private — often delegate the project’s decision to technocratic and highly specialized officials who only read reality as from their special focus and seldom as a synthesis, which is what the architectural project should always aim for.

Added to that it becomes increasingly fruitless to disengage issues about building from issues about cultivating in present day scenarios: we teach students to draw trees with the same rigor they may draw buildings, we discuss the interactions between buildings and nature, and we often framed such introductory exercises in our first-year studio as the conversation between the organic and the inorganic. We find that from second semester onwards as students are introduced to CAD, they download all the “organic” material to be used as ornament for their plans. We find a similar lack of attention in landscape architecture students who are often disinterested in the role buildings play in fostering landscapes.

“The Brief History of Amnesia” was an account about how fruit trees and the notion of the productive garden were completely forgotten in Chilean garden cities by the second half of the 20th century, but also about how plants and buildings get successfully entangled in some of our best districts. An avenue of poplars was for a long time Santiago’s prime public setting, one that was unsurpassed in height and dimension. Of neoclassical ancestry such traditional promenade supplied an ambiance of shade a certain solemnity, a microclimate, and a monumental space. It was an obvious option, yet the model was rarely replicated.

RTP: In your last book, City of Play. An Architectural and Urban History of Recreation and Leisure (Bloomsbury, 2018), you are calling for a different, more integrated urban environment, one where purpose would not determine use so rigidly. Under these circumstances, might one also consider distancing oneself from how the architectural profession (usually) operates within the city? Perhaps from a certain type of architecture?

RPdA: I was always fascinated with the figure of Johan Huizinga and his notion about play as a freely chosen and utterly unproductive endeavor. In play I believe one finds a particular celebration about being together, sometimes a particular exaltation about place as well.

When enquiring into the subject it became ever so apparent to me the exceptional ambition of very brilliant architects about submitting so called free play into fixed patterns. This was historically unprecedented for setting aside the scenarios for organized play — and sports — free play always found its place into the city the way carnivals do, by means of turning over reality rather than casting durable imprints upon it.

When one examines playground schemes one finds a tremendous range of alternative forms often tinged with nostalgia as if the playground became a repository of long abandoned urban formulae. Housing estate playgrounds can often be read as tokens for lost urban principles also

as critique of the prevailing and often reductive urban layouts. Playgrounds happened to be spaces of exception where designers could explore patterns or the relationship between built form and behavior, which were excluded from all other scenarios. The issue of play is in my view however not so much related to the ideation of hyperspecialized scenarios but a question of devolving the public space its multiplicity of usages: when zoning rules play, the city loses an element of spontaneous celebration; when certain functionalist criteria are applied to play segregating its manifestations through age and mode, the city loses the element of mix and the idea of the arena where all sorts of human endeavors converge. In doing the research I found how it was through the playing field that many low-income districts celebrated civic life: these dusty empty areas are fascinating as they recast some of the qualities of our colonial squares. It is also amazing that play rather than other practical or more urgent criteria inspires these people who live in deprived areas to set aside valuable space for their gatherings.

AMZ: *From what I read about the Escuela de Valparaiso, I understood that poverty (of materials, of transitory hospederias, the austerity of life, the assumption of the ephemeral condition, the fragility and temporality play an important educative/formative role. Joseph Rykwert was the first who told me about the group. Can you tell us more about this, please?*

RPdA: As said before, I did not study at the Valparaiso school (a useful shorthand for Escuela de Arquitectura de la Universidad Católica de Valparaiso) but I was not far removed from it either physically or conceptually. Like many of my classmates and friends I develop an early interest about it, perceiving Valparaiso as courageous, innovative, and challenging. Also, certain tutors — whom I regarded as real mentors — came from there.

Aside from the fragility of many of the buildings in Ciudad Abierta (a condition which can also be attributed to limited finances and the ease of construction on a rather adverse site), and given the absence in Chile of powerful canonical examples such as the ones one may find in Italy or Peru, the Valparaiso school reasoned that one should learn from everything; the ordinary and the commonplace, with a keen interest through direct observation. Observation was always transcribed into site sketches and notes. The appraisal was alike the anthropologist immersive method, where the “here and now” beckons a phenomenological bias. Such procedures were distinct from the intellectual appraisal: raw perhaps but deeply experiential.

My first-year experience was extraordinary. Our tutor, Octavio Sotomayor, who had collaborated with the Valparaiso, sent us to explore the city and register as if avid explorers navigating through uncharted but fascinating territories. We roamed Santiago — like, I guess, the situationists roamed through Paris — and we spent far more time out of school than within. We learned to look at the city face to face. School was the place for comparing the accounts of our discoveries.

The flip side was that we read little because such appraisal drew us away from a bookish way of learning, so that our then modest school library stood largely empty. Also, of course, such emphasis was not technical, rather a more primitive but also quite effective way of discovering how architecture was present in everything around us.

RTP: *You also show how several architects, movements, ideas of the 1960s bring about a return of the Homo Ludens as an essential part of the citizen. The same actors, for a second time throughout the 20th century (the first being the beginning of the century avant-gardes), argue for a lighter, more shifting architecture. Since then, do you see a renewed, contemporary resurgence of the ephemeral, either due to the need for programmatic flexibility, to user interventions adjusting and revising more rigid projects, to the very idea of an open-ended project gaining ground, or for any other reason?*

RPdA: The linkage I appreciate the best is the acknowledgement made by the post war architects of the Team 10 generation about the values of chance and the rule, and their reckoning with the kind of spontaneous and sometimes unpredictable patterns one finds in children's games, as a counter to excessively rationalized appraisals about space and behavior. The other issue is of course the idea of the city as a theatre, the city as an arena: filmmakers are probably better in capturing these magic occasions than us, architects, but no doubt there are charged places as there are mooted ones.

Play is all about interplay and so is architecture, and yes there is an element of indeterminacy attached to every single architectural project but every now and then someone turns this condition into a prime consideration for the project.

This idea summons the interchangeable and nomadic as much as the stable and permanent: sometimes I think it would be so nice to furnish certain studio spaces at school with stone tables thus enforcing certain types of interchange, but it would be equally nice to empty our studios of all furniture, turning them into vast arenas as in a mosque where people sit on carpets. Chance and the rule would operate differently in each case, but these formats tell us something about the nature of interplay and also the very nature of the arena's constitutive elements, which are never inert, or innocent.

AMZ: I would like to return to the 1980s, when Dimitri Porphyrios wrote in the introduction to Urban Transformations that in the capitalist world, the reintroduction of such traditions and cultures of the city as you proposed can only exist at the local level of art. I leave aside his misreading of your professional engagement as being with the language of history and the ruin, but I insist on the presumed impossibility of such endeavor within the real world of economics and politics (I quote from the Julien's Marsh introduction to the Urban Transformations and the Architecture of Additions, Routledge, 2015). Do you think that he was right, or some steps have been already been made during the last forty years?

RPdA: I guess that the master narrative is not something so credible now as it was in the last century. Another factor is the Anthropocene which forces us to see the city fabric as something that one should not aspire to easily replace: the practices of repair and reuse are opening interesting scenarios in the domains of architecture, fashion, and design. Planned obsolescence is now seen for what it is, a devious ploy to keep us spending money in a ceaseless cycle of consumption. The practices of care are at least also discussed including their ethical dimension. We may have gone global, but urban squalor and poverty are to be seen almost everywhere and progress certainly has not reached too many people. All this awareness belongs to the 21st century and challenge the notion of ceaseless progress.

Urban transformations may be advantageous when the criterion of embodied energy is brought into focus, but I like to think that beyond these practical considerations it can highlight more profound values attached to the creative dealings we may establish with our inherited fabrics.

Right now, it is interesting to think of the massive reconversions that will be required for those offices or parking buildings which have gone unused due to changing work patterns, the lessons of the pandemic, economic criteria, or whatever other reason.

Palazzo Farnese was no doubt a safe and long lasting investment (one could verify it in real estate terms, and I guess few items outside the realm of art can retain or even increase their monetary value to a similar rate over a period of five centuries), Le Corbusier's villa in Garches (which was subdivided into six units), the PREVI Lima housing scheme where units expanded way beyond the expected range, and other cases that involved massive retrofitting and incremental growth speak to us about certain futures that were never anticipated quite in the manner they unfolded. Despite the unpredictability, such experiences also speak to us about the validation of a scheme through reiterated and meaningful use.

Another consideration here has to do with the building agents that partake in these transformations, which are often small builders rather than huge building consortia, and the design tasks involved in such specific and concurrent processes who can also be advantageously assumed by small architectural practices with the ensuing employment opportunities. This is also a political stance as who are the players so to speak and a claim for a diverse number of medium size players interacting with the huge financing and building consortia who are now in charge. So, yes of course, there is room for the brand new, but adapting and transforming are a vital, relevant, and effective way of keeping our habitat vital, healthy, and inspiring.