Conversation with Alfredo Jose Brillembourg
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about yourself, the journey that brought you to the work that you're doing today, and a little bit about UTT.

Alfredo Brillembourg: I was trained as an architect at Columbia University, New York City. I am a fifth-generation Venezuelan family. In 1958, there was a coup, and so my family came up to New York. They decided to make a new life here, and I was born in America. I'm the first American-born Brillembourg. That's interesting for me because then it gave me two perspectives.

I went to kindergarten in the U.S. but then I grew up the rest of my adolescence in Venezuela. Then I went off to what would be considered better schooling. I went to Columbia University. I did undergrad and grad school at Columbia University in architecture. I studied literature and cinema also at Columbia University. Those are the three things that I like.

Then I went back down to Venezuela to practice architecture. I began as a modern architect, having all kinds of clients. It was a conventional practice. A very good one, one that was well recognized. Then came the famous '89 uprising, called Caracazo. That was when the barrio dwellers came down to the city and broke windows and stuff. Then after that came an attempted coup by Hugo Chávez in '92.

There I was, living through an uprising, an attempted coup, and a country out of order, almost ousted president, democracy at stake. Then Hugo Chávez ran for president and won in '98. That whole tumultuous period of about nine years was reckless for private practice in architecture. I started to think, we do have a problem here. We have a lot of poverty; 60% of the city of Caracas is living in slums or informal settlements. So I geared my practice with a few other colleagues in this new direction. We created the Caracas Urban Think Tank.

The intention was to seek grant funding in order to do projects in the slums, in the barrios. We shifted completely to social impact projects. In that, we began looking at some of the issues that you might be tackling. We did a major research project funded by the German government. Our first grant was given to us by Gerhard Schröder and Günter Grass who had created an organization called Kulturstiftung des Bundes. The German Cultural Grant Foundation.

Ashley Hopkinson: From your perspective how is the organization distinctive, and how is your work distinctive in this space?

Alfredo Brillembourg: Traditional architecture, as you said, is a signature firm. It is a brand for their style. Usually, there's one author who is branded as an artist and that's how he gets work. In our case, we made a collective group. Our mission was —we came together by the citizens of the city and for the city itself. People from all trades came to the Urban Think Tank: sociology, digital media, architecture, landscape, engineering. We came together for our common interest in the city. That's why it's called Caracas Urban Think Tank. Caracas being the object of that. It began as an NGO. The innovation that we worked on as a design group was unique. We were not designing buildings, we were designing processes. We were designing the process of design, not the design of the building.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share a little bit about your process for different projects or initiatives and what is meaningful to you about the way that you've approached the work?

Alfredo Brillembourg: It's important here to say that we had this crazy idea that we as an NGO were building democracy. At the heart of the problem was democracy. We were in a country that to this day is in the struggle for democracy. We saw a very unequitable city. We knew that what was invisible was bigger than what was visible.

We had to make the invisible visible. We did that by mapping, by using digital techniques and mapping. Combining air, foot, and car. We mapped out areas that were not on the mental map of any mayor in the city.

When you come to a mayor's office, they're behind their desk. There's a huge map of the sector that they control. We have five mayors in the city. That area where the slums are, were white spots on the map, they're shown as parks. In those white spots is the highest density in the whole city or in their sector. Why do they do that? They know, obviously, people are living there and squatting. But they cannot put it on the map because then they would acknowledge in legislation that their budgets would have to go to those various infrastructures and it would impact all the other budgets that a mayor needs.

By not acknowledging it, they could put some infrastructure in and do whatever they needed for political sake, for e.g. they would gain votes by going there. They would do handouts of blocks, building materials. The city was being built informally within, let's say in cahoots with the government, but they were out of legislation. Yet the people living there believed that they were de facto legal or they had de facto rights. Then it became this whole discussion. We wrote extensively in articles and many periodicals about this hybrid between legal and nonlegal or formal and informal.

As we were doing the mapping, we came across incredible community leaders. When you come in to do research, you have to befriend the community. The dangerous thing is the drug dealers and the drug dealers control the soccer pitch. There's only one little dirt soccer pitch in a favela, in a barrio. That's where the kids play. The games are usually of the older boys because they control the whole drug thing and they love to play sports.

The little kids weren't getting playing time there. We came across a community leader, a local sports recruiter with a love for children and soccer. He said, "What if you just covered this thing so we could use the court when it rains, because it doesn't drain properly?" We said, maybe we shouldn't just cover it. Let's do several floors of sports so that all the kids can play, so that you can run the place, so you can determine who plays there and who doesn't. You can control the time allocated to each one of the teams. That was the vertical gym story.

He was a great leader. He said, "'these kids, we got to get them off the drugs. We got to get them back in school. We've got to bring health to their households.'"That Vertical Gym turned out where about six on six played all day when previously they couldn't use it when it rained six months out of the year. These are self-initiated projects. Our NGO raised the money.

We were no longer architects in the traditional sense where a client comes to us. We generate or find out through research. The first project was called Barrio La Cruz in Chacao, in a fairly well-off neighborhood, but it's a real slum in the middle of that neighborhood.

It has about 80,000 people and there was only one court. The justice of distributing access to all for healthcare, sports, libraries, education, is not present in the slums of Caracas. Nor did the mayors really realize it, but our mapping brought it to their attention. That's another story about health—health and sports. Health and the cable car.

The government had this plan we found out about through the newspaper. I see myself a bit like a journalist. We read and find out what the issues are. There's a big mountain on the entrance to Caracas City proper called San Agustín del Sur, San Agustín. There were about 70,000 people. On that

mountain, they had an old water tank that wasn't being used because so many houses had plugged into the water pipe of the government with a water tank on the hilltop, that if they used that water tank and filled it with water, the pressure would be so great that it would blow all the illegal pipes that were plugged into it.

We found out that the government wanted to open roads. We told the community, and we found some great leaders in that San Agustín community on the hill. We asked them, have you ever thought of a cable car? Why do you want roads? Why don't you just have low carbon, green, low impact? Why don't you guys just think of another transport system? Forget cars. Stay as a mountain full of houses but rather as one house the size of a mountain.

You serve it with cable cars, and you see yourselves as a collective housing project with pedestrianization and parks, and new bathrooms, and new toilets, and new gyms, and new housing. They thought about it, and we got 70,000 signatures. We took it to the government, and we proposed a cable car with five stations. We had the site for our first cable car location. Then we went on planning it. We got funding from an Austrian company called Doppelmayr that makes cable cars. They said, "Are you guys crazy? We build cable cars on the ski slopes. We don't do it in slums." I said, "Yes, you should start an urban cable car division." Today, they've done more than 30 urban cable cars around the world. Ours was the first.

What did that cable car do? No displacement. When you open roads, 30% of the houses above and below have to be knocked down to bank the roads. We stopped that displacement. Then the cable car allows old people to get down to healthcare at the subway, because the cable car connects to the subway. Then people can get to schools. People can have babies. [Previously] they were walking up and down that hill two hours in each direction at the top. Now, they go up in 10 minutes. It was all about also bringing access to health through mobility.

Ashley Hopkinson: This is really fascinating. It's counterculture.

Alfredo Brillembourg: We are completely counterculture. If you read about our group, we are controversial. We go against the grain.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges that come up with this work and how do you manage those challenges?

Alfredo Brillembourg: The Vertical Gym, when the mayor saw the potential of that wonderful structure, he also contributed money to make it. Then he wanted us to sign off our rights as designers and the patent, and hand it over to him so that he can use it as an instrument of his party. That's one of

the challenges. Resisting that, and then possibly resisting that you'd get contracted ever again. We crossed lines of politics because we started to have some power that politicians wanted. We were not going to give it to any personal political party. It's open source. Our patents are open source, anyone who wants.

Next thing was the cable car. We got the Austrian government involved. Doppelmayr is an Austrian company, so the Austrian ambassador wanted to sell trade between countries, Venezuela and Austria etc. It took a long time for the Chavez government to accept the cable car to give the funding for it. We had already done the project outline. The project was sitting on every desk inside the government, but it was the Austrians who put it on Chavez's table at the OPEC meeting in Vienna.

You know how Saskia Sassen talks about territory, authority, and rights? Sometimes you have to move outside your territory in order to come back in and get the rights. The cable car agreement. It was all signed and negotiated in Austria at the OPEC meeting in Vienna. Then Chavez realized, which I didn't know about, that he needed something else from the Austrians. A cable car was a nice thing, and he did like it, but he negotiated something else with the Austrians.

I only found out about that when I was building the cable car. Big newspaper spread came out and said the Austrian government sells cable cars to the Venezuelan government — and guns. Chavez bought the famous Glock guns for his policemen that later were used on the population, the opposition marches. When you're talking about infrastructure, and when you're talking about politics, and when you're talking about the poor, and when you're talking about trying to look for people just to do things for goodwill, the negotiations are turbulent and blurred, and muddy.

We felt bad that cable cars were somehow the instrument, the good-doer instrument to get the other thing. But the cable cars there, it's working. It's done a really great thing for the hill. It's achieved its purpose. The whole hill is a tourist monument now that people have started shops, everything you can imagine. The cable car, in that sense, really revitalized the community, gave it a special character. It's probably one of the most exciting things you can do in Caracas is to fly up in a cable car and see the city from the air.

It unleashed an incredible boom in real estate. Now, the roofs of the houses are painted with for-sale signs on the tin roofs because you can see it from the cable car. Neighbors started to advertise Pepsi and got payments for ads on the roofs. The whole cable car added a new level to the city that added a new dimension for commercial use. Suddenly, what was invisible became visible, and people started making money.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the things that helped to make this work? What are some of the other factors that helped these projects to be successful?

Alfredo Brillembourg: It's interesting that you might think of success. I'm not sure. I'm not sure it's all successful. I can't be sure of the life of these elements, of the gyms that we've done. They're in a pretty worn-out state, no maintenance. The government later closed a lot of the social centers that we put under the cable car. We made spaces for people to have their own spaces, and the government took them over. The success is half. We know the prototype was successful.

We know the results were successful when they were well working, let's say, in the beginning, but as time goes by, we fear things get abandoned. The one thing I can say is we never saw this as something that we would repeat over and over and over again.

We saw it as we were giving the light, not the lamp. We're not selling lamps. We're selling light. What I mean is we're selling the idea that even if it flickers and it's only there for a little while, we give inspiration that this can be done in other places and in other parts of the world, by other architects, by young students of ours, by people affiliated to our work.

They measure me in the schools of architecture and with the clients of architecture. They measure me by how it looks, and it doesn't always look good. I fail to live up to the beauty aspects of how society is valuing the work of an architect. It has elements that are beautiful. But if you just go there two years later, it's taken over in some way, repainted. The thing is not kept pristine like in Switzerland. Therefore, our work is what we call *arte povera,* which is poor man's art. Not everyone likes that.

Other people do see the value when you take us from an impact investment opportunity. Our projects are still based on grants but we would like to make it based on impact funds and build the business model around that. But there's no will for that on a continuous basis, and I'm suffering constantly to find that money. I'm always just making it by doing the proof of concept. I have the social impact data. But there's a big gap between one off grant funding and continuous support for social impact.

Coming to South Africa, I found the most incredible challenge. I never thought I would find more difficulty than my barrios in Caracas or Brazil where I've worked or in Argentina etc. Then I get to South Africa, and there on top is the apartheid theme. Contested cities like you've never seen. I come in as a Venezuelan, so I'm not really coming in as a colonialist — I'm not an Englishman. I'm not a European. I'm a South American. So that's nice. South Africa likes Brazil. It's the same culture. They understand the vibes. We are similar.

It started when I flew over parts of the city, landing in Cape Town with an airplane to give a lecture at Design Indaba. I saw shacks for miles over the Cape Flats like I'd never seen. I said, how strange? They're all one story high. Why aren't they building their own houses, going vertically, making floors, and renting. I had to find that out. I went in, and with a whole team that I put together, through a friend of mine, Joel Bolnick, who helped me through Slum Dwellers International. They directed me to some really great community leaders. When I got there, Soweto BT South. It's in Khayelitsha. And Kaya means home, so it's quite a beautiful place. This is our home—people reflected to us.

Later, we came to film there after a huge fire. That's when we realized that they heat themselves with kerosene lamps. In the night, kids wake up, they need to go to the bathroom and they knock over the kerosene lamps. Then the kerosene goes all over the house on the floor, and there's wood everywhere. They can catch fire**.** So there was a huge fire on Philippi Road, and another huge fire in Hout Bay. I don't know how many it displaced, maybe a thousand homes destroyed. When I saw that with my own eyes, we filmed it. I said, "We got to do something."

When the homes were devastated, the city didn't know what to do. Families were sitting there with pots and pans, whatever they could have, makeshift, sitting on where their house used to stand. The city said, "We will get you a kit of metal, tin, and wood, and we'll deposit it there." They rallied up materials, and they would come with trucks and give each dweller materials to rebuild this house. I said, "That's completely crazy." This is the opportunity to give them permanent homes not another impermanent home with fire hazards.

Then I started to think, "How can I do it?" So I came up with a whole digital system of creating trust between the community where you log in who you are or where you used to live. We vectorize a Google map. We then say, "Let's put a road here," and people can play with my digital model.

I also have an analogous model with blocks, and you could move it around. We asked: "Where do you want to live? Which member do you want to live with? Then it's duplicated digitally. When it's duplicated digitally, we have income levels, in something like an Excel sheet. In the end we produce an agreement with everything — who wants what kind of a house and who has what money to pay.

From there, I went to raise money for each house, selling each house at a time: 25% is the resident's cost paid overtime, 25% was the city because they were going to give out materials anyway. They promised me the infrastructure lines. So everything under the ground, they would do. I only had to do the top structure, and then I found individuals and later corporations and foundations who would finance my top structure as a grant. Then, we did the first couple of houses. We proved the concept, and it worked out. We changed everything with no displacement. We reorganized the site, we made

double story shacks where people could start shops on the ground floor and sell goods, and then get money to pay for the rest of their loan. They would help build the shack. We taught them how to build.

Then we ended up with a road with solar energy. We rented the roofs of the houses for commercial ads. They'd no longer top up electricity with the government. They get it much cheaper from their solar panels. Then we built a community center, with sports and a hall. There was also food production with a fish farm, and greens—all managed by the community.

They've made their own community land title while waiting for individual land titles. The whole process, it's been 10 years; bureaucracy is huge. It's the power of the ANC government to give houses and they don't want someone else doing housing. We're saying, "Well, we're doing it all for the good of all. We're showing you the new model. You cannot keep on doing suburban trackhouses. These are sites near the city, near the airport. You have to densify, you have to do it properly. You have to do it with a new model." The new model is what we call this blended finance, where we build one unit at a time and sell those units, and subsidize the other units.

We have shops, and we have a community center that's run by people producing food. They sell things and run classes and sports etc. We will have a public park with trees and we will go off-grid. The government doesn't have to use electricity…The story is complete. Now, I'm trying to fundraise for a thousand houses.

Ashley Hopkinson: What has been a big takeaway or an insight you've learned from trying to meld these two worlds together and create a new avenue of architecture?

Alfredo Brillembourg: There are many people who inspired me to get to do what I do today. I'm not the first. There was a group called Team 10 in the '60s, many alternative groups, and FARM, 1970s, early ecology, they were activists. They helped me to get to where I am now in terms of thinking of designing in this way and how to do that. Now all of them died; they were not successful carrying on. I knew that it was because they couldn't find a way to finance themselves. They went back to the conventional design work, and they became quite known and quite good. Some of them were able to do both, they were lucky. If you partner with someone who has money for instance.

One of those was the famous South African architect Denise Scott Brown, who married Robert Venturi. They made Venturi Scott Brown, a firm in Philadelphia. They stopped the construction of a highway, for example. They're the ones who started a whole new revitalization of the world of architecture by saying that the decorated sheds are okay, which is American. They gave me some discourse.

What's my takeaway? I see culture and social impact as inseparable. You create livelihoods, economies. You create awareness. You do good and you also create discourse. I believe at the intersection of all those things is my work. This makes the way I'm working so powerful. If I go and see magazines today on modernism, if I don't see an element of social impact in the work that's being displayed, I'm not interested. For me, we're wasting our time. We're in a world that has more in crisis than ever, more homelessness than ever, more inequalities than ever. More people on the globe live informally than the ones that live formally.

You have two billion people waiting for homes. I regard my profession and the discourse at academia, where I used to be, challenged very seriously at different moments to the point of break. I see some of them as superficial now and that made me move away from that traditional practice of architecture and insert myself in something that's very personal to me, which is building democracy. As you build community, and as you build these physical works, you are actually building the space for democracy to play itself out.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers and practitioners can do to improve collaboration and advance progress in this area of architecture and social impact?

Alfredo Brillembourg: Super easy. I've had the fortune and luck to have been around some important politicians like Bill Clinton. I shouldn't say this because it didn't really have an impact on me then, but Barack Obama was my classmate at Columbia College. Later in life, the way he tackled things — both of them great orators, great people of intersection, of cross-cutting through disciplines. One of the basic things I take away is we need to really, really think about new ways in cross-collaboration and interdisciplinary thinking.

Now that's easy to say, and everyone thinks that they do it. What it means is coming to the table and saying you don't really know everything. Therefore, the problem is that our leaders are running things primarily and have gotten to positions through the power of economics or economics jargon.

The problem is economics will tell you today that the world's never been healthier. We're living longer than ever. China has moved 400 million people out of poverty in their miracle years… this and that. "Have you seen the curve and the tendency? That jargon works when it works. Again, and it's circumstantial to a kind of data and numbers can tell any story.

I think the takeaway is stop reading about it. Just go look at it. Get your hands dirty again. Never remove yourself from the ground, from the issues, from the poverty, and from the community that has a voice. Always remain there with them.

Now, people may say, "But that's dangerous. That's difficult. I need to be a politician. I need to be at another level somehow. I'll send someone to do it." No, because you've got to be the one who's got the power to do it, who leads it.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does collective wellbeing mean to you?

Alfredo Brillembourg: When I got back in 1998, back into the barrios, it was like coming home. When I got back there, and I started to see the communities of Petare or La Cruz in Chacao, where the vertical gym was located. I started to talk and play soccer with them on that court. I began to see that, actually, they were incredibly vibrant communities despite their poverty. They lacked everything that I had. Yet they were happy, and for the most part, healthy, incredibly resilient. Now, maybe 10% of them were criminals or caused problems. But most people did incredible things with very little.

What I say is design as non-design. They didn't know they were designing their future, their home, their thing, but they were, without using any design awareness. That popular design; that laissez-faire. That let it go, let it be. That kind of thing led me to a lot of the ideas I have in architecture, for instance 'how much do we really have to plan?' I'm going against my profession in saying… Can we just lay down the basics?

Can we just put the chalk marks on where the house goes? Can we then do the rest by teaching? Because we know the infrastructure, we know how it works. We know how the city works, but can we do less and allow the community to do more? How can we just be there as mediators of design and not the actual executors of the design?

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you very much.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.