Good morning. Thank You.

Thanks to the Charles Correa Foundation for inviting me. Deep thanks for Nondita Correa and her team for making possible for me to be here - even if I'm not, good morning from Mexico City. It is for me a true honour to be able to share this morning a bit of my vision and my approach to one of the very urgent crisis we are fronting today in my country. And that is a housing crisis. I decided to title this ‘A house is not just a house’ for a book recently published by GSAPP at the University of Colombia, that contains an essay by Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco with a lot of data, very interesting data, that I’m going to cite constantly during this lecture.

I wanted to talk about this crisis we are living in because I believe that the crisis is going to impact deeply socially and politically in a few years. And it's time to do something because the process is reversible although the damage is done, the future is then yet to come. Housing is a human right. It should be but it’s not. Housing is not a human right. But one of the few countries where housing is a constitutional right, it is in Mexico. Other countries imply general responsibilities towards living conditions and others follow international guidelines. But in Mexico, it is a constitutional right. The government task is to provide housing, according to the constitution. Every Mexican has the right to enjoy dignified and decent housing. This is a country of 120 million people. That’s a lot to house. The largest percentage of the population live in urban settlements. Almost 70% of the population is concentrated in urban areas and 20% of it lives only in Mexico city. Obviously, housing all that people - it is almost an impossible task. To provide housing according to the constitution has then become one of the most important tasks for every government, through every single year, since the constitution in 1970s. In the beginning, this translated into an article that mandate employers to open access to employees to low cost housing combined with a governmental mandate to build housing and housing units that would provide that. Many examples of amazing spaces were created then. In the 40s, 50s, 60s, modern ideas of creating housing responsible, low cost housing, connected, embedded in the urban tissue, connected with infrastructure, services, cultural institutions around, providing health, education, work for people that had low income was a task that it was said as an important one. A lot of really incredible places that still today, very liveable, were built at that time. Architects were involved in the process of designing, thinking, conceiving and doing these things.
Tlatelolco, being one of the most representative ones, held almost a 10,000 unit complex with services all over to provide housing at low cost for many, many people. Although the system really tackled one of the constitutional rights in the country, providing dignified and decent housing for a lot of people, it was not clear by the 70s that this system was going to be able to fulfil the demand. Already the demand was overdue but the demand was not even covering the demand that was ongoing every year of …1 million dwellings per year. No doubt they were producing a lot and no doubt they were creating something very interesting. But they needed to find a financial system that would allow them to do and then the **Infonavit** was created. At the time where the last of these enclaves were produced and built, Infonavit was created at the same time of the neo-liberalisation of the economy in the country. At this moment, the combination of that the increase in population, the decrease in income, the increase in poverty levels and the decrease of access to education, sanitation and for the majority of the population, happened at the same time. Then the Infonavit was created with one task - to be able to provide a financial system that would be able to produce more houses. To be able to open system that would be trying to address the lack of housing. And therefore fulfil the governmental task about that the constitution mandate. It took very long time to be able to enhance this system but it started to become pressive, it started to become urgent.

In 2000, President Vincente Fox decided that Mexico needed 3 million new homes a year. So he put money into the situation and the solution found a new system, of creating rows of houses with no connections to cities to be able to produce that. I don’t know where was it - the hen or the chicken, what was first, the egg or the hen or the chicken - was it the necessity of all of us to have a dream house. To become part of this modern life. To be part of this future that the world was projecting. Was it the ideal in our heads of having a house surrounded by lawn; to have the perfect family; to have Sundays with your kids in the garden. Was the possibility of living in a suburban life what fuelled this system or was the really the system that was only the possibility given due to the economical fact. I don’t know. Either there were many examples to refer to of places that offered these ideal housing situation for a low cost. Levittown solved it very quickly and very easily. All of a sudden, in the whole world, there were these suburbs of houses in these idyllic places living this idyllic life to provide housing for many. Unfortunately that happens when you have an idyllic surrounding and a situation, an accommodated situation, where you can transport yourself to, to find education for your kids, to find jobs for yourself, to find health for your family. But when these places are totally disconnected from the infrastructure and just laid down in the landscape, they become a real prison. You don’t have access to education, you don’t have
access to infrastructure, you don't have access to jobs. You started creating them in that community. But it's not enough.

As I said, I don’t know what came first - the idea of this idyllic life or the solution for this big problem. Houses were sold in millions. Houses, to then, Infonavit has given one credit of those four that are out there in Mexico. Houses that it might come in rainbow colours or in pastel colours. Boxes laid out in the landscape with different shapes. But that doesn’t mean they are giving the opportunity for people to have a decent and dignified housing situation. Boxes painted in colours arrayed in beautiful landscapes don’t create a living. They, it might sound idyllic that you live in the outskirts of a mountain but when its a box of 43 square meters, identical to 60,000 others surrounding you, with no connections to the cities, with no infrastructure around, with no education around, with no jobs around and when you spend half of your salary in arriving into your house, it becomes a nightmare. But wait, it's not just that that you have to trespass to get to your house. When you arrive there, you realise that there is really complete abandonment of any public space that is there. There is no possibilities for these municipalities that when they had 2000 inhabitants to hold now 60000 households and maintain them. It's impossible that the speed of the system catches up to provide tax income for these communities to really be able to maintain themselves. So forget about security, I mean police - they don’t exist. If, if barely there’s a system of community, of taking care of each other. But there’s no urbanisation possible within these situations. People, obviously, that are trapped in this system have started to make their lives possible in these places. And a lot of people still remain. But unfortunately, in the last six years these units have lost almost 40% of their population. This means they have, we have, up to 8 million housings built, not occupied. ‘Houses stand empty while homelessness grow. Who makes the profit. Somebody knows’!

And yes, there were many developers doing this in the outskirts of cities that became an incredibly productive financial system. They were making huge profit while fulfilling the demand of governments of producing housing in numbers. Millions of them. Through the years. But the process neglected almost everything else. And just producing boxes in faraway places to let's say, producer right, to enjoy dignified and decent housing. People needing to commute for three hours to their jobs - and the commute is not easy, it's not a train ride. It is not just one or two stops in the subway. It is probably three to four or five even mediums of transport - walking, juggling into urban landscapes, making lines, jumping into terrified public transport system that is very costly. Then to arrive only to your poor paid job. This is not providing what the, what the country states in the constitution - decent and
dignified housing. And this happens in millions. In every belt, outskirt belt of every city in the country. The situation, the urban situation, is also getting very oppressing. Right now, developers are deciding where the city is growing. Not only that, they create poles of development, the city has to arrive there providing services when it was not planned. Instead, we’re not thinking on how the future of these places should be - more compacted, more serviced areas that help each other to create an ecosystem. We’re creating suburbs of useless spaces and houses and empty houses with services that arrive informally and then probably, staying there forever.

But I think one of the most urgent situations to solve - its a very basic human need. Humans, need first, to have health. Secondly, to have a refugee. Then third, to have an identity. That refugee helps a lot when the only thing you have is that. What if you have a house that is identical to 60000 surrounding you. Its difficult to create your own identity. If that is the only possibility of identification for an individual, its very hard that that individual can develop a life of its own. It’s very difficult that they can create a life, a family, in a place where they can share with neighbours and have a beautiful life as they imagined. When you are just a number in a box, you can as well be just a pile of bricks, or a pile of junk or a product in a supermarket. Its urgent that we think that a house also gives identity to a person. Then, why don’t we think not only about the box as outside the box. How do we place them and what is around. Those are the subjects that we started tackling in the beginning when we started, almost my entire professional life I have dedicated to this thinking. And it was not until I had the opportunity to really act that I really was able to get myself immersed in the system, that I was able to understand what were the possible solutions. They seem obvious and when obviously, when I arrived the first time to an institution to give my ideas, the door was shut in my face. Because the solutions sound obvious to all of us, I mean why would you live in a box if you are able to live in a city with all the services around. But if you are not able, how then you can create a life around it.

So we started fighting for projects even though we didn’t have the perfect conditions to work. But we thought it was good to start placing seeds into these places. One of the projects was this one where the challenge was to provide housing for, emergency housing for 600 families. There was a mudslide in this little town in a city named Angangueo and a state named Michoacán that lost nearly 600 houses of the village. Unfortunately, also there were lives lost. So the government needed to respond and they had a plan. Superfast, they came up with the super easy perfect plan of just levelling the topography, arraying streets and
building boxes. We entered and we fight to get the possibility to allow these people to have a different life. We were giving the possibility of designing the urban situation of these houses. They said but the house is designed, and you have to deal with it. We decided to go for it because we understood that also the possibility of only having a surrounding adapted to the topography, to the geography to the geometry, to the culture, to the social life, to the social possibilities, would be already a lot. So we decided to create a little village, a little village around a centre, exactly the same way these people used to live. They have a town that is very unified, has a community, a sense of appurtenance that gives identity to all of these people. The house, yes, the house could have been better but we decided to use it in different ways. So we said, OK that's the design. That's the unit. We can use it as a unit. We aggregated it when we need more density. We disaggregated it when we need less density. And this way, we create moments of identification. We do every single house look different, even though it's the same single model of house all over. We allowed those accidents that the topography permits in these places to become part of the design, to become part of the identity of those houses. I live in the house where the street creates a strange sidewalk. I live in the house that you have to climb up on those stairs. I live in the house in front of the street park. All these little things that give the possibility of representation for each individual to be, not only that of certainty, of seeing the other. The complex resulted very quickly, very successful. People were selling those houses in the black market because the government provide those houses to the people. And they were selling very well. Unfortunately, it was the black market. My point is that even though that the house is not the perfect ideal house you wanna have, you could create spaces that would provide identity to people. Why people live in horrible flats, super old that are turning apart in New York. Flats that are super noisy. Places that are, the pipes sound. It's impossible almost to think to live there and people pay millions of dollars to live there because what - what the city offers.

It's not always the case and we’ve been, as I said, acting in many different ways. We intervened in one of those units built in the 60s and 70s - with less budget than the ones, the canonical precedents that I showed - where we designed with the people the public spaces. We helped the people decide what they wanted in those public spaces and how they imagined to maintain them. How they imagined to share the parking lot. Before all these areas were taken by cars. Now they’re taken by the population. We also talked to them and shared ideas on how to paint those buildings. We invited an artist, Juan Estrada, to create a series of workshops and understand how we would paint those spaces. We did the same in another housing unit in the south of Mexico City. Where we enhance the situation of the public space and immediately after, the people started painting their houses. The houses were really falling apart. When we did three movements to create gymnasium, a little
playground and little places to sit and to eat, people painted their houses. The way of being proud of the place also creates that moment of identification. Then we were invited to develop a project for a very specific situation and forgive me, I was not clear at the beginning, Infonavit gives provides finance to produce homes in Mexico for people that have a formal employment, for people that have a real job which is unfortunately probably less than 50% of the population. There’s a lot of people left out. Lot of people living below the line of poverty that don’t have a formal employment. Therefore, they cannot access even that system that is the constitutional right providing system. So there is another system that works for these people that have really no income or no real steady formal income. And it is a system that supports people to build a house, to get a house built instead of just building their house themselves. The outer construction production in Mexico is probably filling in 90% of the demand for housing. Normally those houses are built with little knowledge on how to build and basically all of them leave those steel bars up to the top. I call them the steel bars of hope. People are hoping to expand their houses always. Always they are looking to have more, to be more, to become more. They are also telling in hidden lines that they want to have more and that they will fight for it. Unfortunately, that, it's not always possible. And this has become the landscape of the country.

So when we were approached by a financial institution to, that asked us to create a model for this system of people that don’t have like a formal employment and have no possibility of proving their income, which is subsidised by the government. It's a whole system, complicated system one - of houses that are, that need to be following specific rules. They have a minimum amount of area possible and they have a minimum of requirements to be need to fulfil and they obviously have a maximum of price target. So, there are hundred models probably in the market that are being built the same all over the country. Because there is a family that can choose these model of house being in Chiapas the same as being in Chihuahua. Stay in the south and stay in the north - the culture, the weather, the geography is completely different. So I was really concerned about this invitation and I thought, well, if there is a hundred models in the market they should have tackled all those topics. There’s very little to move in. So I thought, well, the conditions are we have to do a house of 43 square meters, 8000-10000 US dollars in cost at the end and have the possibility of being self-built. Basically, those are the biggest conditions, conditioners of the model. I thought we would only do that if we were able to give more space than those 43 square meters, to start. More possibility of adaptation to the context, to the culture, to the weather and more flexibility. Those were my percepts. Flexibility in terms of, all the models in the market, they don’t provide possibility for these houses to open to increase in volume, to increase in rooms, to increase in possibilities for their families to have a business or
anything. In terms of adaptability, I am thinking, I mean people in the south of Mexico, they
don't cook with modern kitchens as we know them. They cook with ovens - traditional ovens-
done with wood, wood ovens, wood kitchens. People in the south, they don't use modern
bathrooms. They don't understand modern bathrooms. They don't have drainage systems so
they use dry bathrooms. People in the north, they would not conceive having a one space
that where it all happens. People in the south would not conceive to have one space for
everything to happen. And how can we provide a system like that. We were really inventing
a lot of possibilities - panels, movable panels, openable, adaptable, etc, etc. We were
working for three months until I said well, you know guys, we don't know anyone that would
live in a house like this. We don't know if they want that.

Then we went out, did a series of interviews and we understood that what they wanted is a
house that looked like a house. And their main reason, first I was afraid of the answer
because i thought it was because the media has tell us how to live and how to live that
dream life and this is why they wanted a house that looked like a house, like a typical form of
the house. But little by little I understood that it was actually because of the little situational
possibilities that they have that the houses don't look finished. And for them, a house that
has the archetypical form of the house looks finished. So the steel bars of hope actually
were damaging a lot the possibilities of creating houses that would have this possibility of
expansion. Although they all said well if it looks like a house and if it's expandable, yes, I'll
take it. But if it's doesn't look like a house and it doesn't look finished, I would not do it. So
what did we explore then. We did a house that looks like a house but its modular and those
modules can be adapted - adapted to the possibilities of the income of the family, initial
income, of the possibilities and the necessities of the family, of the size, of the business they
do, but still always describing in form as house. We then decided, well how do we give more
space. Well we built part of it with strong material that is something that the people require -
they even call it, in Mexico we call it construction material - and some part of it, we build it in
a more temporary material. And this is how we created a system of a house, that its looks
like a house, it looks finished but it has many possibilities of being finished in different ways
being fulfilled in and has 62 square meters in plan, has double height and has different
configurations, thousands of them possible for it. Then we tested it. We built two prototypes.
They're been built for four years. They were very helpful. Obviously we did a lot of mistakes.
We knew nothing about this market, about this process. We wanted the house also to be
adaptable not only in terms of spatially, programmatically, we wanted the house to be
adaptable in terms of materiality. So the house we needed it to be built in many different
materials. So we tested it. We tested in panels, we tested in adobe bricks, we tested in
bricks, we tested it even in wood, in the Chicago Biennale we were being invited.
And then we were challenged for - in a complex of those that I don’t like - in a city in the north of the country that had a disaster. It was a tornado - a tornado that destroyed, well, damaged 600 houses and destroyed probably 28. We were asked to build 23 of those houses that were destroyed in the model that we designed. We prove it was adaptable to that. So this was a border city, a very extended green city where there is one of this Infonavit financed housing complexes. In this place we needed to insert 23 of the units that we designed and understand if really our house also provides that possibility of having more space at the same cost, more possibility of adaptability and adapt first to the situation of a tornado, adapt to the condition of the family but also be a possible to be adapted for a future use. We created those houses that you see that out stand for being bigger and for leaving a bigger footprint. So this means you have a garden surrounding it and you have a bigger footprint to work with. These houses have been there now sitting for almost three years and they are being adapted to the necessities of each of the dwellers. It’s very nice to see how these people have a house that cost exactly the same of the neighbour in front, has the same plot, the same possibility but that a little bit more thought and with a little bit of design behind, they have the double amount of space, they have the double of exterior space possible and with no more investment than the neighbours. I thought it was going to be a confrontative situation. The good thing it was that it was not. The bad thing is because these people lost completely their houses and even people in their family, it was not problematic. Happily to say, I am happy to say and to know now that these houses are serving for the purpose that we intended.

We are continuing exploring our crisis and in understanding how we could create solutions for different possibilities. So we are even understanding if there is a possibility of how just a module, as a basic possibility for to start a house but also to create a community. So for those individuals who live alone but for those families who also share with not only nuclear family, a compound. This possibility has given us the, even the possibility of exploring different models in many many projects. This is being built currently in as an experimental laboratory for housing by Infonavit. Also Infonavit has hired us to think on a line in Aguascalientes city in the centre of the country that is kind of prosperous where we decided to test even a more ambitious plan. Why not invite six officers from different parts of the world that are already thinking on different architecture for housing people. And how we could create a proposal that would be kind enough to allow that diversity but also clever enough to fulfil that community sense. So we decided to create like a checkerboard where the layout is completely generic and anonymous, almost. But then with all the public spaces
that we are opening, all the relationships that we will be creating between the city and the buildings and then all those identities that each architect is giving to the buildings creating a possibility of a complex that has explored that possibility of housing many peoples, many apartment buildings with a lot of opportunities of identity. Not only public spaces that promote the community sense but all those individual spaces that relate to each other and embrace the possibility of having an individual but a collective life at the same time.

We learn a lot through a project in Lyon, France. A project where we were invited to do three of out of ten buildings in a block that has a mixed use, a block that has a tower done by Herzog-de Meuron, a very fancy tower for high income people - but three buildings that have social housing in France. We decided to do two of those, out of those three buildings completely different apartments on each. We decided to give identity to those people in the definition of their apartment. We did those buildings add dialogue with those balconies that open towards the others in a way that to start create this sense of community, to start a sense of relating to your neighbour first, then to your 20 neighbours and then to your 100 neighbours. And then to the rest of the city. We created moments of engagements of the community but also moments of privacy, of identification. We did those two buildings of social housing. Every apartment has its own identity. Every apartment is different. We think that there’s a possibility of creating an opportunity of diversity within the norms and the rules of a very strict urban fabric and urban city. We believe that those possibilities exist and in France, we did it. And we are embracing that. We are embracing that story and continuing pushing it forward. We’re now developing a project in San Francisco where you know gentrification has taken every single corner of the city. We want to create an environment that will serve the community that still lives there. It’s the last enclave in San Francisco where people have no possibilities of buying a house on the real market of this city. Where we talk to them, where we, the client already had understood with Liz Ogbu, an incredible professional for years and years, what those people wanted. What was their vision for this former power plant. We translated it into a collage first and we decided then to take this endeavor very seriously. People already knew what to do in their in this place. How then we can create a compound that balances all those things, all those possibilities with affordable housing for these neighbours. How is the definition of an habitat. What is an habitat for us. So we started defining the possibility of an habitat combining their past industrial plans and the community future - the future as a community. What are the four things we need that we think that they need to balance a life. Those areas where you are possible to have a refugee, a living, those areas where you can be really enhanced and have strength, those areas of production, those areas of knowledge. What are those areas, what are those spaces, what are those spaces named. And we created a chart that would help us to combine those
programs into the site. Then we tested a lot of tools. We created our own design tools. We tested them in different possibilities. We test the cities that we liked in our tools that we designed for the...designing this place. We like designing tools. Because then, they help us really understand how to act, how to act in a vast territory that has an incredible potential, has a lot of desire embedded in it but has to tackle a specific need. Has to fulfil the budget to be able to exist, to be able to become a place. How to combine all those characteristics into a place and still be able to do what we want.

It's not easy but I think that I refer a lot to this phrase of Emmanuel Levinas of 'Totality and Infinity', “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relationship, the relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic reaction relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced”.

I really believe that we can start to become the Other to work. Not only to work for the Other. To become the other to work. Thank you very much.