University of Miami School of Architecture

Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Roberto Behar

Professor in Practice, School of Architecture

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Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
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Summary:
Roberto Behar's multidisciplinary practice, R&R Studios, which he founded with his partner, Rosario Marquardt, weaves together visual arts, exhibition, design, architecture and urban design. Celebrated, as one critic put it" as architects of hope" their work proposes encounters of stories and spaces, which alternate between the private and the public, the intimate and the monumental, the quotidian and the fantastic suggesting always "imaginary solutions" for a better world.

Gilda Santana: Roberto, please tell us your title and how long you've been at the School of Architecture**.**

Roberto Behar: I am a Professor in Practice at the School of Architecture. I've been teaching at the school since 1986. I was very young, of course when I started.

GS: You were just a spring chicken. Tell me about your research. What are some of the challenges that you have encountered as a teacher, and/or alternatively as a researcher.

RB: Since the very beginning, when I first came here in 1986, and later on when began teaching that same year, I have been interested in the relationship between architecture and the city. The relationship between these two aspects of architecture, I have always seen as one. In fact, because I consider architecture to be an artistic discipline, in my mind, art, architecture, design, and the city are to be thought of as one, in a way. Perhaps more specifically at the moment where architecture intersects with public space, and, in instances where the city is in need of meaningful spaces—spaces that are not only to serve as places of encounter, but also as representations of our times. That's what I'm most interested in. The moment when architecture becomes public space, and when public space is in need of architecture in order to become public. It's a liminal zone, in between one and the other which requires a particular approach. Apart from teaching at the school, I have a small private practice, R&R Studios, with Rosario Marquardt, my partner. I have always seen our professional practice as a kind of professional, academic practice. That is to say that we are not just interested in building square footage, but building models that can be implemented for other architects and even students to build upon. We tend to see architecture as a collective

discipline. We are part of a family of architects in a way, that over time have discovered have similar interests. It could be living architects, or not. It is with them that we grew to become the architects that we are.

GS: Can you discuss "The Living Room" in Wynwood, a public space piece that is considered perhaps one of R&R's most iconic works, and a piece which became almost synonymous with Miami.

RB: Sometime ago, we had the opportunity to build our first public project here in Miami. Thank God it was a public project, because it's something that distinguishes our practice. We don't do private residences. Our work is not about mega-buildings, or doing huge cities, but rather inventing, if you will, public spaces. After about a year of studying in New York City, just at the end of 1983, we came to Miami by chance. Miami was not a city in our mental map, but we discovered that it was a place of incredible opportunity. And that was the opportunity to be an important part of the invention of the city through the creation of public spaces. Because it is in public spaces that the city, in turn discovers itself, and finds his or her soul in a way, and becomes a place we can refer to. We came to Miami at a moment when you could feel that the city was in the process of discovering itself. It was in need of creating an architecture that once again, would be representative of the city. The Living Room is perhaps our most well-known project. It happened by chance as most projects tend to happen. The project was published in over 250 international publications. What is most interesting about the level of publicity, and it's something that Rosario and I are most proud of, is the range in character and nature of the publications in which it appeared. Not just in architectural publications, but from the New York Times, to the Wall Street Journal, to Elle Magazine, to a popular guide that presented the Living Room as image

of the city. Whenever an article, be it an airline magazine, or an art magazine needed an image to represent Miami, the Living Room was chosen. We never thought the image would be so popular. That led us to think a lot about why the image was so popular as an icon that stood for what Miami was about. We discovered that the beauty of the Living Room is that it's an unfinished affair, an incomplete building. So, you can view it as a ruin of a world that is no longer, a world like the one we lived in when we were kids where all my friends could come in or out, where the doors were always open. We lived in different houses, but all the houses were kind of one within the neighborhood. That experience was very formative. In a city like Miami, where things are becoming more and more private as we speak, with neighborhoods where you have to show your card in order to enter, the Living Room became a symbol of the kind of world that we would like to build. It's a home turned inside out, and it represents the opportunity of Miami, of living outdoors, of a new open city that belongs to all. It's a very small structure, but it's an incredibly well known image. The project is better known than Rosario and I, and we're very, very proud of that. It speaks to the power of our work as being both high art and popular at the same time. It's a landmark and it's home—domestic in nature.

GS: It strikes a chord of irony because you don't think of Miami in terms of domesticity, but as a tourist destination where you come to visit and you leave, but nobody lives here.

RB: In fact, what we all come to Miami for, we discover, in one way or another, is that we're all in search of home. At the end of the day, the living room became so popular because we're all in search of home. We all come from different places, but there is one place that we're all in exile

from—and that place is called childhood. It is in that yearning to go back to childhood, that we find the living room and we are able to smile once again.

Public space for us [R&R] is really, really important. Miami offers incredible opportunities with lots of places still to be built. We have always been interested in an architecture that is not about building more square footage, but actually about producing ideas. We like for each of our projects to, in a way, "build" an idea. We think of architecture as built thought, in a way. And, for that to happen, in these days-the days that we live in, it has to be critical of the place of cities. For us, each and every project has critical dimensions of the status quo, but first and foremost, we like for all of our projects to be beautiful. They could bring a little bit of happiness to everyday life. And if a little bit of happiness means just a smile, that's great. We're happy with that. We see that as our role. To assist in the pursuit of happiness.

GS: What does research mean for you as an artist, and as an architect?

RB: I have always been interested in what I call architectural literacy. I was very fortunate in my early years, to have professors that expanded the idea of architecture as extending into the cultural realm. The most meaningful professors I remember, framed architecture as part of culture, as a manifestation of culture. In this regard, architecture was to fulfill parallel needs. On the one hand to provide for a better life on earth, and on the other hand to produce beautiful things for our brief time on earth. Architecture as a cultural endeavor is a key in regards to literacy. When, as we do, believe in culture as collective enterprise, that linked to history, but also to geography and to place, then research in architecture becomes about expanding our architectural literacy. But, what is architectural literacy, specifically? Well, I always tell my students that first and foremost, they

must become men and women of culture. Then you choose your discipline. Culture in architecture, in my opinion, is built out of specific buildings, streets, neighborhoods and cities. It's not an abstraction, but a physical event which is related to the existence of specific architectural artifacts—buildings that is. Books play fundamental role. There is very important intersection between architecture and the architecture of the book, in a way, because architecture like books, is a way of preserving memory. So, there's this intersection between books and memory, books and architecture in the sense that they both represent memory.

GS: You love books.

RB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The library where I went to school in Argentina was very small. My personal library today is bigger than the one that I had in school, which is amazing. But at that time, I spent at least one or two hours in the library every day. I can confidently say that after four or five years, I knew every book in the library because it was so small. It was a key aspect of my architectural formation. It grew out of books. Today, we have a fantastic library with thousands of books. But very few students come to see them. It's amazing and appalling at the same time. Students have this incredible wealth of information at their disposal on line and in books. Yet, architectural literacy is coming down. People seem to know less about architecture. If you want to be a film maker, the best thing I can recommend is to watch 3 films per day, and dissect the films in all of their constituent parts, from the script to the scenes, from the scenes to the position of the camera, form the position of the camera to the lighting, etc. Deconstruction of the film's elements until you can see them by themselves and understand how a film is made. The key is to watch films if you want to make films. If you want to be a writer, you need to read books. It's

very simple. You learn about the structure of how a story is told. We can find analogies within other artistic disciplines.

In architecture somehow, we have lost track of that simple fact. If you want to be an architect, it's key to look at buildings. Not in the way that we do it today by looking at them in the 2x3 inch screen of an iphone, but rather the reality of the buildings and in books. Books have something that screens do not have. First of all, they're too slow. We tend to think that computers as really fast, and they are in one regard. They allow you to get a specific image of a building very quickly. But that image is not curated. That, in my opinion, is the big difference with books. If I get the right book on any given subject in architecture, I can count on the author having spent a number of years selecting the best images there are on the subject for me to begin my research. This is a rather high plateau to start from, whereas, with an internet image search I have act as a consumer and a curator. I'm a big lover of books because when you get the right book they're actually faster and in depth in a way that the internet does not allow. When you read a book, or at least part of it, you get an opinion from someone who has spent years thinking about and researching a building. You more likely to be enlightened by the book in a way that images without text cannot deliver.

GS: Is it a challenge to get students to refer to books these days?

RB: There's something that we're not doing right. I spend times showing them materials. The new is sometimes more important.

GS: How do you see the field of architecture changing?

RB: I think that especially in America, architecture has become more corporate in nature, and it's not the best for the development of architecture. It's a business model, really, that allows for a limited degree of professionalism, invention and cultural depth in the architecture that is produced. On the one hand, the roofs don't leak, but there's very little critical understanding or engagement of reality in the buildings that we produce because they're being resolved through a corporate structural model.

GS: So how do you teach that?

RB: Well, I don't teach that. I think there are many ways of understanding the profession. That's one way that is current. It's like painting in a way. Every ten years, an art critic decrees the death of painting, and then you look back, and painting keeps on going. The same thing happens with architecture. As one fears that the field has exhausted approaches to building the city, or production that can be seen as culturally relevant and meaningful, somehow, somebody somewhere comes back to prove us all wrong. Architecture still exists. These few, in a way, are in charge of the preservation of what is most unique about the adventure that architecture can be, which is about creating spaces that express the way that we live and the times in which we live. The profession is changing in that it's becoming much more specialized. You are to design one type of building rather than an architecture of buildings. That allows for a higher degree of professionalism, be it residential, or hospitals, schools. That's not the model that I grew up with. I always thought of architecture as an artistic discipline within the visual arts. In my very small firm, we think of it as a medium just like painting, drawing, and literature. As a medium through which to touch someone else's life.

GS: What about in architectural pedagogy? Do you find yourself teaching differently?

RB: Yes. Of course, we use computers much more. What is difficult for students to understand is that the reason I can make commands to the computer to pull up particular images is because I have the necessary architectural literacy. I can summon examples that will be more useful for students to use in their projects. They see the opportunity and advantage of the computer because they have the image in front of them in a second, but they can't stay with it for more than 5 seconds with one image. We live in a world where images are continuously flipping from one to the next without pause. There's no time to reflect. There's no time for thinking. There's no time for processing. There's an avalanche of images that are coming at us all the time. Of course, I try to explain this to students, and continue to fail at it. But, in the process, as I fail over and over again, I encounter the joy of finding students who will take it to the next generation. It's not that times past were better, I now tend to see the past as a more limited experience that it really was as I relate it to myself and my way of seeing architecture than the way that most students saw it.

GS: What are areas of emerging emphasis in architecture?

RB: I tend to think of architecture as something that doesn't really change. Architects are fascinated by the change in the discipline, but for me, I love a Greek vase and the dynamic symmetry of the drawings on a Greek vase, and I love contemporary furniture by Arne Jacobsen. I don't tend to see the differences in terms of style, but in terms of quality. Something has quality or it doesn't. I don't associate newer as better, or old as bad. It's too often the case today in the architectural world to see partisan camps for either. I'm for both. For the new and the old, but not for those reasons. I like them when they are good. I have a different take on the subject. I'm not

very concerned with the problem of tomorrow. I'm interested in questions that are independent. For me the most difficult thing is to create meaning in architecture—for architecture to be meaningful.

I'll tell you a story: One of the best days of our lives, was a Sunday morning when we went to the Living Room and we encountered an entire family of Haitians, six or seven men, women, children, taking a family portrait in the Living Room. The Living Room is a room that is turned inside out. The interior is outdoors. It's a kind of theater, or stage whether you're a spectator or an actor. So, initially we (Rosario & Roberto) were spectators, but we switched to being actors. We asked them why they were taking a family portrait in front of the Living Room. They answered, "Well, because this is our home. We want to send a photo back to Haiti, and we couldn't find a better place to explain where we lived in Miami other than the living room". Best day of our lives. You know, nearby, there is a Haitian neighborhood. In a way that is the purpose of such a project—to offer the building to the community as something that they can take possession of. We enjoy the fact that we're anonymous partners in the design of the building. The building has a life of its own. It's both a ruin, but also an unfinished project that we have to continue building.

GS: Have you documented the aging and the deterioration of the LR? It's not there anymore.

RB: At first, we were very sad about it. But, then we realized that the living room is a portrait of ourselves, but it's also a portrait of Miami. The city goes up and down. It aims to reinvent itself and fails. The city opens itself up to immigrants and then at some point it closes the door. Life is not a straight arrow. You go back and forth, and, in this zigzag we discover ourselves.

The city couldn't preserve it exactly as it was. It was only ten years old when the new owner began to neglect it, but it's notoriety did enforce that it couldn't be torn down. That was quite interesting because it spoke about the tension within the city, between preserving the past and building the new, between building the new with a sense of community and closing ourselves in. The Living Room is a small example of the struggle. It's a built metaphor of our times. To build this fantastic thing, preserved for the making, and then you realize it's almost demolished, but not quite...not quite. It almost reserves the right to rebuild itself, even better, perhaps. It's not bad, not good. It is what it is. It's ok.

GS: What are your hopes for library support in terms of teaching and research?

RB: For me it's probably the most important part of the School's resources. It's even more important than the computer lab, in my mind, because computers are more personal than they used to be. Of course, we don't have enough room. But, in order for the library to fulfill its contemporary mission, its structure needs to become more of a social space. It has to be a place of encounter, where one really comes to spend time, really "spend time". Not just to look at books, because that's only one way to do research. The library has to allow for multiple types of encounters. We should curate our architecture collections so that they're visible. For instance, here at this school there is a great interest in Aldo Rossi. It could be really interesting to purchase a copy of every single edition of one of his titles. Not too long ago, I was at the University of Venice at an Aldo Rossi exhibition. They had compiled a collection of every single edition in every language of *The Architecture of the City*. It was so interesting to browse through the different editions and compare the covers between the Japanese edition versus the Chinese edition. I think

that there's a lot that one can learn, not only about architecture, but about the importance of books by demonstrating this in a curated manner. For example, making an exhibition of all the books of Le Corbusier, and bring in scholars that have written about Le Corbusier. How they relate to one another, and how they change over time. Coordinate it with a lecture series. Seeing the first time that an important architect's project is published. You realize things like, "wow! this guy wrote over forty books".

Aldo Rossi comes to mind again. He was here in Miami. It's great that we have Casabella [the physical copies] here, because we can see the covers. We have a lot of Brazilians in Miami. Perhaps we can do a presentation of books on the subject of *Brasilia*--how Brasilia was presented in 1960 to the world as the city was created. I think that by doing that, we can develop more of an interest in books and show their value to students in particular.

Most of the very well-known architects were also directors of journal publications. Students don't know this. Le Corbusier was director of a magazine. Gio Ponti is another good example. Students don't really understand yet, the relationship—the intersection between the book and architecture. Since the late 19th century, that's been kind of key because of the popularization of architectural media. It has become key in the development of the architect's career. It's important to understand the relationship between the print world and the built environment.

END OF INTERVIEW
Gilda Santana
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