

**University of Miami School of Architecture**  
**Faculty Oral Histories**

Interview with Jorge Hernandez  
Professor. School of Architecture  
Architecture Design & Theory, Architectural History, Urban Planning, Historic  
Preservation,  
Miami, Florida, October 5, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana  
Recorded by Gilda Santana  
Interview Length: 30:09 min

**Summary:** Jorge L. Hernandez, received a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Miami in 1980 and a Master of Architecture from the University of Virginia in 1985. He then worked for Eisenman Robertson Architects and taught at The University of Virginia. In 1987 he joined the faculty of the University of Miami and established his firm. His work includes The Brickell Bridge in Miami, Florida; The Williamsburg James City County Courthouse in Williamsburg, Virginia, both secured by winning entries in international competitions; and The Coral Gables Museum, a LEED certified renovation and addition to a National Register 1939 Phineas Paiste building. He has lectured in the US and Europe, taught for the Prince of Wales Institute of Architecture and participated in numerous international symposia and conferences. His work has been published internationally.

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**Gilda Santana:** What are the challenges you are facing as a researcher and teacher?

**Jorge Hernandez:** I must say it is becoming increasingly easier to access material, because it involves less physical movement and travel. That I think has been helpful, since we seem to be living in at a pace where we can't block off significant periods of time to go to archives. So, I find that it's easier to access materials, and I find it easier to do it in increments of time that we have disposable. On the other hand, I'm old enough to remember the joy of having to scratch three days off my schedule, going to an extraordinary archive, and burying myself in the dust of that wonderful stuff, so that I miss.

**GS:** Everything is not digitized yet.

**JH:** It's interesting that you say that, because one resource that I often consult is the National Register of Historic Places which has an extraordinarily small amount of its materials digitized. So, here's another problem, we have false sense of security, let's say, but I think we live at a pace where it's increasingly harder, and maybe that may just be an excuse, to say, "I have to get to Washington for three days every six months", or, "I have to go back to the Avery", or, "University of Virginia, where I did my graduate studies". They have extraordinary materials that I buried myself into for years, and I miss that.

**GS:** Sounds like you relished that part of your education.

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**JH:** OMG, I knew I was older, I had already become an architect, I was registered, I was married. I didn't realize when my wife and I travelled to go to grad school, that she was pregnant. I must say that I knew I had a block of time because we had saved up whatever money we could to allow ourselves that experience, and I took full advantage of that.

**GS:** What had you done before?

**JH:** Well, I did my undergraduate studies in architecture here at UM. We were a department in engineering back then. The chair of the department, John Steffian, because we weren't a school then, asked me to join him in practice upon graduation. So he had a license, he was probably in his fifties, and he was a really wonderful man, very beloved, quirky and funny, with a very, curious interesting sense of humor, and he had an incredibly fascinating partner, his wife Sarah Enders Steffian. She was the daughter of a man who had mentored Jonas Salk. She loved the school. A very eccentric woman—she would dress in John's rejected clothing. She was fascinating, and brilliant, and in some ways, more brilliant than John. They were good years. It was John's idea to ask President Foote when he newly arrived, to make the department a school. Upon tendering his resignation, and said [paraphrasing] "I would like for my my service that you gift me this". In other words, his resignation was not conditioned upon it, they had been here a while and they were moving. I think he had taken a position at the Boston Architectural Center. Tad [Foote] thought that it was a gracious way to say "good-bye", and the school was formed.

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**GS:** These are the kinds of things that you don't find in the University Archives, so this is great!

**JH:** So he's still living. We should reconnect with him. They are a very interesting couple. So, we started a little firm, and it won a number of national awards, but the recession hit a year later, and I went to work for Ferrandino, Spillis & Candela, which was a very old, established firm in town, and saved my money while I worked for two years and got registered. My wife also saved her money, and we went off to do our graduate studies in Virginia.

I remember pouring over Jefferson's letters. I could touch them. It was unbelievable. Now, for very good reason, you can't touch them. I take students there now, it's kind of sad because they're behind layers of glass [the letters], and we view them as precious objects, so you don't have the intimacy with it, but we were allowed to touch them then.

**GS:** They're museum pieces. You must understand that as a preservationist.

**JH:** Right! They're museum pieces. But it was great contact sport. Just to think that he [Jefferson] wrote that stuff and I had it in my hands [chuckling], you know?

Now that I'm getting older, I'm just starting to write about these ideas that I had in my head regarding the research that I did on him back then. As a practicing architect and a teacher, who does publish, but not with the frequency that I would if I weren't a practicing

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architect, because I do creative research...I have certain ideas about some of the things that I saw way back then, in the marginalia.

**GS:** So these ideas are resurfacing...Are you going back to look at these objects?

**JH:** I am, I am. I have to find a letter...well, there was a gentleman who was well versed in architecture, who was courting one of his daughters. Jefferson was well-versed in architecture, so he had a great affinity for him. He made a passing reference in a letter to the potential son-in-law—I don't know that they ever did wed—about Melitzia's ideas on typology. Melitzia was an Italian, eighteenth-century theorist. Clearly, Jefferson was interested in his interpretation on typology, and he and his "son-in-law" had this kind of relationship where he wrote it in a letter. I thought there must be something here. There's a bottom to this iceberg and I need to get to it. I think it has to do with the distribution of the pavilions at the university, which has to do with an article that I'm working on.

**GS:** Where do you imagine publishing the article?

**JH:** I have no idea. I'm going to write for myself first, and then send it out into the universe. It depends on how much time I can carve out, stick myself in the Alderman Library again to go through all those letters. One thing I learned over time that is that if you have an idea, you can stake a flag in it, write it once for SAH, and then write again for JSAH.

The letter followed a conversation, and while he doesn't go in depth into the details of the conversation about Melitzia's ideas on typology, he mentions it in the letter. Clearly they were talking about it. So one needs to reread it and unearth, through the evidence of the buildings, which is what I like to do, because I am a practicing architect and a teacher. I like to use buildings as texts also because they have an ingrained wisdom, or, logic of thought. That's what design is about. So that's a long answer to question number one, if, it is indeed an answer.

I will tell you about an article that I'm about to publish. I don't think it's weighty enough to start at the top. I've been thinking about the theory of making and keeping. We never think about it that way. It struck because of a beautiful picture that I love of Georgia O'Keefe from her later life when she was nearly blind, and that's when she started making these earthen forms. Beautiful gnarled, and loving hands. This young man [Juan Hamilton] came onto the ranch and taught her how to throw earth. I think some of those pieces are the most profound pieces. She was able to sustain herself before her pieces garnered huge sums of monies, because the ranch had riparian rights, so she controlled the water downhill—very clever woman. So because of her ability to sustain herself—it's not that her paintings weren't selling, they were selling—but they weren't fetching millions of dollars at the time that she bought the ranch. That's why I like that older life picture of her. The younger Stieglitz pictures of her are extraordinary, but in a way, that older life picture is so moving because she'd gone through her voyage. What's interesting is that those pieces are probably the most connected to her because they were made of the earth that she lived on, and with water that she controlled because of the riparian rights. They come from her heart and mind because she could barely see anymore. She must have,

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through her stewardship of that ranch, understood that relationship that makers have to be keepers, and keepers should at least be empathetic with the act of making. And that's unique, only, really, to people who are architects and preservationists. When you think about it, it makes no sense to expend any energy making if it's not going to have a long and useful purpose. So, making without keeping is absurd, and keeping can't happen without the act of making. We don't think of them as inextricable. That's what I'm working on right now, but the idea was prompted by that picture of her.

So, the point is, that I'm the kind of researcher that loves to go deep, but because I make things, and help keep things, and help convey the importance of that to young people who aspire to make and keep, I do a little bit at many levels. I guess I'm a generalist, is the best way to say it, and I probably will never have the time to go deeply into any subject. But, that's ok, because I've accepted that. Because I get to make things and get to keep them. I've made peace with myself. So for me, my research support needs are a bit different from more traditional scholars. I'm not a traditional researcher.

There's a really great graduating class right now. Nicolas Delgado and a group of other students organize events at his parents' store—very cool—that sells t-shirts, called Neustore in the Dupont building, downtown. They have 150 t-shirts with a color theory concept in the most exquisite gradation of color. So the store is sumptuous because it's like a ruin. They took off layers of, I want to say garbage, that had accrued over time, and they took it down to the first archaeological layer that they felt had dignity, and then they have these exquisitely colored t-shirts on a table—that's it. Anyway, they have these events there which include artists, performance artists, film makers, writers, architects. They invited Rocco [Ceo] and me to talk about "light". I had written poems about things

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like that when I was young, and I started writing again. It's nice because as you get older, you realize you have more time. I know it doesn't make sense, but you feel like you have more time...I guess, maybe we get better at managing our time.

**GS:** How is the field changing?

**JH:** I'll talk more about local archives...I know that we have a ton of great archival material here, and History Miami has a good repository, and there's a little bit of it at the Coral Gables Museum. We need to collaborate. It's local history, and it's so tightly knit. And the people that work with it are working with for specific purposes related to projects. I think there needs to be an intersection. It's a mammoth task. But the interconnectedness of place and events that history brings, and then there's separateness...For some reason I keep going back to Jefferson. When he was governor in Williamsburg, he measured the palace he lived in. He did a set of working drawings so that he could project his addition to the palace, which was eventually built. The building was lost. Then in the 1930s when Williamsburg was reconstructed, the only reason that they were able to rebuild the building was because there was an archaeology and the President's measured drawings. His addition, by the way, is not the salon. He was planning to demolish the salon, and restore to the building an idea of typology closer to his liking. Because of it, he measured the relationship between the landscape and the building and the building's interior. Now, those drawings are not in Virginia. They're in an archive in Boston. So, now we can connect those dots digitally, but the same thing happens to a lesser degree at the local level. It just costs money and takes time.



**GS:** What are areas of emerging emphasis for the School?

**JH:** The great question of the day, which I call the “great equation”, is “how do we balance the management of the earth’s finite surfaces? “. We have to continue to allow it to produce, and use its products, while at the same time accommodate ever-growing, urban populations. We have to share that surface with many other realities, wilderness preserves, animal husbandry, wildlife, urban forestry, and, do it in a way that is inclusive that houses people with dignity in meaningful ways—that’s where I place preservation—in meaningful ways, and does so in settings that allow us to flourish. That’s the great equation. If we fail, not good! It’s an equation that every other generation before us has had to balance, but we see it in a new light because of what we know about climate change. We can’t be absolved by virtue of not knowing. Some of the research on climate change is happening so quickly and throughout many specialized fields, that in order to extract the principles that you need to put into practice, it takes super, in-depth finding in one field in order to apply it to general knowledge and use. That translation is going to be at the intersection of what we are being challenged with. A book that I recommend for the library is Tony Tung’s, *Preserving the World’s Great Cities*.

**GS:** I believe we have it.

**JH:** Strangely, the book is already out of print, so I recommend we buy some more copies of it. It has a beautiful introductory chapter, and it contains some great case studies of

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Venice and Amsterdam, which are really wonderful for a looking back to see how those cultures managed this before. And in the case of those two cities, there is accessible data going back to medieval times, which is invaluable. What was really beautiful in the Venice case, he [Tung] argued from the data—he also worked with biologists—that there was an improvement in the ecology of the bay as a result from the early settlement of Venice. We never hear that! We always hear about the damaging effects of our footprints on the earth. But by folding us into the equation of other animals, and studying their effects on the general environment, he was able to determine that there was an improvement of the ecology of the bay. It's beautifully written.

So, I think it's about that. It's about unearthing some of the rapid fire thinking happening at the cellular levels of different fields, and allowing translations of those things to affect our general understanding of this phenomenon.

**GS:** What are your hopes for library support?

**JH:** I'll answer that really personally. I hope that we can build a new facility here at the school. This is lovely, and I think we've done a wonderful job of loving this space that Marion Manley, the second registered, woman architect in Florida designed as apartments. We need more space. The students need more space. We're now a great University. We weren't ranked in the top 50 when I came here. We have a wonderful new President. I don't know him well, but I have had one very good, long meeting with him and the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, to discuss the colonial churches that were damaged during hurricane Sandy, and now, Hurricane Matthew—it skirted Santiago, but I know they

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were affected by the winds. I hope that the damage that Sandy had done, which has not been addressed in total, has not been pushed back by the advent of Matthew. He and the Archbishop had an immediate affinity for one another. I think he's a wonderful next President for the University.

**GS:** I'd like to do a follow-up.

**JH:** Yeah, we should. You should do oral histories. I'm writing an article for Victor (Deupi) on the way that classicism and traditional architecture emerged from here. It's a history of the people and their contributions. People don't know about Arthur Bowen, for example.

**GS:** Well we have many books from his library, and some of his slides.

**JH:** I'd love to do a project with you on that.

**GS:** That would be great. We could get a small research grant. We could have students go through them, decipher the marginalia that you're so interested in.

**JH:** The group of students who won't be here next semester, have actually been very good mentors for the next group.

**END OF INTERVIEW**  
**Gilda Santana**  
**10.03.16**