

**INTERVIEW OF JOHN F.C.TURNER**  
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**BY ROBERTO CHAVEZ with JULIE VILORIA & MELANIE ZIPPERER**  
**Audited by Rudolf V. Van Puymbroeck, Legal Department, and Assistant.**

**Sir Patrick Geddes, Self-Help Housing and Earthquake Reconstruction (Excerpt)**

**MR. CHAVEZ:** I wanted to start out by asking you to tell us about how you got started. You mentioned in the presentation today that you came to Peru; I presume you were an architect at the time in the fifties was it or sixties? Tell us a little about it.

**MR. TURNER:** I qualified at the Architectural Association in London in 1954 and left for Peru in 1957, after the usual jobs as an assistant and various small ones on my own account. The original reason for going to Peru goes back to an introduction to Patrick Geddes' work, especially to what he did in India during the First World War.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Perhaps if you could just say a paragraph about Geddes for our readers.

**MR. TURNER:** Patrick Geddes was a pupil of Thomas Huxley who, in turn, was a pupil of Darwin's, so Geddes was studying botany and biology. When he was doing fieldwork in Mexico, he caught a disease that affected his eyesight; as he could no longer work with microscopes, Geddes turned his attention to cities. His most famous book, *The Evolution of Cities*, which was published in 1915, is a starting point for the holistic view of cities as growing entities. By accident, I came across one of his manuscripts. That was in 1948, when I was a student at the AA. To cut a long story short, I was fascinated by his famous diagrams. He had used his approach to life, his biological understanding, and applied it to cities. That meant he looked at it in terms of place, activity and people, paralleling the way organisms function in their environment, making it and being made by it—an essentially ecological understanding. Geddes' developed his diagrams, an early general systems model, when he was recovering from temporary blindness in Mexico in the 1870s.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Right.

**MR. TURNER:** That was 130 years ago, very advanced thinking which we are still struggling to catch up with!

**MR. CHAVEZ:** But this is very relevant.

**MR. TURNER:** My first publication, worked out with the help of Bruce Martin's familiarity with Chinese culture, was written together with Paffard Keating-Clay, another fellow student at the AA. It was an interpretation of Geddes' diagrams published as an appendix to the second edition of *Cities in Evolution* in 1949. Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, an influential teacher of mine was the editor. It was a long time before I contributed to any other publication! That article led directly to my move to Peru. At a CIAM meeting - of the Congrès Internationales des Architectes Modernes - in Venice in 1950, I think it

was, I met Eduardo Neira, an architect-planner from Peru. He astonished me by saying that he had translated the appendix on Geddes' diagrams for his students at the University in Lima! And that led to an invitation to work with him in Peru where I went with my first wife and small son six years later.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Fascinating.

**MR. TURNER:** Another influence was William Morris, one of the Victorian pre-raphaelite instigators or generators of the arts and crafts movement of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries in the UK. My grandfather worked with Morris as a young man, and May Morris, his eldest daughter, is my mother's godmother. So I have quite a strong connection with the hands-on, arts and crafts world—a bottom-up orientation to the importance of regenerating and maintaining control over production at the local level, the vernacular roots of genuine culture.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Yes.

**MR. TURNER:** The next time I saw Eduardo was in England while he was studying for a planning degree at Liverpool University. He was enthusiastic about Acción Popular, the new political party he and his friends had set up in Peru with architect Fernando Belaúnde Terry as the leader. They were all optimistic about winning the 1956 Presidential election.

**MR. TURNER:** Eduardo, together with his cousin, the anthropologist José Matos Mar and, I suppose, many of the others, understood 'popular' or community action in the way that Morris would have understood it—as a support for genuine, community-based social action. Later, it turned out, Fernando did not understand it that way at all.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** That's true.

**MR. TURNER:** Nice chap but a terrible president. Rather fortunately in retrospect, he lost. Prado, a very ordinary conservative politician and banker turned out to be a more practical, pragmatic president under whom it was probably much easier to work than it would have been under Belaúnde. The opportunity to do some practical work came with a major earthquake in Arequipa, not long after I was settled in Peru.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** But it did do a good deal of damage.

**MR. TURNER:** Yes, it destroyed or damaged some 10,000 houses in the region; rural areas suffered most—but it was daytime and casualties were low. It was on January 15, 1958—a date I am unlikely to forget! I was nearly a casualty myself as I was on the loo at the time.

[Laughter.]

But I couldn't move for the violent shaking! I was terrified expecting the stone roof was going to fall on me as there was so much movement and the construction above my head was made out of old railway lines with stone blocks in between!

**MR. CHAVEZ:** But you're in a good position to answer the question that was raised at the brown bag meeting today. How does this apply to earthquake and disaster reconstruction?

**MR. TURNER:** Fortunately, I haven't experienced any other earthquakes, but I've observed quite a few of the consequences. From what I have seen for myself, I have the same view as my more knowledgeable friends Ian Davis, of Oxford, UK, and Andrew Maskrey now of Lima and Chepi his partner. The single most important thing is that the victims have the opportunity to do all they are able to do themselves—by far the best way of overcoming personal trauma and almost always the quickest way of rebuilding small structures—anyway when the tools and materials are to hand. One of the saddest sights I have ever seen are of supposedly temporary camp sites full of people able and desperately wanting to rebuild but being prevented from doing so by authorities determined to impose their own unsuitable plans which, of course, take years to prepare and for which funds and managerial capacity are generally inadequate.

In fact I was largely responsible for a post-earthquake project in Arequipa along what proved to be the right lines: a simple self-build rehousing project. Money poured in to help the earthquake victims, mainly from abroad. In those days, there weren't so many disasters as there are now, or they're not so widely publicised.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** And Arequipa at the time was the second largest city of Peru.

**MR. TURNER:** Yes, but about a tenth of the size of Lima, at that time it had a population of about 100,000. It was a good manageable size with a beautiful colonial city centre. I had been working there for some months, sent by the then Peruvian ministry of public works as an assistant to the director of the Oficina de Asistencia Técnica a las Urbanizaciones Populares de Arequipa, OATA, which had been set up by Eduardo Neira in 1955. Now, that is remarkable, right? I don't know of any national government that had taken official action to assist the development of squatter settlements before the sixties, or even later. I don't say that this action of Eduardo's reflected the majority view in the administration; far from it. So there I was, in a pioneering situation, still learning to speak Spanish. By the time the earthquake hit, I had been asked to take over from the interim director who had replaced the first, dismissed for incompetence.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** I see. Were the aerial photographs you showed us today taken before or after the earthquake?

**MR. TURNER:** Soon afterwards.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** The chart you made in 1959 showing the areas being built up as Urbanizaciones Populares, by the people themselves—they actually covered a larger area than that of the city itself?

**MR. TURNER:** Yes, over a thousand hectares while the legally incorporated city area was less than a thousand.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Were Neira and his team aware of this as well? Did they really know what was going on?

**MR. TURNER:** Yes, they were very well informed. Eduardo's cousin, José Matos Mar, an anthropologist and John P. Cole, a British geographer who had left Peru before I arrived, had carried out excellent surveys of the *barriadas*—the urban squatter settlements—in Peru for a government report published in 1956. So many leading professionals were quite aware.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** What did they have in common? Were they from a school? Were they associated with the *Acción Popular* party?

**MR. TURNER:** I don't know about their schools but *Acción Popular*, which I mentioned before, was a liberal, left leaning party with what we would now call a 'third sector' bias. Very remarkable, really, some 30 years ahead of the rest of the world.

As I was saying, as a result of the earthquakes, money was available for post-earthquake reconstruction. The city mayor was a bright young man, and he listened very carefully, not so much to what I was saying but to my friend and colleague Hernán Bedoya Forga, director of the local planning office. We knew the Mayor wanted to spend some of the money on housing the earthquake victims—not a good idea as so few would be helped. So we suggested a self-build scheme for those who lost their inner-city homes but who had vacant plots in the *Urbanizaciones Populares*. At least, we could double the number that way.

The Mayor said okay, go ahead. And that was my first really useful experience of working at the grass roots. Once we got the project going, we soon realised that our professional assumptions of design, construction and managerial superiority were exaggerated, to say the least. We soon learned that we needed our supposed clients' own knowledge and the skills of local builders—and how badly our own bright ideas ignored their realities.

[Laughter]

**MR. CHAVEZ:** But you also found that there was some services and support that professionals could provide.

**MR. TURNER:** Oh, yes—but we burdened ourselves with an unnecessary amount of administrative and overhead work, and so if you take the overhead work into consideration, which was voluntary and not paid, it wouldn't have been so economically successful as it seemed to be.

**MS. VILORIA:** Just to expand a little on that, how do you define the relationships with these people? Are they contractual or informal relationships just bound by a common goal?

**MR. TURNER:** Oh, they're pretty formal. First of all, in order to meet the requirements, naturally, of the money you're spending. So it had to be fairly rigidly allocated to people who really were able to use it and were genuine victims of the earthquake. The

participants also took their responsibilities seriously—progress of the work depended on fairly well disciplined contributions of their labour—and at the regular evening meetings with each group.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** But this is the usual sort of thing today, but this was the first time for these people.

**MR. TURNER:** Well, I wouldn't say so. Faenas, days of communal work for the community's benefit is or was traditional and common at that time. The great majority were first and second generation migrants from rural areas where mutual help with house building, roofing especially, was the norm. Relationships were honest. There was no corruption that I was aware of. Agreements were open and verbal and, although there was probably more resistance to the over-organisation my associates and I proposed, voiced no strong objection. But we did talk them into the 'aided and mutual self-help' model from Puerto Rican manual that Eduardo had given me. All seven groups of the 140 participants accepted the idea that it would be quicker if they worked in groups to schedule. When it came to our designs for the houses, however, they said little. We come to know better, on both counts, as the project progressed.

Changes came rapidly—the first approach we had really was inappropriate and as we got working and talking together. So gradually, the relationship changed from being a passive one, where the participants said little and followed our instructions, to working things out together—with critically important help from the local builder we had contracted as an overseer, buyer and distributor of building materials.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Right.

**MR. TURNER:** In hindsight we could have done a great deal more with far less effort by allocating tranches of cash by stage: once you have your foundations in, you can get the next tranche for the walls and so until the work is complete. How you get your materials and how you organise the work is your business. A few years later that's just what Luis Marcial and I did in Lima, very successfully.

Did you ever know Luis Marcial? We were working together with INVI, the Instituto Nacional de Vivienda, a political creation designed to counteract the rather better organised and more professional Corporación Nacional de la Vivienda over which the politicians had little control. Some of the best examples that I was showing on the slides, the early sites and services and sites without services programmes, were planned and supervised by Ricardo Valega of the Corporación Nacional. Ricardo and his brother Manuel, who was Director of the Corporación, were really important innovators and pioneers. Of course, it was a minority effort. I doubt if the board as a whole fully approved.

**MR. CHAVEZ:** Let me interrupt you here for a minute, John. Do you know of any other countries where they were already experimenting with these types of things besides Peru at the time in the fifties?

**MR. TURNER:** Well, some projects along sites-and-services and assisted self-build lines were carried out in colonial Africa in the nineteen thirties. But I don't have more than second-hand references. Apart from the few somewhat paternalistic aided self-help housing projects in the USA during the New Deal era, and a larger programme under Tugwell in Puerto Rico in the forties, I know of no other comparable innovations until the sixties and seventies.