



## **Conversation with Huberth Méndez**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell me about your background and what you do?**

**Huberth Méndez:** My name Huberth Méndez. I'm an architect. I've been working in many fields from land planning to city management for the last eight years. I studied at a small school in Costa Rica, which is a small design/ architecture school that is very connected with the world. In my professional career, I have been working mainly on environmental issues. I was the head of an NGO called the Urban Development Foundation from 2008 to 2014 and then I joined the municipality of Curridabat, where I have been working on what you see here, a development vision for the city, which has a wellbeing core and a nature wellbeing core. I've worked with many institutions in Costa Rica and Central America, and also collaborated with the municipality of Curridabat with UN-Habitat and ICN and many others.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you for sharing your background. I love what I'm seeing on the screen. I can see nature is at the core, nature is in fact, in the center in bright red. Can you walk me through this organizational structure?**

**Huberth Méndez:** We, as many countries, have recognized governmental frameworks are not working for the better of all people, to improve the quality of life or tackle the crisis that we are facing. So we asked ourselves, how can we redesign public policy and redesign the governmental framework that we are using in order to have a broader impact on people and nature? At the core of it, today's practices in terms of government are very human-centered or money-centered. So in order to reframe it, we asked ourselves who are we supposed to be planning for? And in answering that question, we also found other issues to be addressed. For example, we found that if we gave citizenship to non-human characters in town (like nature) we'll find a deeper sense of purpose and a deeper sense of

commitment to really transform what life is in Curridabat. So we came up with another question, which is how can we add value to the planet instead of subtracting value from it?

**Ashley Hopkinson: That's a great question.**

**Huberth Méndez:** Yeah, because cities are mainly consumers, and are consumer-oriented in terms of resources and commerce and entertainment, it's where we live. But we are building a built environment, which is contrary to the patterns of nature. So we came up with this vision, we call it a development vision. It's not a project, it's more than a framework, but it is the development vision for Curridabat, and we call it Sweet City, inspired by pollinators. Pollinators are the source of inspiration for us, and we see them as the main producers of development in Curridabat. If we focus on natural processes and on non-human characters (like nature) or personas, we can have a broader impact on human actions as well. So we are closer to a regenerative paradigm than to an ideology or field of political ideologies.

**Ashley Hopkinson: The work around regeneration seems really action-oriented. And so it's not so much that you're not going to build but you're also going to try to create different design structures with nature and impact on nature in mind right?**

**Huberth Méndez:** This framework works from core dimensions, which you see here, nature, the connection with nature, with place, feelings, and with means of governance. We were inspired by the ecological system theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. And what we call these core dimensions, the connection framework, the connection dimensions, because we know that people and systems that are connected with nature, with the different types of places that coexist in a city, that are connected with the feelings of people and landscape and the public space, create a better city... We acknowledge that we are also a political institution so governance is key for us. Instead of a government from top down, we have a more horizontal view of city management.

We do not have orthodox approach to planning. So in the outer layer, we have experiences that we want to improve, experiences for human and non-human characters [like nature]. And those experiences happen to the inner core of the middle ring of the diagram, which are the personas, the water drop, the soil, single mothers, local bees, an elderly lady, a technology entrepreneur in Curridabat, for a teenage girl and a transgender woman. So these are the characters of the personas that we are planning for, and we know that if we improve their experiences in the city, we will also improve, let's say, the standard profile of citizens.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Is this what's most distinctive about the work? In terms of it's not just that nature is considered, but people's input in how they want to live and where they want to live? And then also you build these characters (personas) around it that are representative of real people who you want to consider when you're making these decisions?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Yes and many of the political aspirations that many governments present to people, they say they are working for people and they use characters on their political platforms, but once they arrive in government, they forget about it and use the same tools. So we also want to reframe the tools sufficiently to better reflect what happens to people in the territory.

**Ashley Hopkinson: So this framework, is this in action right now or this is something that you are working to put in action?**

**Huberth Méndez:** No, it has been in action from 2017 officially. Sweet City started as a project as the innovation team in Curridabat, which was working from 2014 to 2018. They developed a lot of pilots, and the main pilot was Sweet City. We decided to scale that up in 2017 and include that as a division for the municipal strategic plan. The municipal strategic plan is a five-year plan that governs all the actions of the municipality. Then for 2023, we decided to make the adjustments that we have learned during the first five years and developed this proposal. This is taking place today, and it's officially the vision of the town.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say has been your biggest insight or teachable lesson from doing this work that you think someone else can learn from—especially someone who might want to implement this?**

**Huberth Méndez:** What we see today in terms of global conflicts and global issues has to do a lot with the narrative, how through power, people impose their narrative. So we decided to develop a narrative from down to top with the people, with nature, allowing science to speak for nature and develop a narrative that is closer to the people than the additional planning paradigms, mainly strategic planning, which is very useful for institutions, but does not communicate well with people. Narrative is a key learning. To develop a narrative that connects with people is one of the most successful things because people easily know or relate with a Sweet City and not with a highly developed city. Also, shifting paradigms. We know that with the information that we have now, for example, the experience of the water dropping in Curridabat, we can describe now the experience of the water drop, and we can improve the experience for the water drop ... in terms of taking care of the water sources that lies in Curridabat. We know that we have to redesign probably all of our infrastructure or water

management infrastructure in order to be more water conscious and water drop conscious in terms of the archetype.

**Ashley Hopkinson: It's phenomenal that you've been able to accomplish something at this scale. But what challenges have you faced in creating this work and also in continuing to be someone with an architecture background that's thinking so heavily about the environment?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Actually, the last experience that we designed, which is the Sweet organizational culture, had to deal with those challenges because at the beginning, in 2017, the vision was very focused and enclosed at the city hall, at the mayor's office. But we know, and we have learned that if we do not involve all the people at the municipality and ask them to add value to the vision, we will not have success. And we will not overcome institutional (issues) and legal issues in terms of infrastructure. If people are not convinced and motivated to add value to their town, we will probably not be as successful as we feel where we are today. Also, the world is in a very unusual political place. We are very polarized. Everyone is apart and yelling from a very large distance to each other, but no one is close enough to speak. During the last two political terms in Curridabat, we have mainly agreed on all decisions to approve this plan and promote what the vision promotes. But there's always a chance of political instability during a new administration. The administration will start on May 1st, and we have been affected by the political status of the world.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, it's becoming increasingly difficult to bring people together.**

**Huberth Méndez:** Yes, everywhere.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I think Pura Vida, when I think of Costa Rica. As a professor of architecture have you seen a shift in the conversation around built environments that you find inspiring?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Actually, that has to do with what you said about Pura Vida, let's say this image of Costa Rica. But if we look closer to the data, we have the most beautiful conservation areas and the Eastland cocoa and everything, we have that image, we still have that. But if we compare conservation areas to urban areas, the environmental performance of urban areas in Costa Rica are very poor. If we look very hard at what we are doing, we have almost 6% of global biodiversity, but we have been treating only 6% of our sewage. Numbers can be manipulated, but if you look at the data, it's close to 6%. So there's a big contradiction between where we live and what we see from Costa Rica. This vision tries to overcome that ...to look beyond 2030. We can see cities behaving as nature, not as cities imposing on nature, promoting ecological connectivity, managing water in the ways nature does, preventing heat waves with nature and with the local and adapted biodiversity of every town. We use a

methodology that was developed between the 40s and the 60s, which is the Holdridge life zones system, that describes around the world, every live zone according to climate, to height, to the status of the rain. This is a more accurate goal to restore the planet back to what Holdridge described than what the IPCC –Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change– is promoting (regarding) our carbon footprint. If we're only focused on our carbon footprint and not on wellbeing, not on justice, and not justice also for nature, nature has its own rights (then it's incomplete). We can aim higher. That is what we are pushing other municipalities to do.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders, decision makers, people in this field can do to improve collaboration and advance progress in this particular area?**

**Huberth Méndez:** It's hard to do that in terms of how you can collaborate on a multidimensional level with the other branches of government... We have been working with many municipalities, but we have sadly not overcome those barriers. This effort is very young, 2015 to now. And real changes need almost a generation to be implemented. But we also are in dire need to accelerate things, accelerate the way we approach problems and tackle problems. But there's a lot of things that we are doing... We cooperate with IUCN, the International Union for Nature Conservancy, UN-Habitat with Central American governments, with Chilean governments, and also with Mexican governments. But in Costa Rica, the impact is recognized, but it has not been implemented in the same way or in a parallel way like we are doing. Probably in this new term, other municipalities will be closer to what Curridabat has been doing, not with the same brands or the same experiences, but keeping nature at the core.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Let's pivot to the design aspect of this work. Let's say you're not talking to your average architecture colleagues, you're talking to the community and you're saying design has a place in wellbeing economics. How would you describe that significance to people?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Actually, the answer is here in this paradigm, in this model. That's why we have designed the “aesthetic dignity” experience, because dignity is a matter of justice, a matter of accessibility. Every person no matter where they live or their condition, whether they are legal or not legal, they are human beings at the end. And we decided to cross design through every action, because we know that everything that considers the experience of the people considers all the variables and will display a better architectural spatial solution for people. So in terms of how we can redesign, we have a lot of participatory processes.

**Ashley Hopkinson: OK so with the communities?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Yes, with the communities, but there are also a lot of lessons learned from those processes because we don't have the tools institutionally to implement those solutions in a fast way, to deliver solutions in less than a year. So these participatory processes have produced a lot of expectation from the communities, but the solutions came in one to two years and ...other larger projects in seven years. So the process from implementation to impact is very, very, very hard. We have learned a lot from these participatory processes that have also affected the way we approach communities.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say you learned from the process that was successful?**

**Huberth Méndez:** In community processes, what has been successful is to give responsibilities to communities. Not only use communities as a tool to collect information, but they also have to be in charge of some part of the process. That has also been empowering for communities...not just to be solutions, but to propose solutions. We have also been successful in terms of how people learn from what we are doing as pilots in terms of public space redesign. People are asking us to use those same pilots in their communities. Those pilots promote connectivity, ecological connectivity, a focus on water sensitive issues, and heat island management. So by example, and with the approval and demand from communities, we are reaching more people and more territory with this vision in Curridabat.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say gives you the most hope about this sector improving? Especially as you're teaching and you're reaching the next generation of architects. Do you see architecture playing a bigger role in wellbeing?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Well, the thing is that we are always in a transition. We don't actually know what the future will look like. But the amount of interest, the amount of research taking place, not only in Curridabat, but in Costa Rica in urban areas, it motivates me to say that we are on the right track. We probably need more funding to accelerate what needs to be happening. But the new generations, especially those students in my field who are most interested in terms of wellbeing, in terms of holistic wellbeing and nature rights, and these types of issues, will have a better chance to implement projects in a positive way in the future.

**Ashley Hopkinson: In your work you use a lot of personas to represent groups and you speak a lot to the participatory process. I know you briefly touched on this but can you share more about that?**

**Huberth Méndez:** The participatory processes have shifted from an intensive participatory process to meeting with the community (twice a month) to assess how they are doing, and ask them what their priorities are for now, even though we have a long-term plan. What we have learned from these participatory issues is that we need to be more present, not only during the participatory processes. So we decided to shift from a team that only works there for a couple of months to a new area of the municipality, which is called Culture of Peace. They have to deal with a lot of social violence issues at the community level. We don't want to have police, but we need to have community activists and community managers to promote solutions in a peaceful way. And we also have learned that most of the problems in the community are not necessarily the built environment, but behavioral issues and communication issues. This unit, the Culture of Peace office, is in charge of that. So we decided to go from, let's say, a specific process to mainly to design solutions to a process to promote coexistence in communities.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Earlier you mentioned “aesthetic dignity” and the importance of that for everyone. If I lived in a building that had aesthetic dignity. What would I see or experience? Could you describe for me what that might look like?**

**Huberth Méndez:** Yes, that actually depends on every life zone. You cannot use the same recipe for every town or for every country. That is what's happening in architecture during the last 100 years. And that's why most of our energy goes to heating or cooling our buildings. So what you see in Curridabat is actually greener, greener facades, greener roofs, probably taller buildings in our case, because we are very small and we need to make the best out of our territory. You will also see less cars, more public transportation, and in a better served way. Every community, every small town, every barrio needs to solve the educational problems, the commercial accessibility to goods and to fresh food... Curridabat is getting very, very hot in terms of superficial temperature. That is probably one of the stages of that transition that the world is making, but we are at a crossroads.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much. This has been a great conversation.**

**Huberth Méndez:** No, thanks to you, and I hope the best for the effort and for what you're doing.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I appreciate that, thank you.**

*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.*