

**University of Miami School of Architecture**

**Faculty Oral Histories**

Interview with Jaime Correa

ASSOC. PROFESSOR PROF PRACTICE at SOA UM

Miami, Fl. October 19, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana

Recorded by Gilda Santana

Interview Length: 53:33 min.

Jaime Correa is an Associate Professor in Practice and the former Director of the Master in Urban Design at the School of Architecture of the University of Miami (position held from 1996 to 2014) where he was also the Knight Professor in Community Building.

He is one among the 14 architects and town planners that launched the American New Urbanism movement, one of its most important promoters in Latin America, and also one of its most significant critics. From 2013-2017 he has served as a Climate Reality Mentor under the tutelage of former Vice-President and Nobel Laureate Al Gore. He has been the recipient of the Faculty of the Year Award at the Master in Real Estate Development, the Woodrow W. Wilkins Award for Outstanding Teaching and the University of Miami Excellence in Civic Engagement Award. He received the bi-annual 2014 Charles A. Barrett Memorial Award, the Florida AIA Urban Designer and Academic of the Year Award, three John Nolen Awards (in collaboration with the Treasure Coast Regional Planning, the University of Miami, and the City of Delray Beach), the Public Works Association Project of the Year (APAW), the 2014 Florida Redevelopment Association's Presidents Award, the Florida Governor's Point of Light Award, first prize at the Salt Lake City Interrotta competition, four national CNU urban design awards for his master plan collaborations, an Honorable Mention at the Williamsburg competition, and many more awards and recognitions.

**JC:** What matters to me since 2008, is the fact that I'm different from everything else in the universe because I have reason. I have a mind of my own. I want to know exactly how that mind works, and how mindful things can be applied to my daily practice of architecture and urban design. In order to do that you have to start questioning everything that you do. My life was, very much, the life of an architect that had an audience. The light was bright, and shining upon me until 2008. In 2008 things began to change. Some of my clients left, but the light was still bright. I was still in my studio. Then all of the sudden the light was gone. The clients were gone, the audience was gone, no more products in the office. So, what would you do? You have to do something about it. So, I began a process of introspection questioning everything that I was doing. During this process, I understood very quickly that there were several things that were going on in the world. We were going through an economic collapse. We distrust government now more than ever. I was looking at what millennials were doing, and I very quickly understood that they were not about top-down projects. They were taking projects on their own and they were doing everything from the bottom up. An example of bottom up urbanism in architecture, for instance, is Wynwood. I will talk about that later.

I also realized that there was a lot of real-estate evaluation. People were leaving communities because they weren't able to pay their mortgages. Some people owed more money than what the house was really worth. So, they simply left the house and allowed the banks to foreclose. This produced a mobilization from the suburbs to urban areas. I was seeing how that generation in particular did not want to leave where their parents used to live. They were complaining about the fact that suburbia was really awful and that living in the isolation of suburbia was not for them. They wanted to have something more animated, more pedestrian friendly, and those things were to be found in denser areas, in urban areas. Our urbanism is not necessarily the urbanism we find

in Barcelona or Rome or Paris. It's something a little bit different. I noticed that because people were moving to urban areas, there were also people leaving the urban areas, mainly the poor, who were having to abandon those areas and they in turn began occupying all of the properties that the suburbanites were leaving behind. The poor were moving to the edges, and the rich were moving back into the center of the cities. That was the case for a while. The Pew<sup>1</sup> just came out with a report that says that 61% of Democrats like to live in urban areas and 65% of Republicans want larger houses as far away from their neighbors as possible. They don't mind driving 45 minutes to get a gallon of milk. So, things are very divided nowadays. I also noticed that in both suburbia and urbia, there was a sort of retrofit. People were moving to urbia, but they were not taking it for granted. They were actually changing urbia to accommodate their needs in the way that you see nowadays for instance all the neighborhoods east of I-95 or in Wynwood, in the Design District. As part of this change, there was also a new type of media and since 2008, we don't pay attention anymore. We've become introverted and autistic. We spend most of our time on the phone and on the computer and things are weird. We are all connected but we're also very distracted. Also, because of all of these technologies, there is a real lack of what used to be considered public space. Now public space has cameras all over the place. They're collecting data as you move, they know exactly what your times of consumption are. Based on where you are, your phone is sending information constantly to Google on what you're doing, what you like, where you shop, what you want. Every time you look up a restaurant on Yelp, they can corroborate that you are in that restaurant because of GPS that goes into a system. They know what every single American is doing as an individual and as a group. The idea of public space is also merging into something that is completely different. At the same time, we have reached peak oil production and there no new

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org>

discoveries. It's not that oil is gone, we are in the process of going from an oil-based society to a society that will be different somehow. We still don't know how that future is going to be. We are also going through climate change, and we are too many people. There are limits. We cannot feed everyone that is now alive. The more people we have in this world, the worse it's going to get. Eventually, it's going to catch up with us. These were the things that I was realizing in 2008, so if you are in the process of researching these things, and see how one thing affects everything else. That was the old way which we used to do research in architecture and urban design. But since 2008, things have changed. Why? Because now the world is big and interconnected. Once you start doing research on the internet and you looking for corner buildings and you somehow end up in Freeport.com. You don't know exactly how these things happen but all of the sudden you're there. So, what's happened now is that everything is connected and you go from place to place to place and you do the type of research that has extraordinary feedback loops. There are facts and experts everywhere, and the smartest person in this room, is the room itself. So, now we trust that the crowds are smarter than the individual. We're packing everything into intelligence of the crowd. There are TV shows that when you need a lifeline, you call the crowd, and the crowd always answers right. Nobody distrusts the crowd when they have to choose between their choice and the other choice. In science, this is what they call chaos theory. All of a sudden I became very much interested in understanding how one initial convention like this would produce something gigantic, what they call the butterfly effect. A butterfly beats its wings in Brazil, and it causes a hurricane in China. It's understanding how one little action or a collection of little actions will eventually turn into something that is pretty gigantic. This idea of chaos theory is represented in what is called the logistic equation. The logistic equation basically says that every time in your life you have two decisions: yes or no. You either decide to be born or not. If you decide to be born,

you either breastfeed or are fed by hand. If you're breastfed, you're breastfed seven times a day or three times a day, etc. We make decisions all the time, and when you see the combination of all these decisions, at the beginning it's super easy and it's either yes or no, but as it moves along the timeline, it becomes really, really complex. At moments it is almost chaotic and you see moments in which you sort of take a break, this is mine in 2008—I took a break from everything else and I'm beginning to operate again in the world. You have 1000 things that will come up after the break asking whether you should do things, yes or no. The logistical equation is actually an equation to be able to forecast weather patterns but it's used in everything that has to do with chaos. What this tells you, is that at certain points, at which all of the sudden everything tips down. Like water, water is composed of two molecules, hydrogen and oxygen. When you start reducing the temperature, there is a point, which is at 32 degrees, it all of the sudden becomes ice. It doesn't become ice little by little. It's the same thing when you put water to boil. At a certain temperature, it turns into vapor. Those are tipping points, and there are tipping points in everything. These tipping points are very difficult to predict. You don't know exactly when the market is going to turn down. Now it's doing very well, and Trump is taking credit for it. Tomorrow it can be that the market goes down all of the sudden. It's a sign telling you that you have no control over the world.

This is all an introduction to two projects that I am going to show you in a minute. I have also been thinking about the Sorites Paradox, also known as the little-by-little argument. Let's say that there's a pile of nails here. If I start moving nails away, when does this pile become not a pile anymore? If I take one nail, is that still a pile? Yes. If I take two, is that still a pile? Yes. If I take three, will that be a pile? Yes. If I do it the other way around, if I put one nail there, and then I put another nail, are two nails a pile? I put another one, is three nails a pile of nails? When does a pile

of nails become a pile of nails? It has implications for urbanism and design. (17:02). How many nails do I need to remove before this pile of nails ceases to exist? Or, how many nails do I need to add to turn a bunch of nails into a pile? In terms of urban design and architecture, what we're asking is how many projects will it take to turn a familiar place into an extraordinary place? How much do I need to add in order to turn something that is ordinary into something extraordinary? That is one question for urban design. And the other is, how many projects can be removed before the familiar turns unrecognizable? This is a question for historic preservation. When you have a historic district, and you start removing buildings, how many buildings can you remove before that district is not historic anymore?

Little by little I began searching for a definition of what a city should be. This is my definition, which is still in progress. A city is an emerging settlement for habitation where a collection of individuals make selfish design decisions. As urban inhabitants were not looking for anyone else's happiness. We're looking for our own selfish happiness benefiting the decision maker directly, rarely the collective. We're not looking for everyone's happiness. As a result, the final outcomes is dependent on my original conditions. I take one decision that is going to benefit me, you take a decision that is going to benefit you, etc, and at the end of the day, collectively, we end up with some result that is unpredictable. I wrote articles saying, "planning is dead." and publishing the article in Latin America, because my [North] American colleagues does not believe planning is dead, and they don't want to see it. The results are unexpected and always greater than the parts. Urban design becomes a field for calculated disruptions.

Remember, I am one of the founders of New Urbanism Design in the United States. Fourteen of us began the New Urbanism movement back in 1989. The first publication that used the term was by Peter Katz, in which they published our work, the work of fourteen people. I was

one of them, and I have always thought that it was not the exact truth. I have always felt uncomfortable with the way that the New Urbanism operates. I always felt that urban design is not just a problem of form and its control in entirety, which is what New Urbanism says. I believe that urban design is more about disruptions. Disruptions to the public right of way, or on roof surfaces, or on outside surfaces.... on every surface that we touch, we can disrupt it and cause something else to happen. So, I disrupt, you disrupt, she disrupts, etc., and that's how we turn a place into a Miami. Everyone is doing individual projects, and all of the sudden the collection of projects is what we call the City of Miami. OK.

**GB:** A pile of Nails.

**JC:** Yes...a pile of nails. Just because I am saying these things about urban design, I want to share my thoughts with you. I've been thinking about how New Urbanism is all about imitation, it's about mimesis. It's about understanding the past as a point of departure for the future. I'm in a platonic world. I'm in a world of universals. I'm in a world of simplicity. I'm in a world in which, if I want to imitate something, I'd rather look in a mirror and see an imperfect version of myself, so if I want to imitate that's what I will do. But in reality, it's all about progress. If we don't look at the past as a present for the future, we're not going to go anywhere. We will be stuck, doing something the same way it has always been done because that's the way it has always been done. An argument against control and tradition. In New Urbanism the ideal is that cities are regulated. There are cities that are more regulated and cities that are less regulated. In the more regulated the cities always begin with a plan, and cities that are less regulated tend to be more picturesque and

work basically from the bottom-up. Roman encampments for instance, were very regulated. The ideal cities of the Renaissance were very regulated. The garden city movement was absolutely regulated, and the New Urbanism is very regulated. But less regulated areas, where, for instance, in all the initial cities of the world, the Greek cities, the medieval cities, were less regulated. There was a “Phenomenology” movement in the 1960s that had to do with your perception of cities and how you move through spaces. Finally, informal urbanism is less regulated, shanty towns for instance. For me, it was a time to decide if I wanted to be on the side of regulation or on the side of the less regulation. My heart, as a New Urbanist, was on the side of the side of regulation, but I always preferred to lead or to visit cities that looked more like this. That’s why I like Rome. I like Barcelona. I prefer historic Barcelona, El Raval, and all of that area there. My mind was always moving from one place to the next. I also realized that they had commonalities, so I wanted to see what were on the two sides of the spectrum. The commonalities were that in both places there was a multiplicity of individuals working on the place, that there were ranks of diversity involved in both, that they were interconnected, that each one of them had key parts that could easily decompose and recompose, both of them were on the human scale and most of the places that I liked had a precise scale that evolved by themselves because of the individual actions that people were taking. They had precise morphogenetic characteristics. They had a DNA that I could very easily discover and apply in my projects. I also noticed differences. For instance, I noticed that the more regulated sites were centralized and the less regulated were decentralized. In one the sum is equal to the parts and in the other one the sum is greater than the parts. One was a political act, the other was self-organized. This looks like clockwork, this was iterated. This was linear, that was nonlinear, this was top-down, that was bottom-up. So, one was about design and one was one was about dynamic complexity. The differences were really about the components. I entered a period



of analytical philosophy. A period in which I was interested in the components of everything, what is essential and what is accidental about everything I touch, everything I say, everything that I design. If I would have selected just the regulated, I would have done something that is completely antagonistic which is what happens with New Urbanism. In New Urbanism, you produce a master plan, and you just follow the rules of the master plan, and if you follow the rules of the master plan you end up in a product that will most likely excel. The idea I was arguing for this time was stochastic. In other words, I didn't only know how I was going to start, but I had no idea where this was going to end. I decided that I was going to do two projects. One was going to be absolutely deterministic and one was completely stochastic, and I was going to put them side by side, compare them and say "This is what I want to do for the rest of my life". I was given the opportunity, so I went back to work, to do two projects, one in Oman next to Yemen in Saudi Arabia, and the other project, the stochastic project, was near Medellin, in a place called Cauca, which is the only river that runs North-South in all of Colombia. Rivers in Colombia normally run to the Atlantic, but this one goes down and joins the Magdalena which is the big river. So, I worked on two projects which are finished. They were built. One had seven kilometers of beachfront and 230 hectares, plus 30 hectares added as reclamation of the ocean. That project was called the "Wave". The other one was only 3.5 kilometers of riverfront, and 200 hectares of coffee plantation. So, it was reversed. What was a golf course, became a coffee plantation? 230 hectares of city property here, became 230 hectares of open space. Let me show you the wave first, the deterministic project. My projects always begin with looking at precedents. I wanted to see how most cities work, so I looked at the best examples of all cities in Oman. I realized very quickly that they had very clear boundaries, that the blocks were based on family plans, as you know, in Muslim countries, women have to be covered and can only be uncovered in front of family and friends. This is expressed in urbanism

by dividing the block into interior lots, and when you have these sorts of cul-de-sacs, that cul-de-sac is really a family that has several properties within the same cul-de-sac. Once a woman enters through there, she can uncover and be part of that semi-public life with the clan. I also looked at the way the lots worked, and I realized that some of the lots are seams in the New Urbanism. In New Urbanism, we're always talking about fronts facing fronts and backs facing backs, and here there were lots that had three or four frontages, what we call porkchops, which is a lot with a very small entrance and the lot really is in the back of the lot. Then, I noticed the commercial morphology uses were completely different to the commercial uses we are accustomed to in Western countries. As I started learning more and more, I realized that, for instance, they don't like open public spaces for retail because Allah, their god, is the only one that should occupy a central space. In America, when we have an open space, we tend to put everything in the center. In Muslim countries, when they have open space, they go to the edges. Also, it is very hot. With that, I began to work. I was given 7 kilometers of beaches. This is the government of Oman which realized it's not going to have any more oil starting in the year 2032. Their oil wells are dry, so they had to change their economy and they did it by attracting investment from the outside. The way to attract investment from the outside was to do this very luxurious development and give citizenship to foreigners who invest in these areas. It's important to tell you that when you are in Muslim countries, if you're born in the country, everything that is on the land is yours. That's why when they have oil, the profits of the oil is shared and installed within the people of the community. Everything that is on the earth or under the earth belongs to everyone. It's God's creation for everyone. If you were given a fake citizenship, that didn't come with that cause. You pay taxes, you do everything, but you will not get money from the oil. They gave me seven kilometers, with another company called OBM International, which is a company here in Coral Gables with a

specialty in hotels. As I said, every neighborhood in Muslim countries has a mosque at the center of the neighborhood and a hotel. They wanted to be able to work with me and see that each neighborhood had a hotel and a mosque. They asked me for a marina with 300 slips and shaped in a way so that the water, which is coming from the Gulf of Oman, would not block everything. I created a series of neighborhoods in which every single neighborhood had some sort of water, people have this fetish for water in the Middle East. Water is very scarce, so anything that has water is very valuable. Any property that is facing water is very valuable. Those are the neighborhoods, I took an idea, when you look at these neighborhoods, you can see that the urbanism is not reticulated like the regulated city that I showed you before, but it is an urbanism that is more traditional in Muslim territory. When you start looking at the blocks, they are the same, each block has a plan, you can see cul-de-sacs, but they're not cul-de-sacs, they're just plans for particular families. These things that you see here, are the hotels, with 7 hotels total in the project. These are the sketches for the beginning, the step beyond, and the final step is the one that I just showed you. When you are in urban design, you give the client an idea of what you expect the architecture to be like. As things progress, you go into more detail in the architecture and more detail into the plans. You start saying where the cars will be parked, the design of the lots, where you will put trees, what character the house is facing, etc. All of these in sketches are kind of ambiguous, because you don't want to be a tyrant, regarding what needs to be done. As a result this is the final result of the city, and you see here all of my clients in front the place and eventually there's the town. This I designed in its entirety in the public space. I like to do things that are manageable, I can deal with by myself. It's very minimalist. It doesn't have anything extraordinary. What is extraordinary, is the type of spaces that these things have and the way it deals with the culture of the place. It's really embedded in the culture of the place, but it's

absolutely top-down. The government is involved in every single decision. They hired a developer from Australia, architects from France, so everything is designed completely by professionals. It looks very professional, it looks very clean, it looks like as if it was not in Oman. That's one project.

The next project, is called Cauca Viejo and it is in Jerico, Colombia. I studied the traditional urban patterns of the Law of the Indies. Most of the cities in this area are in done in the style of the Law of the Indies because they're in the tropics. The colors are vibrant, colors that you can find in the landscape. Red is blood, or fruit-colored with blood so it becomes extraordinary. The yellow is the color of the earth in the mountains. The only one that is very difficult to get is the blue, because the blue has to be lapis lazuli which is a very exotic jewel that you can only find in Chile or India. So, this is one of my clients. My clients were a whole bunch of crazy lawyers who thought that practicing law in Colombia was totally dangerous. They didn't want to be practicing law anymore. One of them, this guy, was my age and went to school with me, decided that he wanted to live the kind of life that his parents used to live in rural areas of Colombia. He wanted to grow coffee, and live from the profits of coffee growing. He convinced a whole bunch of lawyers to buy some land in the middle of nowhere, in the outskirts of Jerico, Colombia. I went to Colombia one day, and he invited me to have dinner with his wife and kids. During dinner in a restaurant that looked like one of the houses that I showed you (beautiful, colorful, etc.) and he said, "What do you do if you got a piece of land like this?" And I said, "I would do nothing, I would leave it the way it is because it is beautiful", and he said, "no, no, we want to live there". And, I said, "The one thing you should not do is hire architectural planners. The first thing that you should is hire peasants, people that have been doing this for an eternity, people that know exactly how these cities work, and let them do whatever they want. I said to him, "In any

traditional city you want to be perpendicular to the edge of the water.” In the Law of the Indies, you have what is known as the three by four unit, with a plaza, and by removing one of the lots becomes a plaza. A rounded plaza is what becomes a church, a city hall, a jail, at times what they used to call the “picota”, which was a place to hang anybody that was misbehaving. Eventually the picota was removed, and it became a park. A park with a kiosk. So, all over Latin America you see these parks. The first thing I would do is design it in the pattern of Latin America, and then, as the lots move towards the river, I will address the lots perpendicular to the water, so everyone will have a view of the water. I would only use the typologies that are typical of this area, I would make the streets as narrow as possible so they are always in shape and I will use the architecture of the place, so the same colors, balconies, porches, the same proportions, etc. He said, “Yea, but we have more land than that. What do we do?” and I said, “okay, so if you’re going to do coffee plantations, do what they always do in coffee plantations in Colombia, where you have suburban little enclaves with what are called *fondas*.” A fonda is a place where they do laundry, a place where they sell coffee, a place where they sell Aguardiente (alcohol). You go there and it’s like a bar, in the middle of nowhere. So, build those things around the coffee plantation so that you have things to do all the time. I left, and I never heard back from them, until July four years later. Four years later, I received photographs and he says, “This is what we have done. So, after you left, we realized very quickly that what we needed to do was produce rules of behavior amongst all of us.” We looked at agent-based models. I would always have two neighbors on my side. I need to ask my neighbors what I can do. I’m always going to have two neighbors, I’m going to ask my neighbors, “Is it possible to do what I want to do?” If they say yes, I do it, if they say no, I won’t do it. If he says yes but he says no, I will do something else”. I created rules for when somebody says yes and somebody says no. The rules are something like this: if you start following those

rules, by varying the settled rules you can reach a complexity of potential solutions. You can do an infinite amount solution, and each one of them is based on a rule. They had to decide exactly what to do. Once they decided what to do, these are the rules that they came up with:

1. Do not employ architects or engineers except sometimes (when it's difficult, when something needs to be addressed professionally), have square blocks in the center and elongated blocks in the periphery. (blocks should not exceed 1,360 feet);
2. the narrower the streets the better;
3. only quarter living types, all places have roofs, bathrooms and vertical proportions;
4. public business in attached rural areas and detached in rural areas;
5. use color.

Those were the rules of the game. The result of doing that is here. Sketched on a napkin, no planners, no architects. It's more or less my sketch, but not my sketch. In order to avoid plans or people in the same area, like friends, they had a lottery. So, you will buy a lot, and whatever lot you get in the lottery will be the lot for your house. You will go to the sales office, which was the church, and pick a lottery ticket which has your lot. The interior was done by peasants, you told them you needed four bedrooms, and they would do the rest. It was done by people with no architectural degrees, but it is what they had done their entire life. So, it was totally bottom up, not top down. No plans, nobody drew anything, nobody built models, they didn't know what they were going to get. The orders here are not the orders of Vitruvius or Alberti. As you move to the outskirts you see the fondas. Some of them are barber shops, some of them are bars. Here's a lawyer picking coffee beans. Typical transportation in Colombia is the "Civa", a colorful party bus. You drive everywhere and dance inside.

Jaime Correa  
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**END OF INTERVIEW**

**Gilda Santana**

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