“Architecture Is to Put in Order a Room, a House, a City”: In Conversation with Alberto Campo Baeza

Madrid architect Alberto Campo Baeza was born in 1946 in Valladolid, Spain and grew up in Cádiz. He graduated from Universidad Politécnica de Madrid in 1971 and earned his PhD there in 1982. Campo Baeza has been teaching architecture at the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid, ETSAM for more than 40 years. He sees architecture as building ideas and expressing them in the most essential and clear ways, consistently relying on such basic elements as firmly grounded rectangular platforms, thick solid walls with deep cavities and frameless cutouts, and flat thin planes propped up by delicate posts. Colors, complex curves, and diversity of materials are largely avoided to accentuate primary relationships between elementary prisms and to exalt magic out of sunlight. Campo Baeza’s architecture is about transparency and precision, as well as asserting such fundamentals as ground planes, straight lines, and precise corners. He has built relatively few projects and, for the most part, on a small scale. Yet, his legacy is remarkably complete, consistent, profound, memorable, and inspirational.
Campo Baeza is a recipient of numerous prestigious awards, including the 2019 Gold Medal of Spanish Architecture. His most prominent built works include the House of the Infinite (Cádiz, 2014), public space Between Cathedrals (Cádiz, 2009), the Ollick Spanu House (Garrison, New York, 2008), the Museum of Memory of Andalucía (Granada, 2010), a nursery for Benetton (Treviso, Italy, 2007), Caja Granada Headquarters (Granada, 2001), De Blass House (Near Madrid, 2000), and Gaspar House (Cádiz, 1992). The architect has authored numerous texts published in such of his books as *Principia Architectonica*, *The Built Idea*, *Poetica Architectonica*, and the latest *Sharpening the Scalpel*. The following is a condensed version of my conversation with Alberto Campo Baeza at his compact studio in Madrid where he practices architecture with a handful of his collaborators.
Vladimir Belogolovsky: About ten years ago, you took a sabbatical to study at Columbia University’s Avery Library in New York. Could you talk about that experience?

Alberto Campo Baeza: Over the years that I’ve been teaching at ETSAM, I spent two of my sabbaticals as a visiting scholar at Columbia University – in 2010-11 academic year and in the early 2000s. During my second time, I decided not to be interrupted by various invitations to give lectures or undertake other tempting projects and devoted my time entirely to thinking and contemplating about architecture. During that time of reflection and calmness, I wrote my book *Principia Architectonica* to distill ideas that I have accumulated over many years of practice.

VB: What are some of the guiding principles behind your work?

ACB: Architecture should not be capricious; every project should be like a diagnosis for a particular site and program. There is science behind every project. Design is based on reason. You have to look for an idea capable to be built. Beauty is not a utopian idea. Utopia is not impossible. With new technology utopia can be built. Beauty can be achieved with logic, rationality, harmonious proportions, and appropriate scale. You have to try to be serious, deep, and sincere.
VB: Wouldn’t you agree that for one architect to be sincere means to be essential, reserved, and super analytical, whereas for another – it is about being expressionistic, casual, and intuitive.

ACB: It is true, but I would rather try to be universal than personal. Gaudi was a genius but too personal for my taste. When architecture is too unique, it loses a sense of universality. In my work, I try to be simple, quiet, abstract; in short, universal. Sure, this is just the starting point, just the foundation. To achieve real beauty you need imagination, you need inspiration. I focus on such themes as transparency and continuity. Mies did not need to rely on traditional enfilade because he used technology to achieve transparency and continuity. Konstantine Melnikov strived for his architecture to be bare, “to take off her marble dress, remove her make-up and reveal herself as she is, naked, like a young and graceful goddess.” Architecture should be serious, which is not the same as boring. It should be consequential; it should be beautiful. Plato said, “Beauty is the splendor of the truth.” In other words, beauty is the reflection of reason, not a mere intuitive gesture.
VB: Do you think beauty is something that is accepted by the majority of people or an architect can decide whether something is beautiful and that’s what matters?

ACB: When Plato spoke of democracy, he said that it is not a guarantee for a good way or the best solution. I would be suspicious of what the majority thinks. I am sure, you and I can agree that the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies is a beautiful building. It is a masterpiece, of course. But would people on the street agree with us? I am not so sure about that.

VB: You said, “History of architecture is a fight to try to be lighter, lighter, and lighter.” What would you say your work is about? What are the main intentions behind your architecture?

ACB: Very simple – to make people happy. Does it sound naïve? But it is true. It is not for my own vanity, not for my own satisfaction. It is for people to enjoy. Many of my projects are houses. Imagine if people who live in my houses would be afraid of touching everything. I can assure you that my clients are happy in my houses. My buildings are a sort of hymn to freedom. People can live in my houses in a thousand different ways. My House of the Infinite in Cádiz is basically a platform, a podium because it is at the border of the sea. So, it is an infinite plane facing the infinite sea. It is like a jetty shooting into the sea. Nothing more, nothing less. This house could not be built anywhere else. It is very particular to its location. It is built to enjoy the sea, the climate, the sun. You enter the house from the designed as the outdoor living room; it is carved in three ways – the entry in the center, the amphitheater to the
VB: Apart from happiness and freedom what else is your architecture about?

ACB: My architecture is neutral. I try not to impose anything. There is no insistence on any particular style of life. My houses are easy to live in. Restraint is a prerequisite of happiness.

VB: Could you comment on progress in your work from project to project? Is it about making your buildings lighter and lighter?

ACB: I don’t think we can speak of any particular progress. As one becomes older, certain things get clearer. Every project must be a discovery. I’m not trying to be original. I try to discover not originality, but things that are essential. What’s important is that every project becomes a potential for discovering something new.
VB: This attitude explains why you built relatively few projects and predominantly on a small scale.

ACB: A few years ago, a fellow architect told me, “Alberto, I have built two thousand buildings.” I remember thinking, “My God, two thousand buildings!” So, I decided to go over my notes and files and discovered that I completed only 37 projects. I thought, “What a disaster!” Then I read something interesting in a book by Bill Bryson, the biographer of William Shakespeare. The book stated, “As you know, William Shakespeare wrote only 37 plays.” All of a sudden, I felt so satisfactory! [Laughs.] I think it is important to be satisfied with what you do. You have to believe in your work and be serious about each and every project.

VB: This was a few years ago. How many projects have you done since then?

ACB: A few more, so I have built about 45 projects, more than William Shakespeare! [Laughs.]
VB: You said that the quality of architecture is measured by its capacity to stop the passage of time, to hold time in suspension. But so many contemporary architects are concerned with exactly the opposite – they try to capture movement and dynamics of the fleeting moment. What do you think about that?

ACB: When I speak of suspension of time it is, of course, in philosophical terms. If you look at the Pantheon in Rome, its beauty is universal, and it will remain so in the future. How do you achieve something fundamental, something special? People confuse originality with frivolity or being exotic. But I’m not original or exotic. Again, I try to discover not originality, but the basic things. You cannot have an idea incapable of being materialized and you cannot materialize it if you haven’t got an idea.

VB: Your buildings are basic in their forms and minimalist in their details. Yet, you maintain that your architecture is abstract but not minimalist. Why is that?

ACB: I hate the word minimalist. My goal is not to be a minimalist or purist and perfect. No, no, no, I am a sinner. I am not ashamed of that! [Laughs.] What is important for me is to be clean, simple, and sometimes, even obvious, there is nothing wrong with being obvious. What can be more obvious than working with the sunlight? There is no architecture without light, just like there is no music without air. I think a musical instrument is a good metaphor for a building because as architects we tune our buildings just like writers write and rewrite their texts to be ever clearer, specific, and sharp, just like the surgeon’s scalpel. We are all tuning and sharpening our ideas – perfecting dimensions, proportions, distances between columns, choosing between square or rectangular forms, how to hide corner joints, and so on. You tune and tune until the time comes and your building has to perform. What is architecture? To me, it is to bring things in order and clarity – to put in order a room, a house, a city.