

Interview

ARCHITECTURE TODAY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JUAN LUIS BRICEÑO

Juan Luis Briceño is a Venezuelan-born architect and is currently director of architecture and urbanism at Bush Architects based in Paris. His work combines many nuances of his diverse cultural backgrounds; he has lived in South America, Scandinavia and Central Europe. AMA caught up with Juan in his Paris office to talk about how sustainability should be perceived in the context of construction, and the movement of architecture today.



Tell us about your architectural background.

I've wanted to be an architect ever since I first started playing with Lego. I've been very involved in architecture since a young age; it was always my thing. I began working at 16 and went on to begin my first degree in Venezuela; then I moved to Finland for my first Masters degree, where I ended up staying for the next 16 years. I moved to Paris a couple of years ago to do another Masters degree in Urbanism. My background is in quite traditional architecture but now I am working with a firm [Bush] which deals mainly with interiors — I think it's fascinating the cross-over that the two can have. It's also interesting for our clients in that we can talk about a particular interior space but at the same time have a clear understanding of what goes on beyond the walls.

Juan Luis Briceño

Who has been the biggest influence on your work?

For me, it's without a doubt the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto; an iconic figure in the Modern movement who is very different from Le Corbusier and the likes. He really introduced a human element to design: materiality, sensuality, and touch. He is also very much inspired by nature.

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How would you describe your approach?

It's completely directed by customer needs; we are tailors. We begin by finding out as much as possible about the client — their expectations, desires and so on —, and then put that into context with our architectural experience and knowledge.

In this era of technology, how important is it for an architect to be able to draw these days?

Let me show you my notebook... You can't live with out drawing, it's absolutely fundamental. Technology is very handy and practical, but it forces you to work towards a fixed end, and leaves little space for the creativity and creation that actually takes place within the process itself. There is so much freedom with a sketchbook; just tracing out lines and sketching allows other ideas to form.

How has the industry changed since you began working as an architect?

Of course the world has changed a lot in the last 20 years, but I think it's the clients who have changed the most. They believe that they have a better understanding of architecture — I jokingly blame TV shows such as *Grand Designs* — which can be damaging to our profession when people view architecture as 'easy'. Clients can arrive with incredibly specific expectations you have to fulfill. Of course this is part of our job, but it can be stifling to our creativity and leaves no room for our expertise to be employed. It's our role to analyse, suggest and to open up a dialogue rather than follow a prescription. The market often forces us to do just this, which can disrupt the relationship between architect and client.

What does your culturally varied background bring to your work?

Coming from a different culture each time you arrive somewhere allows you to contribute something new and apply it to a new context. By now my experience has become incredibly diverse, which is very valuable; coming from South America, with extensive experience in Scandinavia and now living in central Europe, I have gained the ability to understand a client coming from Singapore just as well as I can an American. It's not because they are similar, but because I have had to consider so many profiles I now can pick out what is relevant in each culture and what needs to be respected.

What do you consider to be the biggest innovations in architecture?

It has to be the communication aspect — the flow of information today is remarkable. We can be working on a project in Turkey, and at the same time sending emails with sketches to somebody in London who will analyse it and get it back to you by the afternoon. Before this you had a drawing and you had to get on a plane to show it. It is really the speed and the pace of projects that have advanced, meaning that today things take shape so quickly. However, it does pose some new challenges as it puts a lot of pressure on the client; sometimes you really do need to meet people face to face for these discussions to take place.

Can you tell us a little about Bush?

Bush is a well-established company which focuses mainly on interior architecture. We specialise in acting as a link between foreign clients and firms who are looking to develop in France, by providing expertise on the French way of doing things, the laws and customs etc. We are construction-driven and therefore very operational.

Is Bush making any efforts in terms of sustainable development?

Definitely, however we have our own ideas as to what we see as sustainable. Our view is a rather low tech one, in that a good design is able to adapt and to last — it's the most sustainable way of building really. For example, we don't rely on solar panels and that kind of 'on-trend' technology; as although it gets the label of ecological, it's expensive and complex. We are looking at spaces that, in the future, clients will want to turn it into something else and it will still serve a purpose.

What are your future projects, both personal and with Bush?

Personally, I am finishing a large-scale project in Morocco, where we are looking at building a university campus in a new town. At Bush we are working primarily on office spaces — particularly in empty buildings — and questioning the problem of what to do with the oversupply of office buildings. We have been working on how to make something of these; it may be that they need to find an entirely new function. We have worked with artists too, turning abandoned or unused spaces into ateliers or living quarters. This is also an example of sustainability, developing what already exists rather than piling money into a superfluous construction. I think that these spaces have great potential, as often they are in great locations.

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We work with temporary spaces too; if things are bound for demolition in two years we try to ensure its use until the very end — if you can extend the life span of a building it must have a positive environmental impact. I have always collaborated with artists, for example often with installations turning projects into workable pieces; work which requires structural knowledge or even civic permission.

There is a lot of demand for development, so we have to look at how can we expand in a sustainable way. Unfortunately, the rules and regulations in cities often limit this kind of creative innovation. We try to link clients with architects in order to resolve this problem. It can be an overwhelming idea and that's where architects come in.

Can you define any geographical locations which will see significant development this year?

Europe is still in a bit of a downturn; I have been working a lot in the Maghreb in North Africa, which is experiencing remarkable growth. It is an interesting area; it has great links with Europe but at the same time it's deeply rooted in its ancient culture. It is very different to the whole boom of the Gulf area which has a seemingly shallow culture these days, in that the construction taking place there is volatile and too focused on current trends. Lots of people are focused on India or China or the Gulf but I think it is important to look closer at North Africa. Growth is slower, but it is much more solid. ■

Voix du monde
Juan Luis Briceño

