

What Got You Here?

An Interview with Ricardo Flores

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BIOGRAPHY

Ricardo Flores is from Buenos Aires, Argentina and graduated from the School of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism at the University of Buenos Aires (FADU) in 1992. He received his Master in Urbanism at the School of Architecture of Barcelona in 1996 before furthering his education in the doctorate program at the School of Architecture of Barcelona.

Ricardo had worked in numerous architectural offices before founding Flores & Prats Architects in 1998 with Eva Prats in Barcelona. Since 2008, he has been a member of the Editorial Committee of Le Carre Bleu/ Feuille Internationale d'Architecture.

Ricardo has been an associate professor at the School of Architecture of Barcelona since 2009 and has also taught for the School of Architecture at the Universitat Internacional (2004-12) and at the Master Programme Laboratory of Housing at the School of Architecture of Barcelona (2005-12). Outside of institutional teaching, Ricardo has also directed many workshops and written many publications with his partner, Eva Prats.

INTERVIEW WITH

Ricardo Flores

FLORENCE MARCH 30, 2015



**Video, Media, and Architecture;**

Kerwood, Ashley: How do you believe that your education and upbringing in South America and Spain have influenced your approach to architecture? Did it influence your choice to value hand-drawing and modeling?

Ricardo Flores: I have been practicing in Barcelona for about 15 years with my partner, but before that I worked at an office that used to be a very special place in Barcelona, but also the world. [Architect that he studied under previously name] was a very particular character that I knew about when I was studying, that is why I flew all the way over after I completed my degree; to be near him for a while during an information period. There I also met Eva, she was already working there and in that place we practiced intensely the relationship between our mind and our hand; in a way translating what you think in precise drawings and bring that into building. That was the main activity in that office and then we moved on and inherited that into our own office. I think that my view from being an American, like you are, has another approach to the scale of things and allows me to see things from a different perspective, from a distance, that in confrontation with Eva's way of things is a very good mixture. We are working mainly in Spain, but both of us from being outside makes this point of view many things, traditions, and in a way that's so contextualized and that makes things much more I would say global, and yet more international way of seeing things to the specific things of the city. So, for me that is enriching the practice. The formative

years, the ones you are in now, are very strong, not only for the amount of years you are intensely looking into architecture with your colleagues but the time that you are spending is very strong and will influence the next 20-40 years. So that way in Argentina for me is still very present.

VMA; Wills, Alexander: So you were talking about how that was very important 20-30 years ago, learning there, and also your firm starting during the beginning of the technology era. Has it been challenging to embrace the changing technology since what you learned about 20-30 years ago you are still carrying through your firm now? Do you think that is a challenge for you? Or do you kind of use your old methodology?

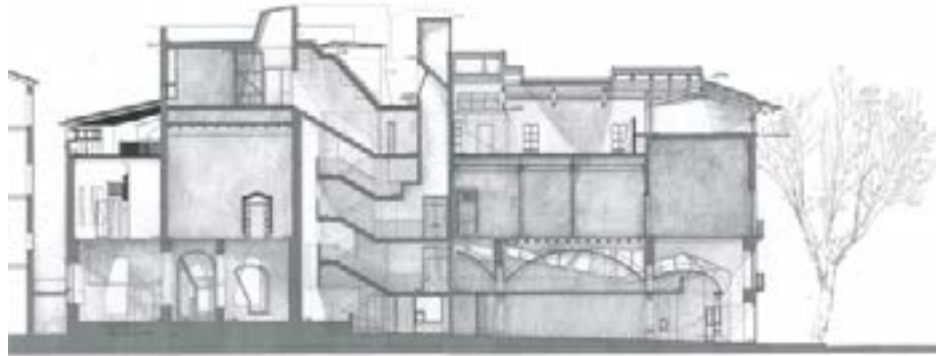
RF: Well we mix any technology that is necessary for expressing any moment. For example, I don't know if you have been able to look into our website, our website is using technology to show our projects and process in thinking in design, which is very difficult to express. In that sense that technology served us mixing the flash program, which is very primitive in a way but is still very clear, it makes photos and transforms, because in a way your head moves from one material to another. Then we've been using videos and films to register post-occupancy processes in some of our buildings; how users are using them now. We call some friends, film directors, to help us with that and in the drawing itself we do by hand but also we use CAD. So, I think we have been incorporating the technology but not as a fundamentalist. We are not starting to change into one technology only, I think the interesting thing is not to introduce only one technology but mixing with the old one and etc. For me the hands are very



Hand Drawing of Casa Providencia;
Photography: Duccio Malagamba,
Hisao Suzuki Alex Garcia

important because it is translating what you think with the pencil. There is a moment, very important then, when you translate with other engineers when you put your drawing in a common language in a way. The AutoCAD is a common language, which anybody uses. In that moment you translate your images to something parametric and use that for everyone to participate in your material; and for that CAD is very useful. We are using the videos for lectures, which is the most advanced technology you could use but at the same time the most primitive mixed together. I think that's the most fascinating because you don't get bored.

VMA; DeChant, Adam: I've noticed that for your projects you make a very complex and detailed model. I was wondering what are the greatest benefits that you gain from making a physical model?



Palau Balaguer, Photographs of the model: Hisao Suzuki

challenge it in a way because you can see from many points of view. It also can make you understand the parts, because the models are also cut in a way that is not complete, they are fragments. An interesting way in doing them is how you define the limits of your thoughts. When you think a building, you think in the limits of the room. How you make a model of this room, where does it end in the model? Is it just a façade in the inside or that room which you are now looking at, what is the limit of a thought? You have the model because sometimes that part of the street, how much of the façade you want to show, that is a reflection of the thought of the building, how this room will be related to other spaces. For me it is a way of testing what will happen later in the construction and they should be precise, they don't need to be precious in materials they could be cheap materials like chipboard or something. And they are always after a drawing; the important thing is that models come after. We don't design on models, we design on drawings, and then when we have enough, we advance another step and make a model.



Palau Balaguer, Photographs of the model: Hisao Suzuki

enough, we advance another step and make a model. Then we don't like this or that, so then we make another drawing, and change this piece of the model. They are process models, so in a way they reflect what you have been thinking on the drawing physically no? Sometimes when you enter a room you see the light passing and how it affects the room at that moment and then your mind keeps on thinking. A 3D model on the computer for example, is something which is inside, and it's something that you always have to print out points of view. These points of view are always intentioned. But, when you have to build a physical model, the person that is building it will ask you, "how do we solve that corner over there which is connecting with a beam that is already connecting with a beam that is already there?" All of these problems, the one who is building it will ask you and then you have to solve it. The physical model allows you to think many more things that sometimes the 3D model is hiding because you are not necessarily building it.



Edficio 111, Social Housing, Barcelona, Spain,
Photographs by Duccio Malagamba and Adria Goula.

VMA; Wills: You talked a lot about the advantages, but my question is the disadvantages of a physical model...? [Laughs]

RF: [Laughs]

“There is still a strange default mode of wanting to train architects as lone geniuses, where as in the end, it is ultimately a very collaborative craft.”

VMA; Wills: And, I guess, you were talking about perfection of craft is not really necessary, but in terms of the bad side of models can you point out anything with that?

RF: Well...

VMA; Wills: Anything that doesn't really help add insight so you have to use other programs to better understand. Like you were talking about the beam, so that's better understood in model because of those joint moments. What's more advantageous to studying not in model form?

RF: No it's true; yeah the model has its limitations in terms of scale, no? As you were saying, because I think that you can define the formal problems of meeting things and the technical problems, it doesn't make sense to make a big scale model of a beam because it's something that you draw and then you see it in reality. For me the most interesting thing of the model is the formal resolution or questions; another question of the model is the materiality. Sometimes the materials are only one, chipboard, or balsa wood or whatever and that is cheating. The reality is that is has a lot of attention to the colors, and materials. The last model that we did was a realistic model; it showed many colors, but it was very helpful, it was the first model with color, which you will see later. It's not abstract, it's very realistic because the reality of the building was ruins and we wanted to have it in the model, we introduced them. Also, the bad thing with the model is that you can like them a lot and then you can keep on changing and modifying them. And it's a bit of an exercise, much more speculative thinking so we try not to get so much into the model thinking and changing more and more because then you can continue that forever. I have a whole cupboard full of models of a roof [Laughs], I will show it today.

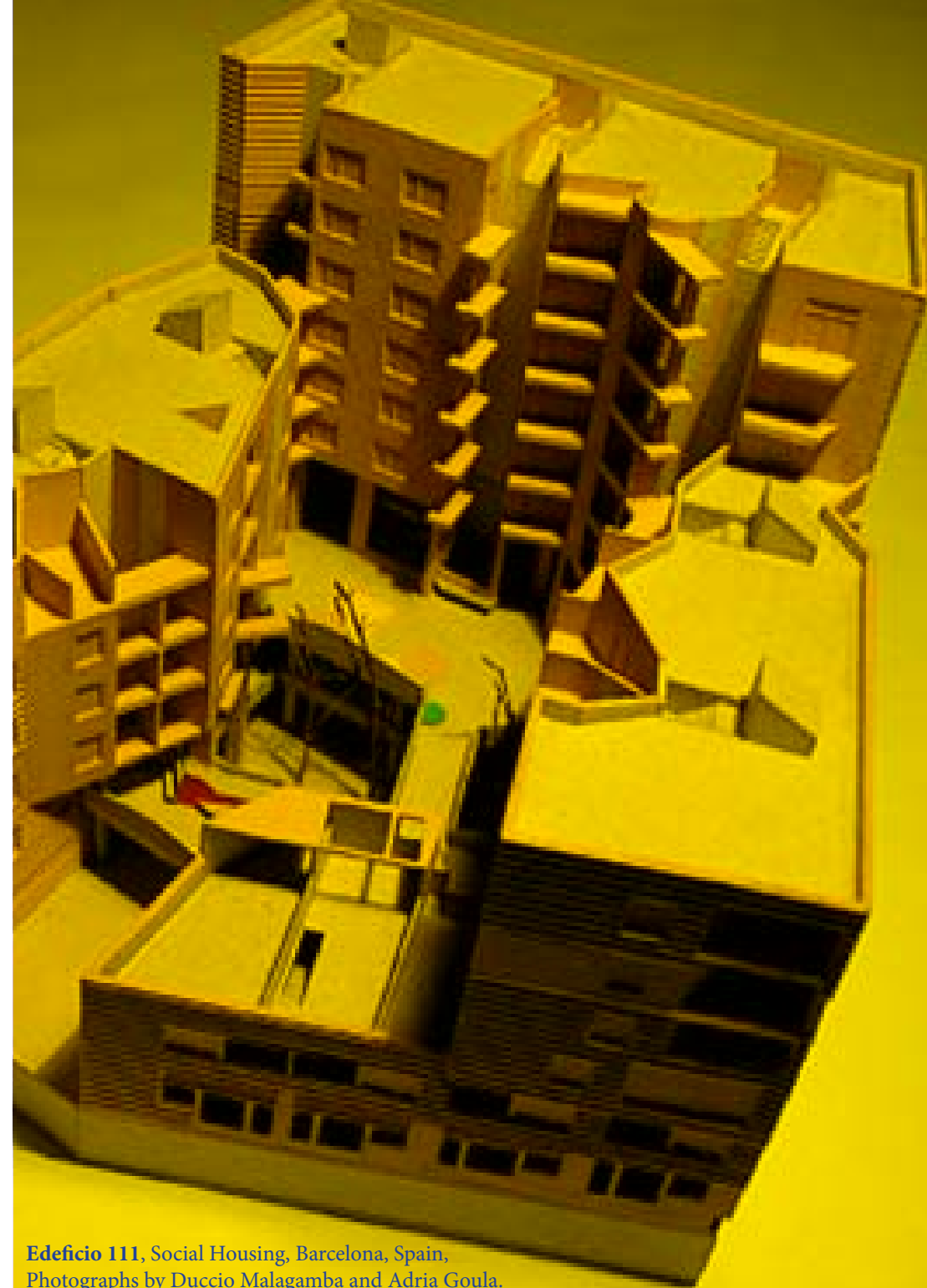
VMA; Wills: Got too into it? [Laughs]

RF: [Laughs] Yes, yes! But it's not my fault, because what happened was that we didn't have the money to start the construction and then we had to wait more years. And then you could see, “Ah! Maybe this could do this and that could do this, and...” [Laughs] and this could be the bad thing with the models. You are trapped.

VMA; Konieczny, Kara: [Laughs] So is it as simple as a model, a model is great for understanding challenges and limiting the thought that came from drawings? Or do you think that it can also be used as the better way of conceptualizing the final idea? Or in the end is the drawing still the best?

RF: Well, the model for me is also very important to translate to others to help participate. For example, now we are working on a theater in Barcelona and the theater people are very good at looking into models; they are very good at making observations. They've been very much involved in looking at the model and discussing with us their opinion. So in a way the model can make your ideas more common to others, no?

Everyone can participate with you and others from the office, and for me that is very important to me because it helps to make your work more public.



Edeficio 111, Social Housing, Barcelona, Spain,
Photographs by Duccio Malagamba and Adria Goula.



Edeficio 111, Social Housing, Barcelona, Spain,
Photographs by Duccio Malagamba and Adria Goula.

VMA; DeChant: You were talking about earlier, how in a lot of your drawings you would print out a CAD file and then you would draw over it and repeat the process. And I was just curious what you decide to put into a drawing when it's completed, because it seems like on a construction document you have the bare necessities, but your drawings are a lot livelier. I'm just curious what makes you choose the particular things you include in the drawings?

RF: I don't know if I get your question well. Because when we see things that are printed out, they are not built but you continue to keep thinking things, even when they are built, so you regret a lot of things that are built. When they are not built you still have the chance of changing them again. Because you're ideas are moving things, and this can still be better, and you try to draw it again. The good thing of the AutoCAD is that they are precise in geometry and dimensions and how they fit to the existing building if it is a renovation; then you draw on top of it and modify on transparent paper. For example, I have been discussing with the theater director and he is always changing his mind, and it's very interesting having a client like that is trying to enrich the project and he is cautious now that we are still under construction and I tell him no worry, that part is not going to be done for 3-4 months so we have time to change it. This is interesting because he comes to the office and looks at the model, and we work to change things. This is a theater and drama center so there is activity all throughout the day and night. At nine in the morning there are teachers and students and all that so how will they change clothes and go to the bar, and how will the actors come without being seen by the public. How will they come after work to meet them at the bar, how

will all of this work with the theater? All of the things he tells you, the most important thing is that you are able to accept things even when they are under construction, even when you like what's happening, that you are willing to change it and improve. You have to be able to incorporate his comment and still make the project nice; that kind of pressure you put on yourself, makes you alive, in a way, as a designer. You never freeze a project because when it's building it takes two years, and even during these two years you think it; so that's very interesting. When you travel Italy you see all of this energy of the past, then you come back to the office and want to change things that have already been built [Laughs]. It has happened to me and Eva many times, and I think it's because you are curious and are trying to incorporate it.

VMA; Wharrey, Justin.: So talking about changing designs, where do you draw your inspiration from when you begin a new design?

RF: It's always about the site and the client, and the program. I think that we try to draw the information that the client tells you, mixed with the place if it is an existing building that we have to work with or if there is nothing there or if there used to be a path or whatever

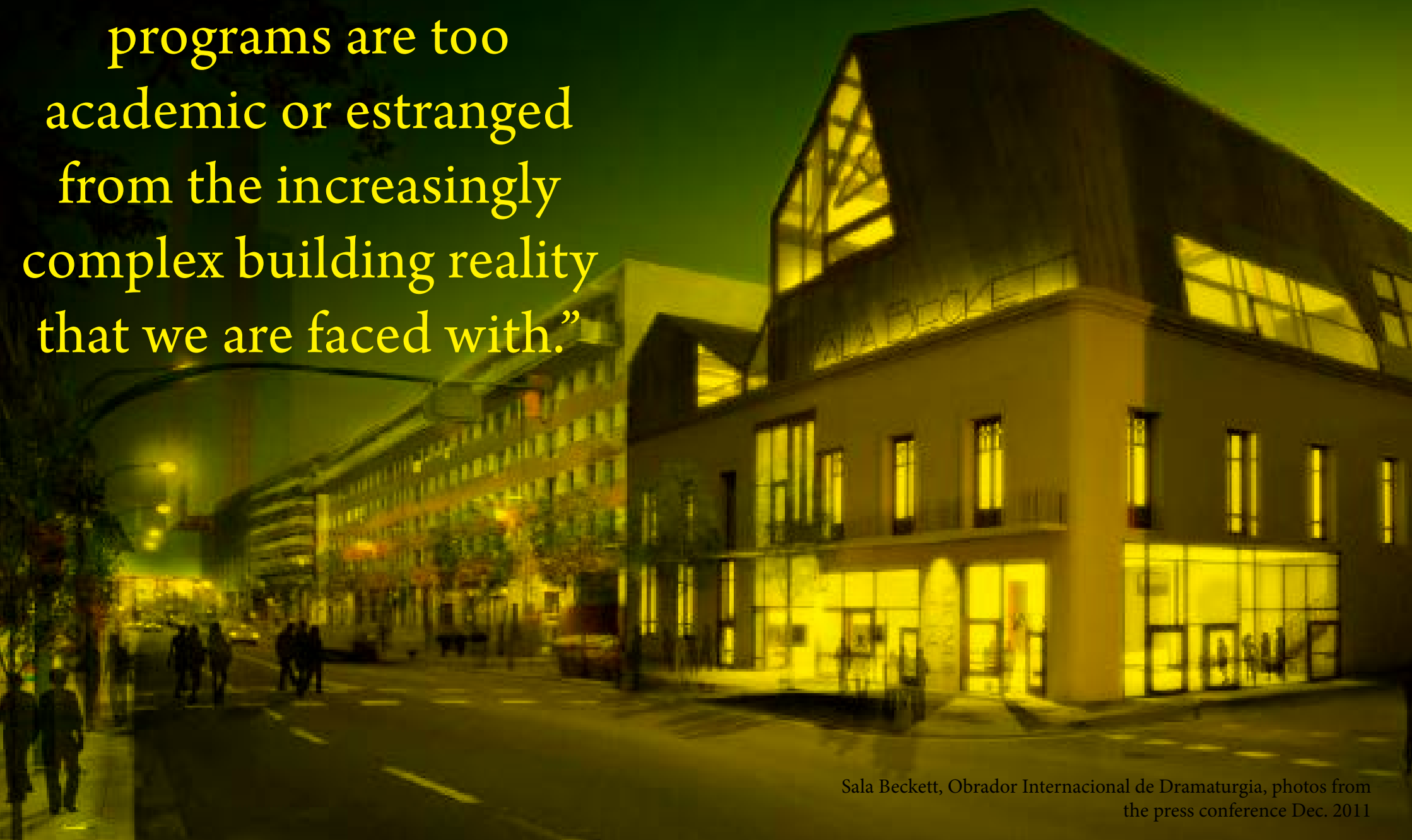
observations you make on the site, observations on the client, and the program he's going to make. Many times I like someone that tells you something, to know him. For example, this guy is around the same age and intellectually very attractive because these people of the theater are very... he writes his own plays and then I love his world and get very close to him. I have been going to theater more than my whole life these past two years [Laughs] and that makes you draw things, no? That makes you draw his things, like changing rooms for the actors, and how the actors move without being seen without being seen by the public. When they end the play, how the public meets the actors and cheer and all that, how they meet at the bar before and after. All of these things you start drawing. In ways it moves you. If it's a family house, how that person will use the house so you start drawing for them. Always you draw as if it were for you, no? The most important thing is that you think of things as they were for you, so you try to make the best thing you can as if it were for you, if you lived there. Would I live there in that space? Is this the most beautiful I can do or can I do better? These are the things that move you. But that always comes from the fascination of the client in a way; the character because you interact from the conversation to the end there is a lot of time. You like the way they live, because with architecture you will affect how they live. There should be a lot of connection. The start of the drawing you are thinking of them and the place. I don't know I guess that answer is a bit unclear [Laughs].

VMA; Wills: Do you ever ask your clients, since it's so important to be close with your clients, what their favorite art style is or their favorite music, or interests? To get your ideas flowing about formal shapes or...?

RF: It's difficult, as soon as you think about style it becomes terrible [Laughs]. The style is something very difficult to put into conversation. For us it's more important to ask how do you like to be sitting in there, or looking over there, how close the TV should be to the kitchen. "Yes, I like the TV there because I like to look at the TV while I'm cooking..." so it's more about doing the things that shape the space and then there is a course in the discussion that talks about dimensions, materials, scale. You try to share tastes with the client if you can if you don't like to destroy things when they are still useful. When you have a client you discuss these things as a friend. You understand what his taste is, but also you can bring him to your world slowly by showing him things, models, drawings, "I saw this that you might like... what do you think of this kind of material?" There are moments of tension but if you don't become discouraged, slowly you can discourage him; make him change his mind with time. At the end they see how passionate you are into the things. You say, "I would love to do this..." and they say, "Well, okay, if you think so" and you say, "it will trust me, trust me". This kind of convincing helps when you don't meet naturally.

Ricardo Flores:

“A lot of educational programs are too academic or estranged from the increasingly complex building reality that we are faced with.”



VMA; Wills: Thanks. Yeah, I have always wondered about that, how you incorporate your “style” into their style.

RF: Yeah, slowly, like with a friend. Yeah, you have to meet. Sometimes you have to give. It’s not like you are working alone in your office, you are working with someone else so you have to give. But that is something that you have to work on, [Laughs]. It’s good that someone else tells you “no, listen” and without making a disaster you change it a little bit, you make it much richer than just doing it on your own.

“In this moment of doubt in society, architects can help in making the community gain faith again in the neighbor.”



Palau Balaguer, Photographs of the model: Hisao Suzuki

Advice for the student:

“I find a useful test for the outcome of final work is to draw the plan @ 1:1 on site. Always allow for change, or modification, even after construction has begun!”

[taken from lecture]

VMA; Kerwood: We live in a world where repurposing architecture is becoming more and more important. In your project, Sala Beckett, you say, “old and new work at the same time”. Can you explain how the design merges the two successfully?

RF: This is the theater I was talking about. You don't want to see this lecture? [**Laughs**] No, I will explain this. There is an interesting point that we have been working on. Me and Eva have been more and more cautious of accepting the ruins, the decadence of the building as a positive thing because in the world of the theater it is so special. The people of the theater like to rehearse in the ruin. You have been seeing more and more examples in Europe and the world that the more decayed the space the more they feel a lot of energy there. All of the past energy and life that was there in the space are present; for them it is much more interesting. For me it is much more interesting that a black box that is abstract and the space disappears. This discussion we have with the director. That was the main important thing when we met; he was very open to see that the black thing that is the normal theater way that they are taking many theaters. It was fantastic to use as a positive thing in the theater, not as a negative thing. Use the ruin to go forward, to use it as a positive state. When you start construction there is a lot of violence because sometimes you have to demolish pieces that you can't have because of the sizes of the spaces and all that. When the builder comes in you have to be very careful that he doesn't demolish old things too much and these kind of things. The ruins are beautiful, but

“As soon as you think about style, it becomes terrible.”

as soon as you touch it, you can make it disappear [**Snaps Fingers**]. You have to make the building and keep the ghosts there until the end, and that is the most difficult challenge in this work. We are in the construction now so I will tell you in one year more how this ends.

VMA; Kerwood: So, going off that note, how can we as designers today design spaces for the future?

RF: Oh well... [**Laughs**] in general? I don't know, I think that we must be inclusive; to incorporate a client, being one or a participatory design, because you have a community. To me that is becoming more and more interesting. I think now, in a situation of global crisis, crisis not only economical, but because of the economical crisis a lot of layers of society have lost credibility in economical power, in political power. In this moment of doubt in society architects can help in making the community gain faith again in the neighbor. In that sense you can help to make a community to incorporate the participation in this community

moment of doubt in society architects can help in making the community gain faith again in the neighbor. In that sense you can help to make a community to incorporate the participation in this community work. Things that help to make them part of the project and they feel like they are part of a group, a neighborhood. I think that is the most fascinating and challenging world you have as an architect today and it's a place where architects can say something in this global crisis. We can step forward and say we can help a little circle of society get strong again and face the big city for example.

"You always draw as if it were for you."

VMA; Inzetta, Taylor: Education seems to play a big role in your life, getting your masters and Ph.D. alone, and teaching at multiple universities and being invited to direct many architectural workshops. What influenced you to start teaching?

RF: I find teaching a very good balance with the office. The life of an architect in general could be very tough only in the office, with the builders and all of the economic problems you have. I thought getting in contact with students is a way of keeping this interest, curiosity you, as a student, have into my life as well.

When we teach, each student has an interest and problems and curiosities they put to you when you discuss. When you have this moment of discussion it's very fresh, it's very generous because students give their ideas and you put their ideas there to discuss. School is like a market of ideas, one puts and shares and learns from the other. It is the most generous point of your life probably, because later when you have your own office you will close slowly, slowly, slowly to your team and it's normal. It's very difficult that later you keep this situation of sharing, so the school is a point for me of sharing my ideas in a conversation with students. We try to put exercises of problems that are similar to the ones we have in the office. In a way we can share this curiosity or problems with them and in a way it's like continuing a conversation you started in your office in the tables of the school. In Argentina, Buenos Aires has a very big university, and the university life is very rich because when you end your studies you continue as an assistant and later you become a professor. It's quite natural that you go to school and participate in this public discussion with students and other professors. In public schools in Spain and Argentina they pay you very little, so it's very social, [Laughs] in the sense that you go and you really enjoy and think that you have to give back something to the society; like what happened to you. I enjoy it very much, but I enjoy the energy that the youth have when you come to the school. [Laughs]

VMA; Inzetta: And as a continuation with that question, you also taught many lectures, what do your lectures focus on?

RF: Depends. Recently I have been to Mexico, to this international festival of architecture and also cinema and other artists, so it's a very open audience. So I lectured about our very social office, about how our participatory design in a public space. We involve our neighbors of the space in our design. After we won the competition, we formed a kind of commission for the neighbors, if they want. We won the competition, our call from the municipality, but even if we could do it just like that we decided to incorporate the neighbors in the process later on. With a social housing building with 111 families as a community we talk about this because this lecture was interesting for the general public to talk about this participatory design. If I started with a skylight and that and that, it was too focused, you know. So sometimes, now here, I will talk about skylights because you are very interested, but it depends on the place. Also, when it is about a school, I try to show process material, how we work in the office more than finished work, because I find that the finished work is something that you can go google. To show you as an audience that we have the same doubts and crises that you have when you design. I thought it was more interesting for you to hear about, so all the intermediate material, not the finished material. When it is open and in between materials you understand and can really reflect, as a student, into the work. So with a lecture it really depends on the audience a lot, how you think that you could be useful for them.

“... the way of drawing things to others you always need a kind of library in the back of your head, you know? A library of design that you like, and then through books and visiting their work there is a way you will have of answering questions to others ...”

Advice for the Student:

“View light as water’
Make public buildings into private houses’
Interview patrons after construction.”



Flores & Prats Architects, on site

"I think I have been just starting some things."

VMA; Konieczny: With your lectures you have also taught numerous workshops. We, ourselves, just experienced a workshop here two weeks ago, and do you find these are perhaps effective times to expand the view that an architecture student has, for us ours were on film and photography through architecture. So, it gives us this different point of view on architecture through media not typical for us in architecture school to handle. Do you find that as an appropriate teaching tool?

RF: Yes, I think as you said it can be a very particular view in your formation, in a condense time. I think for you just breaking your year with some workshops in between, like one per semester or at the beginning of the semester for fresh thinking. I think it is very interesting, because it is something that breaks the rhythm of the much more continuous, formal plan doing the same. Make

something very condense and strong, I think it works very well for you, because you dedicate focus two weeks on something only, very, very fast, very experimental. Yeah, I think it is very useful this workshop. It in between mixed with the long term, you know? For us, it is very useful, because it is the only way we can travel outside; my workshops. We can teach outside, because otherwise I only have the school in Barcelona, and we can leave sometimes one week or 10 days the most. So, the only way we can do this kind of teaching outside is with workshops.

VMA; Konieczny: So you benefit from it too? When you get to gather more knowledge from it and experience other students.



Edeficio 111, Social Housing, Barcelona, Spain, Photographs by Duccio Malgamba and Adria Goula.

RF: Yeah, I think different formations, and different schools. You put the same exercise to 3 or 4 different schools that's a very good test. They see and you learn, to draw on their ideas into drawn materials, or they can reflect and think not drawing in tools and skills, with a workshop you can really test. For me it is very, very fascinating to look at.

VMA; DeChant: I was just curious how publishing your work and allowing the general public to gain access to it influences your design and firm as a whole?

RF: Well, it did not influence the design. But, to your work, 15 years in the office, it's always a question to look unto yourself how you will show to others your work, what material will you show, how you will put it together and it was like making a project. We wanted to be involved in the putting together, because we wanted to show process work as well as finish work. It was really very beautiful to build but very tiring .



design logo, Flores & Prats Architects

build but very tiring because you are constantly trying to perfect the layout and thinking which way you want to project yourself outside your office, that someone else will look inside your office and explain how you would explain your project. So, when we make a sequence of projects, as you may have seen in the book, related to one another by subjects or things like that. Passing from one to the next and the next and if it was like a lecture and to put it into a book. Like today I will show 5 projects for example, I will make a kind of visual theme, so that people do not get bored, so that there is always something fun to see and you can go backwards and forwards, it's like a narration. So that is the decision. Other architects decide no, I want to make a project and finish it, the text at the beginning, plans, photographs, it's done. Then another one likes chapters. It is like a continuous thing, and that is a position that you take and say this will be the composition of the book and then you put in all the material that you can, it's a very thick book. [Laughs]

VMA; Inzetta: What advice can you give to budding architects? And what are firms looking for from graduating students?

RF: Advice for graduating students? I think the program you are doing here is really incredible because to be traveling around the city, is one of the best applied. When you are studying architecture here you go to see architecture a lot, because the way of drawing things to others you always need a kind of library in the back of your head. Normally you invent very little, because you get things or transform things from some things. There are architects in history, that if you look at them they have been testing a lot of things, so if you learn from them how to draw things and how to articulate spaces then when you start drawing and making an effort you remember sometimes. So when you go to visit their work and draw and try to understand what had been done and all that as a student, as a graduate and as an architect you have to still do it all the time. It is the most attractive and proficient of an architect; best you can do. It's fantastic you can do what you like and get paid for it. [Laughs]

VMA; Wharrey: So after owning your own firm for so long and practicing since the 90s, do you have any career goals that you still hope to achieve?

RF: The best is always to come. I think I want to do everything, all the buildings. I think with our work, if there is something positive we have not specialized in nothing, we have done public housing, theatre, public spaces. It is always what will challenge you again and again, there are a lot of programs, and then there are like something you go to competitions, and you try to do more and more until you win one and then you do that. At the beginning you don't win because you don't know anything about chapels and then you learn through doing them. It is a way of learning on things, doing the competition. When this was our first theatre I didn't know anything about doing theater, but insisting and learning, I understand a little bit. There are a lot of programs I would like to do. I don't think we have been doing a lot, even if we have a book. A book was a way of putting together a lot of work, in a way. I was always not nervous but unsure how to keep all the material that were floating there in the archives and studio. The book was a way to put something fixed and now the box opened a series of interests developed. In the next years, I want to work a lot in social housing. The studio is not finished, it is just starting. The next projects will be the best ones, probably better, because now that I have a little bit of experience in building and projecting; I want to put it in practice. I want to do more and more. It's not really, I don't think my career is past, or that I have been arriving to nothing, I think I have been just starting some things.



This interview with Ricardo Flores was focused upon his growth as an architect, design process, research, and the globalization of architecture. It was a collaborative effort between students of the Video, Media, and Architecture course at Kent State University Florence. Guest lecturers were brought in from all over Europe for a Spring lecture series and students were tasked to create an interview before each of these lectures. After analyzing numerous interviews with other architects, students researched and explored the work of the visiting lecturers. Questions were then devised by each student, and these questions were analyzed based upon their thematic similarity and their relevance to the work of each lecturer. The most appropriate questions were chosen for each interview, and the specific students who created these questions then were charged with interviewing our guests, using the chosen questions as a base and posing any other questions that flowed with the interview.