



Specific Ambiguity: On Tropical Space and the Dissolution of the Interior / Ambigüedad Específica: Sobre el Espacio Tropical y la Disolución del Interior

This article explores the dissolution of the architectural interior through the lens of tropical architecture, proposing the notion of specific ambiguity as a mode of practice and thought situated in the equatorial condition. Drawing on professional and theoretical research, it argues that in the tropics, comfort is not achieved through insulation or mechanical control, but through negotiation—an ongoing calibration between body, climate, and matter, mediated by spatial disposition. The text situates this understanding within the broader critique of modernity's disciplinary isolation, where the interior became a symbol of separation from the world. By revisiting vernacular and contemporary practices across tropical geographies, it suggests that architecture can reclaim environmental intelligence through porous, transitional spaces that expand the notion of the interior into the atmospheric and territorial. Ultimately, the tropical condition is framed not as an exotic exception, but as a critical paradigm and vibrant architecture laboratory from which to rethink comfort, sustainability, and architectural ethics in the context of planetary crisis.

Keywords: tropical architecture; specific ambiguity; comfort; climate; interiority; environmental ethics



Este artículo explora la disolución del interior arquitectónico desde la perspectiva de la arquitectura tropical, proponiendo la noción de ambigüedad específica como modo de práctica y pensamiento situado en la condición ecuatorial. A partir de la investigación profesional y teórica, se sostiene que en los trópicos el confort no se logra mediante el aislamiento térmico ni el control mecánico, sino mediante la negociación de los límites y el intercambio entre interior y exterior. Esta es una calibración continua entre cuerpo, clima y materia. El texto sitúa esta comprensión dentro de la crítica más amplia a la autonomía disciplinar de la modernidad, donde el interior se convirtió en símbolo de separación del mundo gracias a la posibilidad de la climatización mecánica. Al revisar prácticas vernáculas y contemporáneas en geografías tropicales, se sugiere que la arquitectura puede recuperar una inteligencia ambiental a través de espacios porosos y transicionales que expanden la noción de interior hacia lo atmosférico y lo territorial. Finalmente, se plantea la condición tropical como un laboratorio vibrante para la arquitectura, no como excepción exótica, sino como paradigma crítico desde el cual repensar el confort, la sostenibilidad y la ética arquitectónica en el contexto de la crisis planetaria.

Palabras clave: arquitectura tropical; ambigüedad específica; confort; clima; interioridad; ética ambiental

01. Introduction — The Comfort Paradox

Modern architecture has long defined itself through the capacity to produce interiority, with one purpose: to culturally construct an idea of comfort through the power to insulate, to separate, and to regulate. The interior became the ultimate architectural product—a sealed environment that embodies control over temperature, light, sound, and even social behavior, a climatized bubble. Yet this control has come at the cost of detachment. The disciplinary project that once promised emancipation through technique has instead generated a form of discomfort masked as comfort, an anesthetized condition that I have elsewhere called being comfortably numb. Architecture's historic pursuit of comfort has thus coincided with the neutralization of its relationship to the world, its isolation, its objectification.

In tropical geographies, this paradox is exposed most vividly. Here, climate is not a variable to be neutralized but a constant interlocutor; space is formed not by exclusion but by negotiation. The modern idea of comfort—an equilibrium secured through mechanical mediation—fails under the weight of humidity, radiation, and social density. Buildings that attempt to reproduce temperate ideals of enclosure become both technically and culturally alien and most often unnecessary. In contrast, tropical practices across Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia have historically evolved forms of specific ambiguity: architectures that remain open yet inhabitable, exposed yet intimate, unstable yet precise in their environmental intelligence, and surely, an architecture made of specific elements, easy to read, but ambiguous in its spatial definition, an architecture that forces you to think, to realize where you are and be present, in time and in its experience.

The present article builds on that observation to ask: What happens to architecture when the interior dissolves? How can tropical space—its verandas, courtyards, and shaded thresholds—inform a broader redefinition of comfort and sustainability beyond the disciplinary tropics? The aim is not to celebrate regional identity or climatic determinism but to examine how these conditions unsettle the modern hierarchy between inside and outside, nature and culture, control and adaptation. In other words, to pay attention and work with transitions rather than destinations, to pay attention to spaces located in between conditions, rather than self-referential spaces.

By situating the tropical condition as a laboratory of negotiation rather than enclosure, the paper argues for a relational model of architecture, one that understands climate as collaborator, not antagonist. Through this lens, comfort becomes less a fixed standard and more an evolving conversation between material, atmosphere, and body, mediated by spatial disposition and its organization.



Fig. 1. Patio, Corridor and eave in vernacular old house in Rionegro, Antioquia, Colombia.



Fig. 2. Orquideorama, Medellín, Colombia
.Photos: Cristobal Palma. Camilo Restrepo
Ochoa with J.Paul Restrepo and Plan B, 2006

02. Theoretical Framework — Toward a Dissolution of the Interior

The history of comfort in architecture is inseparable from the history of energy. As Luis Fernández-Galiano reminds us in *Fire and Memory* (2000), the built environment has always been a mechanism for transforming energy flows into habitable order. The hearth, the stove, the radiator, and the air conditioner represent successive stages in this domestication of climate. Yet as mechanical systems replaced spatial intelligence, the architectural interior became an increasingly abstract construct, defined less by geometry or form than by a will to control and spatial homogenization. Reyner Banham's *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1969) identified this shift, tracing how technology displaced design as the mediator between body and climate. Forcing architecture to lose part of its ethical and territorial grounding; the interior became a bubble of regulated neutrality, a support for machinery, and less of a space for enjoyment.

Beyond technique, interiority also carries ideological weight. Scholars such as Mark Wigley and Suzie Attiwill have interpreted the interior as a cultural apparatus that reflects modern subjectivity—the self as bounded, autonomous, and protected. Peter Sloterdijk's theory of spheres - bubbles - further elaborates this notion, describing interiors as micro-climates of existence where individuals construct artificial

atmospheres of security. In this sense, the interior is not simply a physical space but a psychopolitical technology, an act and action that mirrors and reinforces the desire for separation. Within the colonial and postcolonial tropics, this desire produced a persistent tension: imported architectural models sought enclosure where climate and culture demanded permeability, bubbles versus pores.

The tropical condition rejects this ideology. Here, the boundary between interior and exterior is porous by necessity, and comfort depends on the ability to dwell within gradients of exposure, in the administration of limits and environmental filters. From the shaded zaguán of the Andean house to the veranda of the Caribbean plantation, the tropics have developed architectures that oscillate between shelter and openness. Rather than a deficiency to be corrected, this ambiguity constitutes a sophisticated environmental response—one that integrates thermal, social, and aesthetic dimensions. Such practices reveal a plural ecology of design, where adaptation replaces control and context becomes constitutive rather than decorative.



Fig. 3. Zaguán entrance in old house in Santa Fé de Antioquia, Antioquia, Colombia



Fig. 4. Our Lord of Tula Shrine, Jojutla, Mexico.
Photos: All Sandra Perez Nieto. Except T Magazine, Rafael Gamo

Camilo Restrepo Ochoa with Dellekamp / Schleich,
2017-2020

What makes sense is not the spaces as destination, either for the program to evolve or unfold, but rather the spaces “between” programs, the intermediate spaces that not only calibrate and “tune” the atmosphere and its spatial reaction as climatic filters, but also as transitions. In other words, and under a different logic, what comes first is not the spaces to be dwelled, but all the apparatus needed to make these spaces to breathe naturally, to be multi referential in its relationships with the exterior and within itself. The zaguán not only connects the entrance with the patio or the private areas of the house, but it is also the “horizontal shaft” to absorb air from the street and bring it in. And within this action to establish a connecting space that does not belong to the interior, either to the exterior, becoming a limit that is constantly negotiated, between the private and the public. Is the way the domestic unfolds into the city, and the public permeates the private.

Within this continuum, I use the term specific ambiguity to describe a mode of architectural reasoning that resists the binary logics of modernity. It acknowledges the impossibility of total control and instead embraces uncertainty as a productive tool. The specificity lies in the attunement to local material, social, and climatic conditions as much as the specificity of architectural elements that are strategically used, in it, a column is seen as a column, a beam as a beam, there is no coverage or disguise of architectural elements, up to the point where structure is form, and all elements are necessary, rejecting surplus or scarcity, it is organized through the sufficient amount of elements to produce a space that allows actions by its users out of the imagination of the architects, but at the same time keeps its identity and allows it to be contingent; and remarkably allowing the ambiguity to lie in the refusal to fix boundaries.



Fig. 5. Vernacular coffee wet mill from early XX century, Tarso, Antioquia, Colombia



Fig. 6. Pílares, Mexico City. Camilo Restrepo Ochoa AGENDa with: TO arquitectos and UDEB arquitectos. Photos: Jaime Navarro

This approach does not reject modernity but recalibrates it through exposure, allowing architecture to act as a porous mediator between human intention and environmental contingency. In this sense, the tropical is not a style or geography but a methodological stance—an ethics of relation and a particular way of making space of putting things together.

The dissolution of the interior, then, is not the disappearance of architecture but its expansion. When walls cease to define inhabitation, other elements—air, vegetation, humidity, light—take on architectural agency. The interior becomes atmospheric rather than geometric, relational rather than bounded.

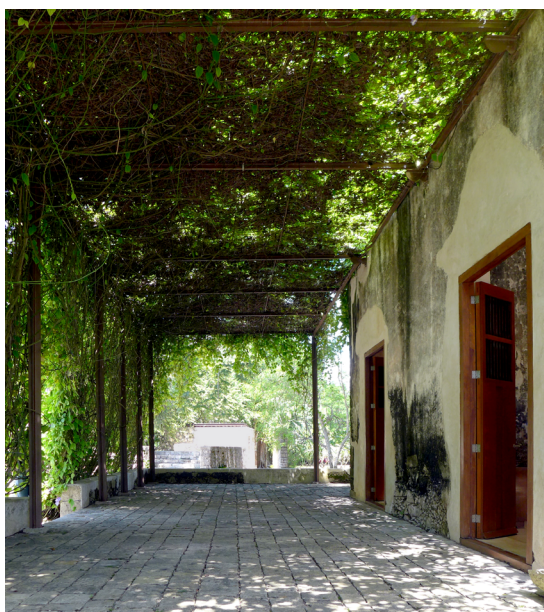


Fig. 7. Pergola in Yucatán hacienda, Mexico.



Fig. 8 y 9. Pílares, Mexico City. Camilo Restrepo Ochoa AGENdA with: TO arquitectos and UDEB arquitectos. Photos: Jaime Navarro

But this atmospheric condition cannot be mistaken or understood as phenomenology. It is certainly not about that. Phenomenology privileges the individual perceptual experience of space, often grounding architecture in the sensory, affective, or embodied encounter of a subject with its environment. In contrast, the approach adopted here follows Ernesto Rogers' notion of *ambiente*, which understands environment not as a personal horizon of perception but as a collective, material, and cultural field where climatic, social and territorial conditions co-produce forms of inhabitation. Rather than focusing on how space is experienced, the argument centers on how practices, constructions and exposures generate an ambient intelligence, a situated form of world-making that emerges from climate, matter and use. This shift opens a space for rethinking sustainability, not as optimization but as coexistence, as doing what is possible with what is available. The tropical example makes visible what the temperate modern project had repressed: that architecture is always contingent, always in dialogue with forces that exceed it, producing a generous and more public architecture.

03. Methodology — Between Practice and Reflection

This article does not emerge from empirical research in the conventional scientific sense, but from the intersection of architectural practice, observation, and conceptual reflection. Its method is grounded in what I call situated reasoning: an approach that privileges the specific conditions of climate, geography, and social life as the framework within which design operates. The aim is not to generalize principles but to articulate concepts derived from lived and constructed experience in the tropics.

The discussion draws from a combination of sources: direct engagement with projects realized in equatorial contexts; comparative readings of historical and contemporary references; and theoretical reflections articulated through writing, teaching, and public discourse, including my own previous essays such as *Comfortably Numb*. Rather than separating design from theory, this approach assumes their reciprocity. To design in the tropics is already to theorize through matter; to theorize from the tropics is to design concepts that respond to humidity, radiation, and collective life. The methodology is therefore interpretive and critical, guided by the ambition to expose how architecture—under conditions of climatic immediacy—redefines its disciplinary boundaries.

This interpretive stance aligns with a hermeneutic–analytical method rather than with empirical or phenomenological approaches.

04. Analysis — The Idea of Tropical Space

It is important to have distance from the cliché and the temptation of relating topicality with the idea of the exotic. The tropic in its conditions is no longer a sublimation of adventure, beauty and nature. It is a place with its own rationale, its own possibilities and constraints. Under those precisions, its fundamental to acknowledge its small variations, even though every day may look the same and temperature and climate variations can be radical. From 2 C in the morning to 30C in the afternoon.

The tropics have historically resisted the dichotomy between interior and exterior. The environmental conditions—heat, humidity, intense radiation, and cyclical rain—create an atmosphere where enclosure becomes undesirable and, often, unfeasible. Instead, architecture develops around the modulation of exposure. Courtyards, verandas, patios, and porticos emerge not as intermediate spaces between two stable states, but as primary sites of inhabitation. They constitute the social and thermal core of life, places where the boundary becomes gradient rather than line.



Fig. 10. Small vernacular shade used for cattle in Honda, Tolima, Colombia

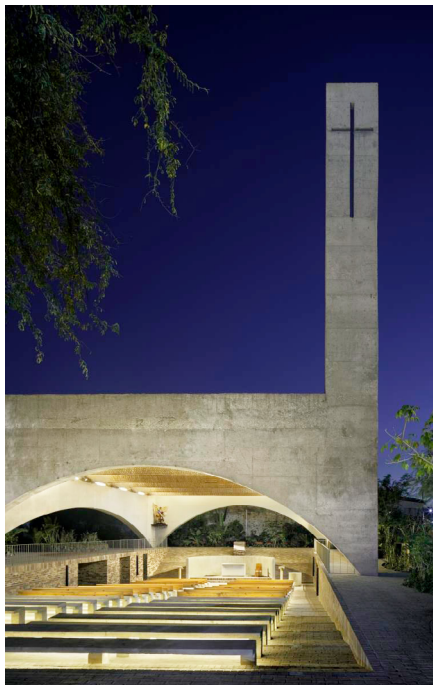


Fig. 11. Our Lord of Tula Shrine, Jojutla, Mexico. Photos: All Sandra Perez Nieto. Except T Magazine, Rafael Gamo

Camilo Restrepo Ochoa with Dellekamp /
Schleich, 2017-2020

In this sense, tropical space is not the negation of interiority, but its expansion into the environmental continuum. The veranda does not mediate between inside and outside; it is the space of dwelling. The courtyard does not separate private from public; it stages their coexistence. Such spaces operate through oscillation—between light and shade, intimacy and exposure, architecture and vegetation. They materialize the condition of specific ambiguity.

Vernacular architectures across tropical geographies share a logic of passive adaptation that modern design often overlooks. Thick walls with perforations, elevated floors, expansive eaves, and cross-ventilation strategies demonstrate a profound understanding of environmental flow. Yet beyond technical ingenuity lies an equally important social intelligence: the capacity of these forms to sustain collective life through openness. The *zaguán* or *corredor* in traditional Antioquian houses functions simultaneously as climatic device, social interface, and threshold of privacy. It embodies the convergence of environmental and cultural systems without privileging one over the other. This is not merely a bioclimatic question, nor reducible to thermodynamics, or just the tempering of climate through architecture, is about a different order, a different logic of how to organize and define space; if for Le Corbusier was the joyful and beautiful play of volumes under the sun, for us the question and matter is how this volumes can become porous, contingent, and above all, have the ability to resonate in its specific condition.



Fig. 12. Eave and corridor at vernacular coffee wet mill from early XX century, Tarso, Antioquia, Colombia

The transplantation of modern architectural ideals to the tropics in the twentieth century marked a moment of conceptual dislocation. The universalist vocabulary of white boxes, glass façades, and sealed interiors proved incompatible with tropical realities. Mechanical systems replaced the intelligence of spatial porosity; architecture became dependent on energy rather than environment. The imported comfort of the temperate world—air-conditioned, hermetic, luminous—became an emblem of alienation. The response to this failure has been uneven. While some regionalist movements reintroduced vernacular motifs as identity markers, few transformed the epistemological foundations of design. To think tropically is not to reproduce images of the tropics, but to assume a different relation to uncertainty, temporality, and matter.

05. Specific Ambiguity and the Dissolution of the Interior

Specific ambiguity describes a design intelligence of negotiation, where form is determined by the coexistence of conflicting forces rather than their resolution. It is both precise and indeterminate, attuned to the specificities of place yet open to transformation. In practice, this manifests as an architecture less about boundaries and more about rhythms: the rhythm of light filtering through slatted screens, the pulse of humidity absorbed and released by porous materials, the alternation between human and vegetal occupation, that once calibrated properly, does not seek to be understood, experienced or depicted as phenomenology, but architecture as a device of confluence, similar to the resonance box proposed by Juan Navarro Baldeweg¹, rather than the more superficial chain of sensory correspondences discussed by authors like Pallasmaa².



Fig. 13. Perimeter corridor in Calle 10b Housing, Medellín. Camilo Restrepo Ochoa and J.Paul Restrepo.

This architecture demands movement from its inhabitants, because space is not absolute, it cannot be grasped or perceived as a static entity, it is more similar to the hut, where relations are all around rather than the cave, which is more self-referential. Here, comfort emerges not as a static condition but as an evolving dialogue between body and climate. The building becomes a mediator of flows rather than a fortress against them. This approach displaces the architect's authority from author to negotiator, aligning with broader posthuman and ecological perspectives that question anthropocentric control.

The dissolution of the interior also carries political resonance. In societies marked by inequality and segregation, the idea of the enclosed, private, and individualized space mirrors social fragmentation. The tropical openness, whether in the form of communal patios, public verandas, or shaded marketplaces, suggests an alternative politics of inhabitation based on shared exposure. To inhabit without interiors is not to reject protection, but to redefine it as reciprocity rather than withdrawal. It implies trust in the collective and in the environment—conditions often excluded from the modern architectural imagination. The dissolution of interior requires mediation, often through types or filters, a patio, an eave or a brise-soleil; these elements are usually a transitional buffer between inside and outside, hard to control, and most of the times creating a liminal space of difficult definition, and within that condition, a more public and generous space appears. An eave to protect pedestrians from rain or sun, a brise-soleil that operated as a canopy, or a non-programmatic corridor that mediates between the facade and the interior. The tropical condition becomes an ethical proposition: to build as one breathes, acknowledging the inevitability of exchange. Architecture ceases to be an object of isolation and becomes a field of relationships, where thresholds are not limits but instruments of care.

Comfort, as traditionally conceived, equates with predictability and control. The tropical experience redefines it as adaptation—the ability to remain at ease amid variability. Shade replaces insulation; air replaces glass; rhythm replaces regulation. To be comfortable, then, is to be in relation, to inhabit the world rather than stand apart from it. In dissolving the architectural interior, the tropics remind us that comfort does not require enclosure, and that climate, far from being an external threat, can become an architectural ally. This recognition marks a shift from design as domination to design as dialogue.

06. Discussion — Architecture Without Interiors

The notion of architecture without interiors does not imply a return to primitivism or a romantic dissolution of the built form. It signals a critical reorientation: from enclosure to relation, from isolation to exposure, from control to negotiation. In the tropical context, this transformation is lived; it defines how architecture operates as a mediator of gradients—of temperature, light, sound, and social proximity.

The dissolution of the interior forces architecture to confront its own disciplinary mythology. For more than a century, modernity equated progress with the ability to exclude the world. Walls became membranes of separation; technology promised immunity. Yet this promise has collapsed under environmental and cultural pressure. The climate crisis exposes the unsustainability of sealed environments, while social fragmentation reveals the ethical limits of withdrawal. In both cases, the architectural interior becomes untenable—not only as a spatial device but as a cultural ideal.

Against this background, the tropical condition emerges not as a periphery to be corrected but as a laboratory of resistance and renewal. The ambiguity of its spaces—the veranda that belongs to both house and street, the patio that belongs to both sky and ground—offers models of coexistence rather than domination. These are not aesthetic gestures; they are ethical propositions embedded in form. The veranda teaches permeability, the patio teaches reciprocity, the pergola teaches temporality. Each of these spaces embodies an alternative definition of comfort: not the elimination of difference, but the capacity to live with it.

From a theoretical perspective, this shift resonates with the recent turn in architectural thought toward relational ontologies and ecological humanism. Thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti have emphasized the agency of nonhuman actors and the interdependence of material systems. Within this framework, architecture without interiors can be read as an ecological practice—one that does not attempt to master the environment but to inhabit its dynamics. The tropical example materializes this ontology through built form: shade, humidity, and vegetation become active participants in design.

Beyond ecology, there is a political lesson. The openness of tropical space challenges the modern cult of privacy and ownership. By dissolving the interior, architecture questions the social hierarchies that the interior historically sustained—the segregation between servants and masters, between public and private, between human and nature. To dwell in ambiguity is to accept proximity, to negotiate boundaries continually. This condition, far from weakening architecture, reclaims its civic dimension: the capacity to host collective life in all its complexity.

07. Conclusions — Ethics of Exposure

To think of architecture without interiors is to imagine a discipline no longer defined by protection alone but by responsiveness and contingency. The tropical experience demonstrates that exposure can be a form of intelligence; that ambiguity, when specific, can yield precision; and that comfort, when negotiated, can become ethical.

The dissolution of the interior is not the disappearance of architecture but its expansion—toward the atmospheric, the climatic, and the territorial. It invites architects to design not only with materials but with air, shade, time, and relation in a non-over-programmatic way. Such an expansion requires humility: an acknowledgment that architecture is not autonomous but contingent, that its boundaries are porous, and that its success depends on the quality of its exchanges.

In this sense, tropical architecture offers more than regional knowledge—it proposes a universal critique of modern comfort. The equatorial condition becomes a site for rethinking global architectural ethics in the face of ecological instability. Its lesson is simple yet profound: the future of architecture may depend less on perfecting the interior than on learning to inhabit the world in a shift of our idea of comfort and wellbeing.

Ultimately, to build without interiors is not to renounce the discipline but to redefine its generosity. It is to design spaces that breathe, adapt, and connect; to accept the discomfort of openness as a necessary condition of contemporary life. In this exposure lies a new form of comfort—one grounded not in insulation, but in relation.

Figures

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