



ITRUVIO

International Journal of
Architectural Technology and Sustainability



ENVISIONING FUTURE CITIES

Interview with **MANUEL PORTACELI**



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Restoration of the Atarazanas (shipyards) for cultural use. Valencia, 1979–1993. Photo credits: Pepa Balaguer.



Manuel Portaceli.

Manuel Portaceli Roig (Valencia, 1942) is a Valencian architect and one of the most significant figures in contemporary Spanish architecture. His professional career has developed across architectural practice, critical reflection, and intervention in the built heritage. His best-known works include the rehabilitation of the Benicarló Palace, seat of Les Corts Valencianes; the restoration of the Roman Theatre and Castle of Sagunto, in collaboration with Giorgio Grassi; and the extension and reorganisation of the Museum of Fine Arts of Valencia (San Pío V). The author of numerous writings and essays on architecture, the city, and heritage, he has also pursued an extensive activity as a critic and architectural thinker. He has received various distinctions, including the Spanish Architecture Award, the Gold Medal for Merit in Fine Arts, and the 2026 *Piranesi Prix de Rome alla Carriera*, awarded by the Accademia Adrianea di Architettura e Archeologia and the Ordine degli Architetti di Roma.

Luis Palmero, Graziella Bernardo, Stefania De Gregorio

INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL PORTACELI

Valencia, 17/05/2026

Vitruvio: *How did the historical and cultural context of your formative years influence your approach to architecture and design?*

Manuel Portaceli: I was born and raised within a particular historical and cultural context, one that evolved as the circumstances shaping it evolved. We are all formed by the world into which we are born, even as we contribute, in our own way, to its transformation.

I grew up in a family of physicians, in an environment where culture and respect for the individual were part of everyday life. My grandfather was a distinguished doctor who devoted many evenings to translating a multi-volume French medical treatise used at the Faculty of Medicine, while also writing several shorter works of his own.

I regularly visited museums and enjoyed theatre and, of course, cinema. I spent long afternoons browsing bookshops which, in Valencia during the late 1950s and early 1960s, were not particularly numerous. I had friends with similar interests and sensibilities, and together we exchanged ideas and aspirations in a Valencia that often felt grey and constrained, where the Mateu Gallery discreetly introduced some of the most recent artistic currents.

We lived under a dictatorship that restricted public life. Occasional arrests and scattered reports were often the only visible signs of a subdued opposition. In short, I was the product of a provincial middle-class upbringing.

After completing secondary school, which at that time lasted seven years, I enrolled in the Faculty of Sciences to attend the so-called *curso selectivo*, a common and compulsory first year for students intending to pursue Architecture, Engineering, or the Sciences. Subjects included Biology, Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry, Geology and, inevitably, *Formación del Espíritu Nacional* (National-Spirit Formation), a compulsory subject under Franco's regime.

Having passed this first stage, I entered the introductory course at the School of Architecture of Barcelona, located on the upper stretch of Diagonal Avenue, near the Pedralbes Palace and other academic institutions. Officially, *Formación del Espíritu Nacional* still existed, but in Barcelona it was no longer taught.

That was Barcelona—and to me it seemed a hopeful sign.

More importantly, Barcelona was my first encounter with modernity. I absorbed everything around me like a sponge.

Historical and cultural context is inescapable. We are shaped by it, even as we contribute, however modestly, to shaping it in return. Architecture, too, has its own circumstances: the context in which it is conceived and built, and which it inevitably transforms in return.

These concerns began to take shape for me in the early 1960s, when I arrived at the School of Architecture of Barcelona. A few years earlier, in 1959, the final CIAM meeting in Otterlo had brought together young architects such as Aldo van Eyck, Alison and Peter Smithson, Ernesto N. Rogers, Giancarlo De Carlo and José Antonio Coderch, who challenged the functionalist orthodoxy of the Modern Movement. They advocated an architecture rooted in social relationships, identity, and respect for cultural context, replacing rigid zoning principles with a renewed attention to history and to the inherited conditions of place.

These concerns had, however, emerged even earlier. At the CIAM meeting in Hoddesdon, chaired by Josep Lluís Sert, the theme of the “heart of the city” was raised for the first time. Attention shifted from urban peripheries to the historic centres of European cities devastated by war.

From that moment onward, architectural design became increasingly responsive to context, urban history, disciplinary tradition, and the needs of citizens. Architecture acquired a more organic character, while the individual increasingly became its central concern.

V: *Looking back, who were the architects, thinkers, and teachers that most influenced your formation?*

MP: Let me continue with my years at the School of Architecture of Barcelona in the 1960s and with the people and ideas that played a decisive role in my formation.

The infectious enthusiasm of Oriol Bohigas, expressed not only through his design studios but also through his writings, publications, and cultural activities, left a profound mark on me. Equally influential were teachers such as Federico Correa, whose approach encouraged us to reflect on the reasoning behind our proposals; Xavier Rubert de Ventós, philosopher and professor of Aesthetics and Composition; and Joan Margarit, architect and poet, whose writings on structures revealed a humanistic dimension that helped me overcome many of my prejudices towards that discipline.



Figure 1 | House for an Art Collector. Valencia 1987-1990. Photo credits: Pepa Balaguer / Luis Vicén.

Although I still think that if a building can stand on four columns, there is little reason to insist on reducing them to two.

Among Rubert de Ventós's books, *Theory of Sensibility* and *The Self-Absorbed Art* were particularly important to my intellectual development.

There are external circumstances that shape our thoughts and actions, just as there are internal transformations that, in turn, shape the world around us.

At the Barcelona School we approached architecture through Gestalt theory, studies of perception, and semiotics. We sought to develop an understanding of architecture that would address not only its artistic dimension but also its social and cultural implications. What we would now call the inherited conditions of place formed the background to our education as young architects.

Many of our professors maintained close ties with Italy, especially with Milan. Visits by Italian architects were frequent, and we had the opportunity to hear figures such as Ignazio Gardella, Vittorio Gregotti, Franco Albini, and Carlo Scarpa. Their work was widely discussed and deeply admired within the school.

My earliest architectural references were José Antonio Coderch, Federico Correa, and Oriol Bohigas. Later came Ernesto N. Rogers, Gardella, and, more recently, Giorgio Grassi.

In my early years, under the influence of Sigfried Giedion and Bruno Zevi, two apparently opposing figures coexisted in my imagination: Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright. Afterwards came Le Corbusier.

Over time, my intellectual horizon expanded to include other periods and other masters: Brunelleschi, Palladio, Hawksmoor, Schinkel and, closer to home, Conrado Rodulfo, the architect responsible for the Baroque façade of Valencia Cathedral and a member of Bernini's workshop. And, of course, Adolf Loos.

I could mention many other figures who helped me understand architecture as a discipline inseparable from the city and from history. To them I would add thinkers from outside architecture—Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger, Gadamer, Gombrich, and T. S. Eliot—who helped me, and continue to help me, understand that every work belongs to an interpretative tradition.



Figure 2 | House for an Art Collector, Salón Valdés. Valencia 1987-1990.
Photo credits: Pepa Balaguer / Luis Vicén.

Architecture is not invented from scratch; it is always built in dialogue with accumulated experience.

V: *How did history come to occupy such a central role in your understanding and practice of architecture?*

MP: If we accept that every architectural project enters dialogue with a world that precedes it, then the importance of architectural history becomes immediately evident. History is not merely a source of information, nor a catalogue of masterpieces arranged chronologically. It is an indispensable instrument in the formation of judgement.

It is through historical knowledge that we acquire the critical criteria needed to understand architecture in all its complexity and, ultimately, to contribute something meaningful to its continuing development. Every project requires us to take a position within a disciplinary tradition that existed before us and will continue after us.

As Giorgio Grassi once wrote, “the most important thing for a student today is the formation of a reasoned and coherent judgement on architecture in all its complexity. In this sense, a fundamental step in learning is the judgement of historical experience.” I have always found that observation particularly illuminating.

History offers a field of enquiry in which architecture can test itself against its own experience. It allows us to understand not only what was built, but why it was built, under what conditions, and in response to which problems. The History of Architecture becomes truly useful when it helps us recognise the reasons behind the answers that architecture has provided over time.

Architecture is part of a continuous disciplinary tradition. Buildings acquire meaning not in isolation but through their relationship with that broader historical continuity. Through historical knowledge we develop a critical judgement that enables us not simply to admire the past, but to engage with it.

What history ultimately reveals is that architecture has always sought to address questions that, despite changing circumstances, remain fundamentally human. The problems we confront today are often not so different from those faced by previous generations. Technologies change, societies evolve, and forms are transformed, yet many of the essential questions persist.

As the Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni once observed, the fundamental concerns of modern life are not radically different from those that shaped the world of Homer. The same may be said of architecture. History reminds us that every project belongs simultaneously to its own time and to a much longer continuum of human experience.

V: *Where does the project begin? Is there a design method that underpins your work, or does each project require a new interpretation of its place, program, and historical circumstances?*

MP: My design method does not exist. What guides my work is not a method in the strict sense, but a particular understanding of what architectural design is.

It is important to remember that a project is neither a gesture nor a purely formal exercise. It is a response to a fundamental question: what was this place, what is it today, and what might it become through our intervention?

Every project is, in a sense, a declaration of principles. It represents an attempt to produce an architecture that



Figure 3 | House Yamano Bansho. Rugat (Valencia) 2005-2008.

engages with a world that already exists, a world of places, memories, forms, and meanings with which it must inevitably enter dialogue.

A project expresses a judgement, both on architecture itself and on the place in which it is situated. It emerges from an understanding of what that place has been, what it has become, and what it might yet become. It begins with an interpretation of the questions that place has raised over time and of the ways in which those questions reappear, transformed, in the present.

In other words, the project begins with a place, very often the city itself, with its history and its present condition. From there, it seeks to understand what that place may wish, or perhaps ask, to become in the future.

Every project must answer a series of questions. Why here? Why now? What is this architecture doing in this part of the city? What kind of place does it seek to create?

What does it contribute to the landscape? What does it wish to say?

And yet no project ever exhausts all possible answers. Every proposal inevitably reveals new questions and new possibilities that had previously remained hidden.

For many of us, two fundamental parameters shape the project: program and place.

The programme constitutes what Giorgio Grassi called the practical object of the project. Defining this practical object means clarifying its purpose, its conditions, and the expectations associated with it. Yet the program should never be accepted uncritically. It must be interpreted and, at times, even challenged.

Louis Kahn used to say that the first thing an architect should do with a program received from a client was to change it. Architecture, he argued, is not about fitting functions into predetermined spaces, but about creating



Figure 4 | House-Studio for the painter Manolo Valdés. Dénia (Alicante) 2001-2005.

spaces capable of expressing the atmosphere appropriate to the life they are intended to accommodate.

Place constitutes the second fundamental parameter.

If architecture is concerned with constructing places for human dwelling, then place inevitably exerts a decisive influence on the project. It reveals its history, its qualities, and the richness of its accumulated meanings. Yet place does not simply pre-exist the project. As Heidegger famously observed in his example of the bridge, a place comes into being through the act of building itself.

There is no place without construction, just as there is no act of building that does not transform a portion of territory into a place.

The project therefore begins with questions. How has this place come to be what it is? What forces have shaped it? What meanings does it already contain? Only then can we begin to understand how it might be transformed.

The encounter between program and place generates the conditions from which architectural form emerges. These parameters are objective, transmissible, and open to discussion. The same cannot be said of the final act of design itself.

At a certain point, architecture enters the realm of interpretation. The translation of knowledge into form is an individual act. It depends on judgement, sensibility, experience, and on the capacity to establish relationships through analogy and imagination.

Every project therefore requires a different response. As experience accumulates, it provides confidence and critical judgement. Yet every new project demands that we question our assumptions once again. Indeed, one might say that this willingness to place everything back into question is one of the essential conditions of architecture itself.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer observed in *Truth and Method*, an architectural work points beyond itself in two directions: towards the purpose it is meant to serve and towards the place it is meant to occupy.

Program and place can be analysed, discussed, and taught. The giving of form, however, remains an interpretative act. It belongs, ultimately, to the individual responsibility of the architect.

V: *What does it mean, in contemporary practice, to work in continuity with architectural tradition?*



Figure 5 | Sanz House. Paterna (Valencia) 2004-2006.

MP: Continuity with tradition does not consist in repeating its forms, but in participating in an ongoing historical dialogue.

When we look at a work by Alberti, Schinkel, or Coderch, the question is not how to imitate it, but why it took the form it did and what reasons brought it into being. What matters is understanding the principles, circumstances, and intentions that generated the work rather than reproducing its visible appearance.

In some of its excesses, postmodernism transformed history into a repository of images and quotations, a kind of architectural costume wardrobe from which forms could be borrowed at will. But tradition is not a collection of forms waiting to be reused. It is a continuity of questions, criteria, and responses.

To work in continuity with tradition therefore means participating in a conversation that began long before us and will continue after us. Every generation is confronted with new circumstances, yet many of the essential

architectural questions remain remarkably persistent. What changes are the conditions from which we respond to them.

Authentic continuity requires understanding the inner logic of the architectures that precede us and engaging with them from the realities of the present. The objective is not to reproduce past solutions, but to understand the reasons behind them and to formulate new responses appropriate to our own time.

Tradition, therefore, is not a limitation on architectural thought. On the contrary, it is one of the conditions that makes architectural thought possible.

V: *What, in your view, can actually be taught in architecture, and what must be learned through experience?*

MP: Architecture certainly possesses a transmissible dimension. Methods, procedures, criteria, and ways of approaching a project can all be taught.



Figure 6 | Restoration of the Roman Theatre of Sagunto. Sagunto (Valencia), 1984–1993, with Giorgio Grassi. Photo credits: Pepa Balaguer-Luis Vicén.



What is transmitted, however, is not a formula but a way of thinking: learning how to observe, compare, judge, and organise. Every student must ultimately develop a judgement of their own, yet such judgement does not emerge spontaneously. It is formed through knowledge, experience, and through contact with those who have travelled further along the same path: the masters.

Architecture is born not only from knowledge and technique, but also from the ability to perceive beauty, emotion, and meaning in space. Sensibility comes first. It is through experience that architecture moves us, questions us, and invites reflection. Only afterwards does that experience become thought and, eventually, judgement.

In this sense, architectural education is a process that moves from perception to understanding, and from understanding to critical judgement. History, place, memory, necessity, and experience all contribute to shaping the way we design.

Perhaps the process can be summarised in a few simple steps.

Before design begins, there is an almost invisible phase rooted in sensibility. We experience architecture before we understand it. We are moved by it, intrigued by it, and challenged by it. That experience must then be cultivated through knowledge and reflection.

Gradually, we acquire the capacity to distinguish not only what we like, but why we like it. We begin to develop a judgement of our own. Only then are we truly capable of formulating a project grounded in knowledge, reason, and delight.

Ultimately, learning architecture resembles the process of constructing oneself. It is a lifelong journey in which knowledge and sensibility come together, giving meaning not only to what we design, but also to the way we understand the world.

V: *What qualities do you consider essential in the education of an architect today, and are any of them at risk of being lost?*

MP: The education of an architect requires curiosity, sensibility, historical knowledge, analytical rigour, and direct experience of architecture itself.

The first essential quality is curiosity. Plato and Aristotle already understood that all knowledge begins with wonder.

The second is learning to see. Not in the ophthalmological sense, but in the intellectual and cultural sense: learning to understand what one sees. It means opening oneself to the meanings embedded in places, spaces, and human actions.

The third is recognising that architecture forms part of a historical process and can only be fully understood within that continuity.

Once we have developed a critical judgement of our own, we can practice architecture in the service of society that needs us. At the same time, we should beware of the siren songs of powerful economic interests whose priorities do not always coincide with those of the architecture is meant to serve.

We cannot build the future without memory. In Greek mythology, memory was Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses and therefore the source of the most creative and enriching activities of humankind.

Memory provides us with the means to understand the present and to confront the future.

What concerns me today is the possibility that architectural education may become increasingly specialised and technical while losing contact with those dimensions of culture, history, and sensibility that are essential to the formation of judgement. Knowledge is indispensable, but knowledge alone is not enough.

Architecture ultimately requires the capacity to bring together reason and sensibility, memory and invention, knowledge and imagination. If any of these dimensions is neglected, architectural education risks becoming poorer, and architecture itself risks losing part of its human significance.

V: *Between place and program, which exerts the stronger influence on the design process?*

MP: What ultimately shapes a project is place, although place can never be understood independently of program. The two are inseparable.

If I were forced to choose, I would say that place exerts a stronger influence, because it provides the physical, historical, and cultural reality within which architecture must operate. Yet a project emerges not from one or the other in isolation, but from the dialogue established between them.

The logic of the project arises precisely from this interaction. Program gives purpose to architecture, while place



Figure 7 | Restoration of the Roman Theatre of Sagunto. Sagunto (Valencia), 1984–1993, with Giorgio Grassi. Photo credits: Luis Palmero.





Figure 8 | Gavina School, Picanya (Valencia), 1980–1981; Extension, 1994–1995. Photo credits: Rafael de Luis / Victoria García.

gives it meaning. The task of the architect is to bring the two into a coherent relationship.

V: *What principles should guide an intervention on historic architecture, and how can contemporary design engage with the past without compromising its integrity?*

MP: Beyond stylistic considerations—which, in my view, are alien to contemporary thought, now more closely concerned with essences and concepts—the understanding and interpretation of the *raison d'être* and the inner logic of the architecture upon which we are to act constitute the starting point of every intervention.

In this way, a connection, a continuity, is established between present and past through interpretation and its embodiment in an architectural project.

Every intervention on an existing building should begin with understanding. Beyond stylistic considerations, which in my opinion are of limited relevance today compared to deeper questions of meaning and interpretation, the first task is to understand the reason for the building's existence and the internal logic that has shaped it.

Only through such understanding can a meaningful continuity be established between past and present. Interpretation becomes the bridge through which historical knowledge is translated into architectural action.

I often recall a remark by Ambrogio Annoni, one of the leading Italian theorists of architectural restoration: “Only by penetrating the labyrinth of ancient constructions and allowing bricks, stones, beams, and paintings to speak in their own voice does the monument reveal its true reason for being.” This remark has always remained with me. The monument itself becomes the teacher. Every intervention begins by learning from what already exists.

For this reason, there can be no universal formula for restoration or rehabilitation. Each building presents its own problems, its own history, and its own possibilities. Every project must therefore be approached as a specific case.

The Roman Theatre of Sagunto, the Palace of the Marquis of Campo, the Atarazanas of Valencia, and the Valencian Parliament, housed in the former Palace of the Borja family, all required different responses because each presented different circumstance.

No intervention should be understood as a model to be mechanically repeated. Every project generates its own knowledge and its own lessons. What remains constant is the attitude with which we approach it: a willingness to understand before acting.

Experiences such as these have reinforced one of my deepest convictions: heritage is not a dead object but a living reality. It continues to shape the city, revitalize forgotten places, and create new possibilities for collective life. The task of architecture is not simply to preserve that reality, but to ensure that it remains capable of generating meaning in the present.

V: *Can there ever be an objective approach to architectural heritage, or is every intervention inevitably an act of interpretation?*

MP: My experience with architectural heritage has reinforced a conviction I have long held: every intervention must begin anew, because every monument presents a specific problem that cannot be reduced to a general rule.

I insist on this point because it is fundamental. The study of a building, its history, construction, transformations over time, relationship to place, comparative analysis, and many other aspects, provides a body of knowledge. Yet that knowledge does not speak for itself. It is inevitably interpreted through the values and criteria with which we approach it.

As Ignasi de Solà-Morales, both historian and architect, often reminded us, “every problem of intervention is ultimately a problem of interpreting architecture.”

It is precisely this act of interpretation that establishes the principles guiding intervention. Different readings of the same monument may lead to different architectural responses and, consequently, to different projects. Such interpretative diversity is possible not only because monuments are rich and complex realities, but also because every act of interpretation is conditioned by the cultural horizon—the *Zeitgeist*—from which it is undertaken.

Historic buildings are not inert objects but living cultural realities, capable of sustaining multiple meanings and multiple forms of engagement. Intervening in architectural heritage is therefore not simply a historiographical, archaeological, sociological, technical, or documentary problem, although all these forms of knowledge are indispensable. They constitute the necessary body of information upon which every intervention must be founded. Ultimately, however, it is an architectural problem, and only architecture can provide an answer capable of enabling contemporary society to continue recognizing in



Figure 9 | Restoration of the Marqués de Campo Palace as the City Museum. Isabelline hall, Valencia, 1985–1989. Photo credits: Ana Müller.

monuments -testimonies of its civic past -certain collective values.

To these considerations I will add a principle that I regard as essential if we accept that heritage is a living phenomenon: the value of knowledge.

This means moving beyond what Alois Riegl described as the “age value” of monuments—the tendency to appreciate things simply because they are old—and striving instead to understand what characterizes each historical period and what each period has contributed to the formation of our monuments and our collective memory.

In other words, heritage demands knowledge before admiration. It requires understanding before judgement. Only then can we fully appreciate the richness of history and recognise in historic architecture something more than the mere survival of the past.

To commit ourselves to knowledge is also to commit ourselves to the enjoyment of history, beginning with a sensibility that has been patiently cultivated and educated over time.

V: *The intervention at the Roman Theatre of Sagunto remains one of the most debated restoration projects in contemporary Spain. Looking back, how do you assess that experience today?*

MP: At that time, Giorgio Grassi and I were already close friends.



Figure 10 | Museu de Belles Arts de València. Grand Lobby. Restored space and core of the new museum. Photo credits: Ana Müller / Lorena Miguel / A. Otero.



Figure 11 | Museu de Belles Arts de València. Temporary exhibition hall. Restored space and core of the new museum. Photo credits: Ana Müller / Lorena Miguel / A. Otero.

A few years earlier, in 1980, I had invited him to participate in a symposium that some colleagues and I organized at the College of Architects of Valencia under the title *Architecture and the City: Avant-Garde and Continuity*. In retrospect, its theoretical impact was considerable. Participants included Kenneth Frampton, Giorgio Grassi, Demetri Porphyrios, Robert Maxwell, Tomás Llorens, Ignasi de Solà-Morales and Oriol Bohigas, among others. Their contributions were later collected in a publication which, due to the inexperience of its organizers, was never assigned an ISBN and therefore circulated only within a limited circle.

During those years, Manuel de las Casas, one of the architects who contributed to the revitalization of Spanish architectural heritage after the end of the Franco regime, entrusted me with the restoration of the *Almudín* of Xàtiva, a fifteenth-century grain exchange later converted into the Municipal Museum. I invited Grassi to collaborate

on that project, an experience that allowed me to become closely acquainted with both his working method and the intellectual rigour that would later prove so influential in my own professional development.

Shortly afterwards, Tomás Llorens, then Director General of Heritage of the Valencian Government, commissioned Giorgio Grassi to undertake the restoration of the Roman Theatre of Sagunto. Giorgio, in turn, invited me to collaborate with him, and I accepted with great enthusiasm.

The commission was both difficult and fascinating. What impressed me most was Grassi's ability to maintain a balance between conceptual clarity and economy of means. His theoretical rigour never became an obstacle to architecture; rather, it provided the framework within which architectural decisions could acquire coherence and necessity.

The theatre, as we found it, presented a particularly complex condition. It could not simply be regarded as a ruin. Since the 1950s it had already been the object of successive interventions and, in many respects, was a monument in the process of reconstruction. This condition became one of the starting points of the project.

Through the architectural type of Roman theatre, we sought to recover the spatial relationship between the *scaenae frons* and the *cavea*, the two fundamental elements that define its architectural character. Our objective was to restore the intelligibility of the monument, making its architecture once again recognizable to the visitor while introducing only those additions strictly necessary to avoid misunderstandings and false interpretations.

The intention was not simply to preserve fragments, but to recover the spatial and architectural logic of the theatre itself. In doing so, we sought to restore one of the great inventions of Roman architecture: the powerful relationship established between stage, audience, and landscape through the architectural unity of the theatre.

Looking back today, I continue to believe that the project addressed a fundamental question: how to make a monument understandable without reducing it to an archaeological fragment, and how to allow architecture to speak again through what history has left us.

Ultimately, the aim was to recover one of the great architectural discoveries of the ancient world.

V: *How did typological thinking inform your intervention at the Roman Theatre of Sagunto?*

MP: Intervening in architectural heritage is not simply a historiographical, archaeological, sociological, technical, or documentary problem, although all these forms of knowledge are indispensable. They provide the information necessary for understanding the monument. Ultimately, however, the challenge remains an architectural one, and only architecture can provide an answer capable of allowing contemporary society to continue recognizing in monuments the collective values they embody.

For me, typology is central because types constitute the essence of architecture.

In the case of the Roman Theatre of Sagunto, recovering the type meant recovering the primordial space of the Roman theatre itself. It meant re-establishing the relationship between the *cavea* and the *scaenae frons*, the

two elements that together define the architectural and spatial identity of the theatre.

By recovering the space generated by these elements, one also recovers the theatrical function. The issue was not simply one of preserving material remains, but of restoring the architectural logic through which those remains acquire meaning.

Recovering the space of the theatre also implied recovering its volume, which could be reconstructed only partially through the traces that survived and through the extraordinary archaeological work carried out by the team led by Professor Carmen Aranegui. Their surveys, measurements, and investigations made it possible to recover that sense of proportion and harmony that can still be perceived within the theatre today.

At the same time, the intervention sought to restore the relationship between the theatre and its landscape. Roman Sagunto was organised around a sequence of interconnected elements: the castle enclosure containing the forum, temples, and administrative buildings; the urban fabric descending the hillside; and, at the centre of this composition, the theatre itself, acting as a powerful civic and spatial focus.

For this reason, the Roman theatre cannot be understood merely as an accumulation of archaeological remains. It must be understood as a recognisable architectural structure and as a coherent spatial order.

Typology allows us to move from fragment to building, from isolated evidence to architectural understanding. Without such a typological reading, the theatre would inevitably be reduced to a picturesque ruin.

V: *Do the questions raised by the restoration of Sagunto still matter today, or have contemporary approaches to heritage fundamentally changed the terms of the debate?*

MP: Restoring to historic architecture those characteristics that genuinely belong to it—or at least those that can be established with reasonable certainty—does not constitute an arbitrary act. On the contrary, it is often the only way to recover the aesthetic values that define architecture: space, form, scale, proportion, and dimension.

These are the qualities that allow a monument to be understood and appreciated in accordance with the intentions that originally gave rise to it. They also allow archaeology to become intelligible, transforming fragments and traces into a coherent architectural narrative.



Figure 12 | La Sede de las Cortes Valencianas. Rehabilitación y ampliación del antiguo palacio de los Borja, Duques de Gandía. Valencia 1988-1994.
Photo credits: Sánchez-Baltanás / Pepa Balaguer-Luis Vicén.

For this reason, the debate remains very much alive. The relationship between contemporary architecture and heritage can never be definitively resolved. Every generation reformulates its criteria of intervention, yet the fundamental question remains unchanged: how can we act upon what we have inherited without falsifying it, freezing it, or reducing it to a mere support for contemporary gestures?

That question belongs to the very nature of heritage itself and for that reason it will never disappear.

The Roman Theatre of Sagunto continues to raise precisely this issue. It reminds us that heritage is not simply a matter of conservation, but of interpretation; not merely a question of preserving the past, but of understanding how the past can continue to speak to the present.

V: *In your view, how can research move beyond the accumulation of information and become a genuine instrument of design?*

MP: Research becomes meaningful when it strengthens the project's capacity for judgement.

Research is not simply the accumulation of information; it is the transformation of information into knowledge that can inform action. In architecture, its role is to deepen our understanding of place, type, construction, use, and history.

The purpose of research is not to replace design, but to make it more conscious. It allows us to understand more profoundly the realities upon which we are called to intervene.

Research provides information, certainly, but more importantly it provides the basis for critical judgement. It enables us to distinguish what is essential from what is incidental and to recognise the relationships that give meaning to a place, a building, or a landscape.

Without a deep knowledge of place, history, and construction, it becomes very difficult to produce architecture of quality. Design and research should therefore not be understood as separate activities, but as complementary dimensions of the same intellectual process.

V: *Can research into history, typology, and construction be considered a genuine form of innovation?*

MP: Innovation should not be identified exclusively with technological advancement or formal novelty.

Innovation can also emerge from a deeper understanding of a building, a place, or a tradition. It may reside in the precision of an interpretation rather than in the visibility of a new form.

History, typology, and construction remain extraordinarily fertile fields of inquiry. When approached critically, they can become powerful sources of innovation, not because they reproduce what already exists, but because they allow us to understand it in new ways.

The new does not always manifest itself through appearance. Sometimes it resides in the depth of understanding that underlies a project.

For this reason, research and professional practice should maintain a constant dialogue. Projects raise questions that research can help to clarify, while research reaches its full potential only when it informs and transforms built reality.

In the education of architects, this relationship is essential. Without it, we risk falling either into a sterile academicism disconnected from practice or into a form of pragmatism devoid of critical reflection.

Architecture advances not only through invention, but also through understanding. History, typology, and construction continue to offer immense possibilities for those willing to engage with them critically and creatively.

V: *How do you assess this relationship and what role should it play in the education of architects?*

MP: At times, architecture demands constructive methods or new materials capable of making its execution possible.

Let us simply recall the work of Gaudí—*La Pedrera*, for instance—or that of Mendelsohn; let us think of the Einstein Tower.

The architecture of both seemed almost to call for the invention of reinforced concrete.

The project raises questions that research may help to clarify, and research only reaches its full potential when it has an impact on built reality.

In the education of architects, this relationship is essential to avoid both sterile academicism and pragmatism devoid of thought.

V: *Which aspects of your way of understanding architectural design do you consider transferable to other cultural and professional contexts?*

MP: Architecture is not merely a technical discipline; it is also an art. As Walter Gropius argued in the founding manifesto of the Bauhaus, architecture stands at the centre of the arts. For this reason, I have always found it difficult to understand the suspicion that is sometimes directed towards its aesthetic dimension and towards those qualities that are intrinsic to architecture itself: space, form, scale, proportion, and dimension.

When we intervene in historic architecture, restoring those characteristics that genuinely belong to it—or at least those that can be established with reasonable certainty—should not be regarded as an arbitrary act. On the contrary, it is often the only way to recover the aesthetic values that define a work and to allow it to be experienced in accordance with the intentions that originally gave rise to it.

The same applies to archaeology. Why should archaeological remains not become intelligible through their relationship with the architecture that originally produced them? Why should archaeology not be read as part of a broader architectural reality rather than as an isolated collection of fragments?

As for my own work, it is not for me to determine its place within the international architectural panorama.

What I would say is that every culture will provide different answers to architectural questions. Contexts vary, traditions differ, and societies inevitably develop their own priorities. Yet the search for a criterion remains universal.

The need to understand place, program, and society does not change. Nor does the need to cultivate sensibility, for it is through sensibility that we acquire the capacity for judgement.

Perhaps this is what can be shared across different cultures and contexts: not specific forms or solutions, but a way of approaching architecture grounded in understanding, interpretation, and responsibility.

The search for a criterion, to which I have referred several times is not a local concern but a universal task. Contexts may change, but the obligation to understand before acting remains the same. In that sense, architecture continues to be both a cultural and a human endeavor, wherever it is practiced.

V: *In a time marked by war, displacement, and large-scale reconstruction, what principles should remain non-negotiable for architecture?*

MP: When I look at the perspectives, photomontages, and renderings currently being produced for the reconstruction of cities devastated by recent wars, I often feel compelled to question the predominance of market-driven logics.

Too often, what is presented is not a vision for rebuilding a city, but a collection of speculative images detached from the realities of the communities that once inhabited those places. In some cases, the results are no better than the banal architecture that has already disfigured large portions of our Mediterranean coastline.

The issue is not simply the reconstruction of buildings. It is the reconstruction of cities: places of encounter, exchange, memory, and civic life. In other words, the reconstruction of what a city ought to be for free and equal citizens.

To me, the situation is deeply troubling. War and economic power continue to reshape territories according to interests that frequently have little to do with the needs of ordinary people. Too often, power appears to recognize no limits other than those it imposes upon itself.

Before discussing reconstruction, we must first defend the democratic values that societies have achieved through sacrifice, effort, and historical struggle. Only then can we begin to ask how the human environment should be rebuilt.

By this I mean that architecture must resist becoming merely image, spectacle, or commodity. Its task remains the construction of places capable of sustaining human life in conditions of freedom, dignity, and equality.

Responsibility towards the city and its citizens, respect for memory, and the conviction that architecture should contribute to the improvement of collective life remain, in my view, non-negotiable principles.

In this sense, architecture continues to be, above all, a useful art.

V: *How would you like future generations of architects to understand your work?*

MP: I would like my work to be understood as an attempt to pursue a form of critical continuity.

Throughout my career, I have tried to design from a knowledge of place, history, and discipline, avoiding both arbitrary gestures and nostalgic repetition.

If there is any contribution that might be recognized in my work, I hope it is the conviction that architecture should listen before it acts, interpret before it transforms, and build responsibly within the circumstances of its own time.

I would like my work to be seen as the work of someone who sought to understand before intervening.

Someone who believed that architecture does not consist in imposing itself upon reality, but in listening to it, interpreting it, and responding to it.

Above all, I have always understood architecture as a form of knowledge, responsibility, and service.

If my buildings, my projects, or my teaching have encouraged even a few people to look more attentively at the city, at history, or at architecture itself, then I shall consider my efforts worthwhile.



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