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ENTREVISTA / INTERVIEW

# Entrevista a Vishaan Chakrabarti.

## Interview with Vishaan Chakrabarti.

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Vishaan Chakrabarti tiene doble título de pregrado en Historia del Arte e Ingeniería en la Universidad de Cornell, EE.UU. Además, es *Master of Architecture*, de la Universidad de California, Berkeley y *Master in Urban Planning*, del *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT), EE.UU. Con más de veinte años de experiencia comprobada en la creación e implementación de diseños visionarios, Vishaan Chakrabarti es el fundador de la oficina *Practice for Architecture and Urbanism* (PAU) con sede en Nueva York. Al mismo tiempo, es profesor en la Escuela de Arquitectura, Planificación y Preservación de Graduados de la Universidad de Columbia, donde enseña diseño y urbanismo. Recientemente, Chakrabarti fue nombrado decano (William W. Wurster) de la Facultad de Diseño Ambiental de la Universidad de California, Berkeley, cargo que asumirá en julio de 2020. Los proyectos de PAU incluyen diseños para nuevas comunidades en el este de Nueva York, Filadelfia, la refinería de azúcar Domino, Newark, Detroit y Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, así como una visión del plan maestro para Sunnyside Yards en Queens. El proyecto Penn Palimpsest de PAU imagina crear un espacio público lleno de luz reciclando los cimientos y la superestructura del Madison Square Garden para renovar la estación de Penn y sus alrededores. Mientras servía bajo el alcalde Michael Bloomberg como director de la Oficina de Manhattan para el Departamento de Planificación Urbana de Nueva York, Vishaan colaboró con éxito con los esfuerzos ahora realizados para salvar High Line, rezonificar Hudson Yards, extender la línea de metro #7, reconstruir el East River Waterfront, expandir el campus de la Universidad de Columbia y reincorporar la red de calles en el sitio del World Trade Center después de los eventos del 11 de septiembre de 2001. Es miembro de las juntas directivas de la Architectural League of New York, la Regional Planning Association y la Citizens Budget Commission. Vishaan ha recibido un Premio CACF Catalyst for Change y es un ex becario de Crain "40 Under 40" y David Rockefeller'. / Vishaan Chakrabarti holds a double undergraduate degree in Art History and Engineering from Cornell University, USA. In addition, he holds a Master of Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley and a Master in Urban Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. With over twenty years of proven experience authoring and implementing visionary design, Vishaan Chakrabarti is the founder of *Practice for Architecture and Urbanism* (PAU). Simultaneously, he is a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, where he teaches design and urbanism. Recently, Chakrabarti was named the William W. Wurster Dean of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley, a position he will assume in July 2020. PAU's projects include designs for comprehensive new communities in East New York, Philadelphia, the Domino Sugar Refinery, Newark, Detroit, and Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, as well as a master plan vision for Sunnyside Yards in Queens. PAU's Penn Palimpsest project imagines creating a light-filled public commons by recycling the foundations and superstructure of Madison Square Garden to renew Penn Station and its surrounds. While serving under Mayor Michael Bloomberg as the director of the Manhattan Office for the New York Department of City Planning, Vishaan successfully collaborated with the now-realized efforts to save the High Line, rezone Hudson Yards, extend the #7 subway line, rebuild the East River Waterfront, expand the Columbia University campus, and reincorporate the street grid at the World Trade Center site after the events of 9/11. He serves on the boards of the Architectural League of New York, the Regional Planning Association, and the Citizens Budget Commission. Vishaan has received a CACF Catalyst for Change Award and is a former Crain's "40 Under 40" and David Rockefeller Fellow<sup>1</sup>.

Vishaan visited the city of Valdivia in January 2020, in the context of the Congress of the Future, a national activity that brings together outstanding professionals from different areas of knowledge. Vishaan is particularly interested in the cities of the future. Throughout his professional career he has been involved in areas such as engineering, art history, academia, independent architecture, urban planning, and professional development

in different places and cities around the world. Considering such background, he is a socially relevant, comprehensive, and realistic voice concerning cities of the future. The questions focus on his experience as Dean and University Professor, his ability to learn from mistakes, a strategy that understands a city before making any interventions, a vision on the future of public transport, and finally, his impressions regarding the city of Valdivia.

More than just encouraging a thoughtful conversation, the questions are aimed at getting specific answers. The purpose of the interview is to contribute to knowledge and to build a record that sets a precedent for future actions to be implemented by Valdivia and other intermediate cities. The idea behind this is for cities to become increasingly smarter, cleaner, efficient, fairer, and sustainable.

<sup>1</sup> Este texto es un fragmento de PAU, Practice for Architecture and Urbanism.

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**As Dean of the College of Environmental Design UC Berkeley, understanding that the academic vision is usually more advanced and innovative, what kind of visionary or futuristic elements and concepts would you like to introduce to the students? What must drive the creativity of future architects?**

I think what should drive their creativity should be solving humanity's problems. So, obviously starting with climate change. Buildings and cars are responsible for 70% of global carbon emissions. So, what is critical is the way in which we build buildings, if we can do it with less carbon. I could start from a place of human need and then go from there. Because we can teach students all sorts of technology, but the technology is only valuable if it's addressing a human need. And so that's where I would begin.

**During the career and experience of an architect or urban designer sometimes we succeed in projects, and sometimes we fail. This is particularly true in public spaces where the design process aims at a desired use of the space, and then it turns out to be used differently. How do you use failure as knowledge for the next challenges?**

I think this is very important. I think we learn from our mistakes much more than we learn from our successes. In our field, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the big failure was the love affair with the automobile. Le Corbusier responded to it; going back to 1929, the Athens charter had a kind of love affair with what cars could bring and that turned out to be a massive failure. We redesigned the world around the automobile in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it's a huge part of the problem we have today in terms of climate change and social relations. It's

very important to learn from our failures; and sometimes I worry that some of the technology companies that are now very focused on city building are not learning from those failures, because they're not so visionary in their thinking. That's why I think it's very important for the academic sector, for universities, to be teaching history, because history is often a kind of story about both human success and human failure. There's an old saying that if we don't understand history, we are doomed to repeat our mistakes. That is why I think it's fundamentally important to understand these failures.



**Image 1.** Vishaan Chakrabarti at TED. In his talk he encourages the need of solving human needs (image: Courtesy of PAU).



**Image 2.** Zona Calma Maipú. Experimental intervention in the city center of Valdivia carried out by Activa Valdivia Consorcio Valdivia Sustentable (CVS). This initiative seeks to correct the overuse of streets by cars and balance the distribution of space to the benefit of pedestrians (image: Guillermo Müller, Courtesy of Activa Valdivia).



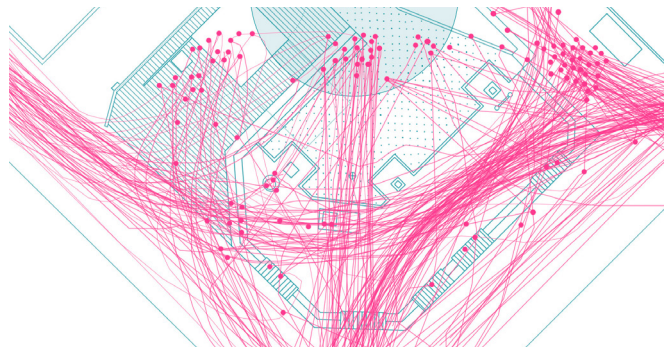
**Image 3.** Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, is a paradox: It boasts a dense urban center while also home to a centuries old nomadic culture in a mostly rural nation. An example of the reading before writing process (image: Courtesy of PAU).

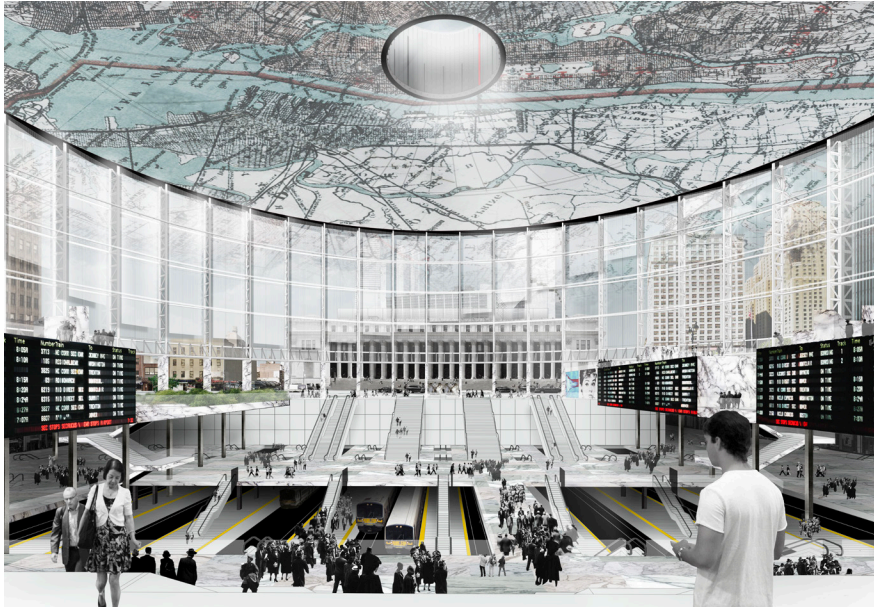
**You mentioned here in Valdivia that the city must be read before writing on it. What kind of reading strategies do you recommend for small-medium cities in the globe's south?**

Well, the way we do that reading process is we have a kind of three-part process in our office. We first start by looking at a place and that means looking at the climate, and what will the climate demand in terms of how you construct buildings and create intelligent public spaces. We look at context, so we'll often look at the scale and nature of the spaces people have already created. And then we look at construction methods, which are very important. For example, Valdivia had the largest earthquake known to mankind. So how you build in Valdivia is fundamentally different to how you build in a city like New York, which isn't very prone to earthquakes. Construction is very important indeed. All of that has to do with



**Image 4.** Pocket Square. Experimental intervention in the city center of Valdivia carried out by Activa Valdivia CVS. This initiative seeks to activate an unused space and take advantage of an urban activity as a process for reading the space (image: Courtesy of Activa Valdivia).





**Image 5.** PAU's Penn Station proposal aims for a future where people have the best urban conditions; public transport, and commuting could not be only underground (image: Courtesy of PAU).

how you read the place. After you've read the place, the next step in the process is to read needs. What a client needs, what communities need. Is there a need for housing? Is there a need for transportation? How do you satisfy those needs? The third step is the process of writing, of actually defining the way we think about connections; how do we create new things that connect to the old things socially, culturally, and emotionally. So, for us there is always this three-step process of place, need, and connection.

**You expressed the need for cities to have free public transportation because space is limited, too many trips are made in private cars, and there is an urgent need to entice citizens to move around cities in more active and sustainable ways. How can small-medium cities in the globe's south, like Valdivia, make that dream of free public transportation come true?**

You just include it! People say, well how can you pay for free public transportation? But we actually pay for free private transportation all the time. Because private cars use roads that are built by the government, and the government has a right to build those roads. And we also have a tax structure. For example, Chile has public healthcare and that is a public good. If public transportation isn't free it should be very, very low cost because we want to reward people for doing the socially good thing, which is taking mass transit, avoiding cars, and lowering their carbon footprint. It's just a policy question really. We have to rethink why it is we supply free private transport in the form of roads, but we see public transportation as a problem.



**Image 6.** PAU's master plan for Sunnyside Yard in New York prioritizes contextual buildings and pedestrians, and is an example of how we should think about urban mobility (image: Courtesy of PAU).



**Image 7.** Valdivia fish market and waterfront seen from the Pedro de Valdivia Bridge (image: Cristóbal Lamarca).

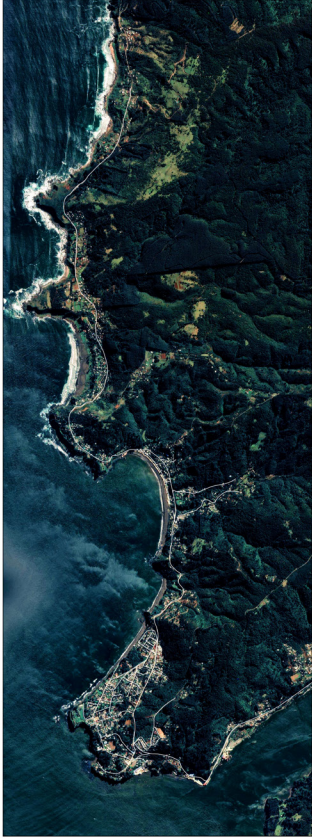


**Image 8.** PAU was tasked with creating open architecture that seamlessly connects the existing neighborhood to the recaptured waterfront a quarter-mile long. The result is a state-of-the-art, 425,000-square-foot workspace housed within a beautiful, idiosyncratic urban artifact that is unique to post-industrial Williamsburg, offering its inhabitants and the larger community alike a singular experience (image: Courtesy of PAU).

**When you were in Valdivia, what caught your attention about the urban landscape, city identity, and social relations that you saw?**

It's a very beautiful city. It is one of these cities that has just this amazing symbiosis with nature, the relationship to the river, the relationship to the mountains, there is all this greenery. When my plane was landing it was very clear that all of the context of the city is extraordinary. I spent a lot of time in the fish market and this place has this direct relationship to the river; you can eat things raw in the fish market because it's so fresh. And a lot of cities don't have that ability. I think whatever the city does it should always remember its relationship to nature. In a lot of cities, we've lost the relationship, the connection to nature and I think people really miss that. And so, to me it's one of the most fundamental characteristics of Valdivia: that sense that you're in the city and you're in a social place, but that social place is connected to nature. ▲▲▲

DISTRIBUCIÓN ESPACIAL  
TRAMA URBANA SOBRE IMAGEN SATELITAL



Distribución de la trama urbana de Valdivia en base a red  
vial y construcciones sobre imagen Google  
Elaboración propia en base a  
Ejes Viales: Sectplan Valdivia  
Edificaciones: UREH - SRAI + Activa Valdivia  
Ref. Espacial: WGS84\_UTM18S



**Image 9.** Map of the built environment over the natural context, which represents the symbiosis of the city of Valdivia (Image: Courtesy of Activa Valdivia).