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Alberto Kalach

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ALBERTO KALACH

by JOSE CASTILLO

It's 9:00 on a Tuesday night, and Alberto Kalach and I are on the second floor of the Taller de Arquitectura X offices. An immense open space filled with acquired objects, artwork from friends, architectural models, drawings, books, and music: a true workshop with a 12-meter window overlooking Chapultepec Park, the most important public space in Mexico City. It's the perfect setting to talk with Kalach about the double nature of his practice, which, on the one hand, takes a precise, craft-like approach to architecture, and on the other, reflects his interest in gardens, public space, and urban life.

At 46, Kalach is one of the most versatile and prolific architectural voices in Mexico today. From the intimate garden he has built at his workshop, to private residences in Mexico City and California, to the Lakes Project, the most ambitious and coherent planning vision Mexico City has ever seen, Kalach moves with ease among diverse scales, interests, and approaches. What characterizes his architecture is a combination of raw talent, an

incredible work ethic, and a deep interest in structure, tectonics, and nature that results in projects of material elegance and spatial sophistication.

Having taught until 1997 in Mexico City as well as at Harvard University, Kalach now focuses on his architectural practice. Unlike most architects, he seldom pursues opportunities to publish, lecture, or exhibit his work, always arguing that the work should speak for itself.

I've known Kalach well for more than 18 years and have seen him evolve from the precocious, highly talented *enfant terrible* of Mexican architecture to a sought-after architect working for both state commissions and private clients on three continents. Having recently finished the Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City, after winning an international open competition called by the Ministry of Culture, Kalach keeps a relaxed attitude and is looking forward to the next commission.

We sat with our mutual friend Johnnie Walker, for a conversation on all things on the horizon.

JOSE CASTILLO

What are your current interests?

ALBERTO KALACH

I'm interested in everyday situations, what's there, day-to-day life.

JC You have two typical projects going on now: you've been working for 10 years on the Lakes Project, a strategic plan that proposes to recover Texcoco Lake, on the eastern edge of Mexico City, as part of an ambitious vision of infrastructure, ecology, and urban development for the Valley of Mexico. And your latest, the Jose Vasconcelos Library in Buenavista, Mexico City, the most important cultural project of the past six years—yet you say that you are interested in the prosaic. When you say *everyday life*, what is it that interests you? What do you have on the table, what grabs your attention, what makes you stay and talk with me at 9 o'clock in the evening?

AK **I have nothing better to do! If I had a 60-story building project, I'd be working on that.**

JC You do have two renderings of 60-story towers over there on the wall. One is for Tijuana, and the other is for Reforma Avenue in Mexico City, right?

AK **Those projects are finished. It's an interesting thing, working on towers. In the end, it doesn't matter if the client decides not to build it; when you get another client who wants a tower, you can ask**



ALBERTO KALACH/FDU, THE LAKES PROJECT.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALBERTO KALACH AND JOSE CASTILLO.

him to choose which one he likes. A tower is one of those projects that can be pulled off the shelf, whereas architecture that is close to the ground has to respond to its immediate context. The tower is related to the horizon, with distances, and proximities; its logistics are completely structural. You can make plans for towers without being commissioned by anyone. That way you have towers for whatever you may need.

JC A tower in search of a client. Do you have several of these?

AK **On the shelf, yes. We've been pondering towers. It's a classic architectural structure, like the patio or the housing block.**

JC Did you not work on the library as if it were a tower laid flat on the ground? From both the interior and the exterior, the building only minimally responds to its specific condition. An auditorium extends out from one side; a covered pavilion constitutes the entryway; a canopy makes a small gesture toward a busy street. It is really three buildings that repeat themselves, in their totality, horizontally. Don't you see it this way?

AK **No. Do you know what describes the ideas of the library very well? It's a text that the director of the library himself wrote, discussing how the building works from the point of view of a librarian. In any case, it was conceived not as a horizontal tower but vertically, as a grand arc or ship. Buildings that are the products of competitions are usually more exaggerated than those for which you're hired. Contestants have to make a statement to grab the jury's attention. To me, there are two basic library designs: the labyrinth library, and the universal library, which in the end is also a labyrinth. For a public building, the labyrinth is too complicated, because many librarians say that it does not work, or that users will get lost in it. So you turn to the other powerful image of a library, which is the universal library, Boulee's library. It is a singular, monumental space, and always very attractive, like [Gunnar] Asplund's early-twentieth-century drum-shaped design for the city library in Stockholm, with its cylindrical readers' hall. I don't know if**

that library keeps additional stacks elsewhere, but all the books in the drum talk about a kind of total or complete knowledge. The Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City tries to represent this through a long gallery space where one can see all the books, all the knowledge simultaneously. So our project tried to bring a new dimension to an old idea.

JC Do you remember Hans Hollein's drawing of an aircraft carrier standing in the middle of a field? When you make reference to arcs or ships, do you see these forms in a tradition of huge autonomous objects?

AK **We use the word arc as a hook or as a reference. I believe that once buildings pass a certain volume and scale, they tend to be more autonomous, less integrated with their landscape. The building lifts off the ground and becomes an absolute invention. The greatest ideas in architecture are ones that break from their context. In his dome in Florence,**



ALBERTO KALACH WITH JUAN PALOMAR, GUSTAVO LIPKAU, AND TONATIUH MARTINEZ, VASCONCELOS LIBRARY, 2006. EXTERIOR AND READING AREAS.





PHOTOS THIS SPREAD:
ALBERTO KALACH, BROSS HOUSE, 2006, MEXICO CITY.

Brunelleschi cared very little about the scale and context. It has more to do with the mass of the building as well: a huge volume is naturally more impacting.

JC What happens with the library's garden? The garden is another architectural theme, not only in the library project but as a part of your own interests.

AK **Jorge von Ziegler, the library's director, explains it well: "Cicero said that if you have a library with a garden, then you will have it all. An Arab proverb assures that taking only one book is like taking a garden in your pocket. And if the words *paradise* and *Eden* signify *garden*, Borges always imagined *paradise* as a library." Well, let's think that it was congruent. The classification of plants and the classification of books could be congruent. Of course, the garden could not be made in a very eccentric way; a botanical garden needs many years of work and order. Making a garden is like painting a canvas; there are layers and layers. So let's say that the garden is traced; the topography is there. The basic structure that tries to wrap the library makes up a surrounding mass that attempts to isolate the library from the urban landscape.**

JC Which part of the garden interests you most? Because you know the flora, but you also talk about forms of organization: the library as a way of organizing knowledge, and the garden as a way of organizing the natural world. Does the experience of the garden interest

you most, or is it the way in which systems of knowledge relate with other systems?

AK **I am interested in the garden from a sensorial point of view: to me, what it provokes is fundamental. If we consider the garden as a part of the architecture, we can say that it is the most sublime part, because its only function is to please, to refresh. If you build a parking lot, the cars must fit, turn, circulate. If you make a building, the structure has to sustain it. But the garden is about paths, sensations, odors, freshness. Imagine designing only for that purpose. That part of the garden is what interests me most. The other part, about classifying and such, requires the designer to read the space from a different perspective, in order to establish paths, so that people will say, Let's walk to that corner there. Apart from its primary function, which is to surround the visitor, it is divided into different sections. You can enter the garden of aromas, and from there you walk on through a forest on the plateau of the city, and then to the side there is the orchard. The orchard has a section devoted to herbs. A collection of bamboos has its own area, and whoever is interested can see that not all bamboo is alike, that there is golden bamboo, black, and African.**

JC Where did your interest in gardening come from?

AK **I think that plants and gardening make a good activity for older people. You have to prepare for aging. What we're talking about is something**



that is directed only toward pleasing the senses, not like some architecture that tries to be aggressive on purpose. Sometimes a building needs to be aggressive, but a garden is never aggressive. It is trying to make something amazing and pleasant.

JC Frank Lloyd Wright said, "There is no architectural work so bad that could not be improved with a garden."

AK **Well, there is always room for improvement. The green areas around most city buildings are terrible, but this speaks to a certain correlation: in those cities where gardens and trees and streets are taken care of, people are more civilized; they are happier. Boston is a good example: there are tree-lined streets, gardens, climbing vines on the sides of buildings.**

JC Funny you mention Boston, because a good part of that first system, what they call the Emerald Necklace, is the work of [Frederick Law] Olmsted. It has a double intention, as a park and as an infrastructure. It was an ancient wetland that connected to the old part of town, crossed Back Bay—a piece of land gained from the river—and then went south.

Jorge Gamboa [architect and former chief city planner of Mexico City] told me that you have an idea to propose to the next mayor: to become the city's gardener.

AK **Tagore has a poem called the "The Gardener." The gardener comes to see the queen and she asks why he has arrived so late. She has already given away all the titles. Why do you arrive now, when**

there is nothing left? He says, I only want to be your gardener.

JC Do you *only* want to be the gardener?

AK **I believe it is a way to civilize the city, to have good boulevards and tree-lined streets, to increase the quality of certain streets that after years of service deserve to be improved, to make the sidewalks wider. There has to be a gardener who says what should be done and where. It is an important job; I hope I'm taken seriously.**

JC Enrique Peñalosa, ex-mayor of Bogotá, says that public space and infrastructure are key policies of social equity. By empowering the pedestrian who circulates in the streets, you're empowering their quality of life.

AK **They will be happier, of course. Simply by planting trees on avenues, you achieve all kinds of benefits. If the trees are of substantial height and the sidewalks are wide and well maintained, the value of the street changes.**

JC Tell me about your conversations with your friends, artists and fellow gardeners: Tonatiuh Martínez, Carlos Clausell, Jorge Yazpik. I get the impression that your work has been informed and influenced by your interactions with them.

AK **Well, it's like everything. Twenty years ago, the garden we knew of came from a certain limited palette of plants that we learned of in school. Trees that, as a group, are more iconic: the palm tree, the cypress. Then we began to frequent [Luis] Barragan's abandoned house, and discovered the garden. It's a jungle, the savage garden. If you were to remove the garden from Barragan's house—its facade and volume are monstrous, but the garden mellows it. The monumentality and plainness of the facade are in a way domesticated by the unbounded vegetation.**

JC What other themes are you interested in now?

AK **These structures are classic. For example, for a block of housing you turn to Le Corbusier. Many other architects work with this theme; it has variables, just as in music there are also recurrent themes, ways of composing. So making a block of housing is a composition that, as in music, could be a minuet or an adagio. By the way, I'm going to show you a picture of a housing project we are finishing that looks like it could be in India. But they are finishing it *horrendously*. The quality of the construction, the change of the specs, the lack of landscaping—**

JC I'm glad you mention this project. You are showing me a picture that almost speaks to the ruins of modernity, these buildings that even before being occupied are already ruins.

AK **I don't agree with what they say. They also wrote that in *Arquine* [Mexico's leading architecture magazine]. What are my clients going to think, that I build them ruins? No. The ruin has this potential: what remains is strictly what had to remain. The ruin is essential; it remains as structure, as bones. The most important aspect of how a thing exists is**

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its being. That is why my buildings have that characteristic. We use the word *ruins* to describe them, but it sounds terrible.

JC Do you remember that drawing by Rob Krier, the fifth order in architecture? It was a concrete column with all its wires in the air.

AK **I like Krier; I think his ideas about the scale of cities, the role of architecture with regard to the private and public realm, and the nature of public space are still relevant today. I understand why he exaggerates things in order to prove his point. He makes a very clear argument, and in many ways he is right.**

JC I can accept that Krier is right in some of his conceptions. But it would seem that his formal definitions have to be linked to an aesthetic, which in Krier's case was conservative. Are you more interested today in an architecture of ideas or an architecture of forms?

AK **In the end what matters are the ideas, in the way that you and I can have a dialogue even though our forms are different. You are balder than I am, you express yourself differently, wear different glasses, but our conversation takes place on the level of ideas. It is the same way in architecture. If everyone were truly original, there would be as many forms as there are architects. If instead of living 60 years you lived 300, at age 170 you would be able to manage architecture and conceive the organization of spaces more wisely. Many times you express things by copying others. That is why I believe form is not as important, because while you learn and copy, forms can always change.**

JC But you happen to have been educated or brought up at a moment when language in architecture was critical. It was about finding your own language. Even today some of the architects we admire hold a certain importance in the notion of architectural language. Without a doubt a key figure at the time of your professional upbringing was someone like Aldo Rossi, and then the other extreme would be people like [Michael] Graves or [Richard] Meier, who had a very particular language. Today, nobody would commission Graves for a high-profile project, and Meier isn't very interesting either. How have you negotiated between your strong material language and your interests in ideas that are more abstract?

AK **The first task of language is to create a space that fulfills a concrete objective, a space that is practical but at the same time thrills and offers a sense of surprise that becomes part of your memory. You can say it in English, in French, in a very direct way, or in a poetic way. The specific language you use is not important, as long as you can evoke an emotion in the person who occupies the space. You are pressured into using modern language; at this point you try to reach higher levels of sophistication, wanting the building to float or to be delicate, visible or not visible. That is like standing before a mirror and asking yourself if you will wear this or that shirt or if this or that tie matches. To me**

this is a practical step. For instance, I may like Frank Gehry as an artist, but *he* is the only one who can be Frank Gehry; he is the only one that can sell what he calls *stuff*.

JC You have work abroad, houses in California, a project for a pavilion in China. You have a 1500-square-meter house in California that has been six years under design and construction. Yet you just finished a library of many square meters in three and a half years. Are you interested in the challenges time presents? The idea of finishing things rapidly, of finding a mechanism and a method that allows you to comply with the times in which we are living in Mexico? Or are you more interested in being able to think, work, and evaluate a project for however long it takes, such as the six-year house?

AK **I am interested in both. Of course part of the issue of any project is time. If you need to set up a tent for victims of a disaster, then you have to do something that can be assembled quickly. The fact it will be temporary takes it to an extreme. So the architect works with specific situations. Constructing a building that you know needs to be inaugurated in three years and *not* to think of systematization or repetition would be suicidal. You can afford the detail in a house, because then there is the possibility of change. In the end you are offering a solution. More and more I sell myself as an engineer who will solve your problem efficiently.**

JC But in your work there is a clear stand, an assumed position on the structural and material order of things that is difficult to imagine coming from someone who understands architecture as a problem to be solved.

AK **Well, yes, but a problem to be solved in an elegant, original style.**

JC I have always thought that more than solving a problem, you explore opportunities. That is, a competition for a tower is the opportunity to rethink the theme of the tower or Texcoco.

AK **And resolve matters concretely, make sure that cars fit properly in a parking lot—and after that there is an appendix of aesthetics, of proportions. For example, a tower is more of a tower the slimmer it is. A fat tower is no longer a tower. It's a question of proportions. Then, once again you must have an engineer's perspective toward problem-solving, in terms of the proportions, the qualities, the orientations.**

JC Some of your best works come from conversations with active, strong clients. I'm thinking of Alejandro González Iñárritu [director of the films *Babel*, *21 grams*, and *Amores Perros*], Guillermo González, and Simón Bross, and perhaps also the Neelys, whose residence you are building in San Diego.

AK **The client writes the script. You may not agree with part of the script, and you need an intelligent script writer or a smart client. Then, a client who converses is interesting. You can understand some of their problems; their concerns are valid. For example, María Eladia Hagerman [Iñárritu's wife]**

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was very concerned about having a cozy house. As an architect you cannot disagree and tell her that her house will not be cozy. You have to work with that. You learn from the client, and she helps you distance yourself from the crystal box, which is hard to do. It helps you get closer to noble materials, such as wood. The client helps you reflect and get away from stereotypes, to search for a solution to the *specific* problem you are faced with. You want to collaborate with the clients. You have to be a just person, in the broadest sense, as in the justice of things.

JC The political philosopher John Rawls said that in order for justice to be fair it has to *appear fair*, leave evidence of its fairness. When you describe your projects it seems as though there is a will to make evident that there is an economy of resources in relation to a structure, to a budget, a notion of domesticity.

AK It's also because it is easier to design with fewer elements than more. That is why we should be just with the use of materials. The possible number of combinations among materials becomes exponential: two materials can be found a certain way; if you use three, they can be found in more ways. If you use six there are already I don't know how many types of encounters, and then you become a slave to your project.

JC But your architecture is not simple or simplistic. Your work has certain complexities, sometimes material-wise, almost always spatially. I would never classify you as an architect associated with the minimal. On the contrary, I believe there is a sort of maximalism in your architecture, even the most recent.

AK Yes, but you have to have a simple formula to make something complex. For example, the Great Wall of China is made of one section design that repeats itself, with a garret and a door that repeat themselves, and it all adapts to the topography. Sometimes it is taller and the formula for its proportion changes the base and the height, and sometimes it changes the curvature. But it's another interesting way to make architecture that derives from a formula.

JC Is your process more systematic than linguistic? Are you more interested in ways of thinking than in physical forms?

AK I am interested in both. You can be interested in the sensation created by a space but also in the logistics of construction. You want everything to be a consequence of the other. For example, the rhythms created by the placement of the windows in the end do affect the project of a building, but you also have to consider the logic of how these windows are to be placed. You can place more value on one thing or the other, but everything is important.

JC Fifteen years ago, you were involved with the academy. It is clear that many of the architectural practices of the younger generation in Mexico are linked with the experience they shared with you, first in the



universities and then in your studio. Nevertheless, today it seems like you're contaminated with a certain cynicism about teaching, about showing your work, about architecture's relationship with the media. When I say *contaminate*, I don't mean it in a negative way, but as a productive cynicism that allows you to focus on your work rather than on how to get it published. Where does this come from?

AK Fifteen years ago I believed that things should be a certain way and that it was very important to go to school and to communicate that to the students. But I don't think that any longer. I think that things can be, and are, of several ways. So what ends up happening is that rather than giving classes you reflect on a problem with the students. You explain that things can be resolved in several possible ways. It can be draining.

JC It's curious—when you present your work, you do so as if it was all “recent failures.” You are self-critical, which I've always found very fresh. You don't take yourself too seriously.



AK **As if one could! That would be the only thing missing.**

JC Let me give you two paradigmatic examples: one model, let's call it *the diva*, thinking about Zaha Hadid and how she will construct a building that will evoke a character, impeccably dressed in Issey Miyake, loud and authoritarian; versus another model, maybe the Rem [Koolhaas] of 10 years ago, who knew that his buildings were never going to be as good as what he thought. I don't know which model interests you most.

AK **Neither of those interests me. It's a very strange question.**

JC Let me explain. When you talk about clients and about solving problems, one could think that you are a smooth operator, someone who is interested in landing more work. Either you are a tremendously intelligent and charming guy, and therefore transmit trust—

AK **I hope that I would be that.**

JC —or a brutally talented guy who responds to nothing and no one but himself. I see these models in some of the younger architects, who build a persona, a character, and act accordingly. On the other hand, there are architects who assume that the work is what generates the character. Does the character precede the work or the work precede the character?

AK **Well, if we think of ourselves as characters, then that in itself is a very vain act. I prefer to think that you focus on doing your work and do it as best you can. That makes you more natural, and your architecture will become more natural as well.**

JC It's not a given that successful or interesting architecture comes from this authenticity of character. We have monsters in the history of architecture, extremely vain or fantastically social creatures, sociopaths. Think of Le Corbusier, who changed his name from Charles Eduard Jenneret, or Frank Lloyd Wright, whose book of speeches is titled *Truth Against the World*. I'm interested in the relation they have with their work.

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AK **Well, a day has 24 hours, and you distribute that**

time as you please. I sleep some part of it, I have fun, I get drunk, I work, I study or read. If you wish to spend time to build up a character, to see what bullshit you will say, to which party you will go, you have the liberty to spend your time doing that.

JC What are you dedicating your time to these days?

AK **I've been pondering the theme of the tower. I've been observing cacti. Cacti have a surprising structure. When they are placed on the ground these organisms attain equilibrium with only three small roots.**

JC It may seem, if one hears you, that this kind of reading from nature is like an architectural metaphor of construction and that it may be the only thing that guides your work. But there is another part of it, which I'd like you to talk about. It is a strong cultural dimension that I don't know how you manage to make room for. We've talked about your readings, your music, your interest in art.

AK **I read a lot, like you, even if only for a little bit at a time. In the morning, in the afternoon, for an hour. I try to read things that are fun or make me reflect in some way. The same with music. Music is like a garden; it only pleases.**

JC Do you read about architecture?

AK **Architecture is read on drawings. Verbal constructions sprung from architecture tend to be quite boring.**

JC But forget about reading architecture, or even literature—what about someone like Gabriel Orozco? What about different ways of creativity, artistic practices, or cultural forms that nurture our ways of working?

AK **Of course, seeing a good work of art might be more inspiring than the architecture we see. It tells you different things, makes you think other things. Generally at our age you want to learn about other things as well; if not, you get bored. Maybe learning about geology could refresh you.**

JC You could be characterized as the youngest old man, then. You are 47?

AK **I am 46 years old. Isn't that what it's all about, Jose?**

JC I don't know. I guess it's about finding interesting conversations.

AK **I don't know, either. I began a new project. Here on my roof there are ash trees blooming, 500 saplings. The seeds blew from Chapultepec Park across the street and landed on the small layer of crust—but there are 500!**

JC You have a small orchard up there.

AK **I'm bagging them. They won't prosper up there, so I'm collecting them, but it's amazing that a 100-square-meter roof has 500 ash trees. It's a sign of something. ☺**