

University of Miami School of Architecture
Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Carie Penabad
Associate Professor, School of Architecture & Program Director for Undergraduate
Studies
Miami, Florida, October 27, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
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Carie Penabad received a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Miami and a Masters of Architecture in Urban Design degree from Harvard University. Upon graduation she went to work for the office of Machado & Silvetti in Boston, and in 2001 she established her own practice in Miami with partner Adib Cure. The work of CURE & PENABAD Architects has received numerous awards including American Institute of Architects awards, state and local preservation awards, a National Congress for New Urbanism Award, and a Silver Medal prize at the 2010 Miami Biennale. Most recently, the firm was nominated as a finalist for the prestigious Marcus Cooperation Architectural Prize for emerging architectural talent.

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Gilda Santana: How long have you been teaching at the University of Miami?

Carie Penabad: I have a long-standing commitment to the University Of Miami, School Of Architecture because I received my Bachelor of Architecture degree from UM in 1995. I got my graduate degree from Harvard, and worked in Boston for several years prior to joining the faculty in 2000, so I've been teaching at the University for fifteen years.

GS: Can you talk about your leadership experience(s) as a woman in a primarily male-dominated profession and within academia?

CP: We have more women than men currently enrolled in our student body. So when you walk around the campus you would argue that the profession is fifty/fifty. But what I have observe as an academic, and as a principal of an architectural firm, is that the balance shifts pretty dramatically about ten years after graduation. So about 10 years out of a BArch program, you start to realize that while there are many women in the profession, few of them reach high leadership positions, either being principals of firms, or being the heads of departments. So there is a shift in the practice of architecture which is dramatically different than what is reflected in academia. It's something that needs to be addressed, but I do think that it's changing. I am optimistic. I think that as women, I think that we need to help one another in the profession. I find that sometimes that because for many it is so difficult to arrive at certain positions of leadership, that we're not always willing to help those that come after. I think it really starts with us. We are responsible for nurturing the

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next generation of female teachers, practitioners, and collaborators. I'm optimistic, but we still have a way to go.

GS: Your partner in practice, Adib Cure, is also your partner in life. Can you talk a bit about that?

I'm thankful to have had the good fortune to have met Adib, and been able to develop both a life in practice and in academia. It has been thus far a fruitful one and one that will continue to grow. It's not an anomaly. There are many firms that operate this way. For us, it's a great working model. But, I would say that in general collaboration in architecture is critical. I would say that if one is going to establish a practice of any size that has the ability to withstand the test of time, then one has to be creative in one's ability to collaborate. Sometimes those collaborations change from project to practice sometimes. As a practitioner one has to be very flexible in that regard. So I am definitely an advocate for collaboration, and I don't really know of any other way to pursue a life in architecture.

GS: Can you talk about your research?

CP: I don't think that my research necessarily falls into any one particular line. I find that I discover projects that are of interest to me and then I pursue them. I have an open-minded attitude when it comes to projects and research. In the past I worked very closely with Katherine Lynn on the production of a book titled *Marion Manley: Miami's first woman architect*. I can't tell you that I conscientiously set out to do that work. It began with the

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documentation of historic buildings here on campus, and meeting Katherine. I was intrigued by the fact that I knew very little about a woman who had played a relatively large role in shaping the architectural scene in South Florida. Then going back to your question, as a woman in the discipline, I realized that there weren't very many female role models that one could look at. So I guess that led into what could be classified as research in women in architecture, which then produced the book. As of late, and perhaps more broadly, I'm interested in architecture in relation to cities. I received a graduate degree in urban design, but I think that was instilled in me from the time of my undergraduate work here at the university. I collaborate with Adib Cure on research on informal settlements throughout Latin America. This is a growing phenomenon. We've been working with the Center for Computational Science to document numerous settlements. These settlements are typically off the map, so they don't exist. By drawing them, we are able to make them present, particularly on contemporary maps of the cities. This allows us to learn from their patterns of settlement to understand whether the settlement patterns vary from culture to culture, and if so, how? Then it allows us to make more informed decisions when we actually produce design projects for these settlements within the studio. So that is ongoing work. On the one hand, it attests to my interest in cities, but it also attests to my dual interest in the idea of the vernacular, and looking at the more ordinary settlements, or ordinary architecture of the city, and try to draw from them lessons that could inform an architecture of place, or perhaps an architecture that is reflective of a particular culture. It's a large project that we've been doing for several years. It involves research that involves mapping, but also projections as in architectural projects. We as designers and architects can project works of architecture from the research.

When you do research that involves cities, you need to understand the cultural context in which that work takes place, and that often involves gathering with the community. I say “gathering” with an open mind, because we always arrive at any situations with prejudices, which is natural. I think that if you can arrive in a relatively complex situation with an open mind, you’d be surprised at how much you can learn as a professional. For instance, for us, we always assumed that working in these informal settlements, we’ve be asked to design housing, or a better house for individuals. We were struck by the fact that we were never asked to design single family residences. Often times, this was seen as a grass-roots effort that could be done by the individual settlers. What they generally asked us for was the larger, infrastructural projects, such as those that would involve bringing water into the settlements, or better sewage, questions of transportation—how they can be better connected to the city? There are also questions of the public realm. What kinds of public spaces do they need? They may need places to house hundreds of children so that they can feed them. These are scales of building and development that are difficult for the individual community settlers to do. This is where we found the role of the architect or the urban designer can really make a difference. Again, it wasn’t what we originally had considered we would be asked to do, but, we learned through talking and meeting with these individuals that this seemed to be the most meaningful place we could make an impact.

GS: I think that the study of informal settlements is one of the most interesting developments in the field of urban design. What are some of the challenges that you’re facing in your research and in your teaching?

CP: I see challenges as opportunities for improvement. For me, the research is intimately linked to work that I do in my practice. I'm not a scientist. I'm a designer. I look at the world through the physical act of making cities, and buildings, and spaces. I believe that as a designer this is where I can make the most powerful impact. Some of the work that I do at the School has influenced some of the work that I've done in my practice. So, to go back to the question of informal settlements, Adib and I have been doing quite a bit of work in Latin America in our practice. We've been doing proto-types for rural schools in these informal neighborhoods. This interest arose, perhaps in part because of our research in academia, but also because of our need to want to give shape and form to those interests by improving the physical reality of places. So, when I think about research in a school of architecture, let's say, conventionally, the way one might imagine the production of books and scholarly works, but I equally see it as the production of physical works of architecture, or design proposals for the making and the shaping of cities, which occur in our design studios. So I think that our design studios are ahead of the game if you think about pedagogy across the university. If we listen to recent discussions, there are a lot of conversations about how academia can influence the real world. How can we work on project based solutions so that they're not just theoretical? The architecture design studio has always been structured that way. You are presented with a series of abstract, or diagrammatic, or even theoretical ideas that you then have to apply to the design of a building, or a city, or, in the confines of a design/build studio, an actual physical construction. We as a discipline can set a standard for the new ways in which pedagogy can be structured in academia. And, I think that we can be leaders in the conversations that

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occur outside the School of Architecture and engage the broader University community because we have a lot of experience in collaborative work, and we have a lot of experience in figuring out how to take abstract ideas and make them real by way of drawing and/or physical making. I think it's an opportunity.

A challenge for classroom teaching, to do the work that we do, is that we need to visit sites. Without visiting the sites, it becomes a detached reality. Finding ways to build partnerships that allow us to take students to the sites is one challenge. Another challenge is the integration of digital technologies combined with more traditional analog techniques for teaching. I believe that tools are just that, and we can deploy them in different ways. I struggle with balancing the knowledge and understanding of media, and a pursuit for a more timeless lessons in architecture—the ones that supersede the latest programs. The place of the University is not merely to teach students tools, but to teach them to think about the world of architecture, and hopefully be able to instill them with a critical, curious mind, and, a love of architecture that produces greater architectural literacy within which one can apply these different tools.

GS: How is the field changing?

CP: Change is the only thing that is certain in life, so one has to remain open-minded. Miami is an extraordinary place to be studying architecture at the moment, in part because of our geographic circumstance which places us at the crossroads of North and South America. We have extraordinary cultural diversity. We're a growing metropolis. We're confronted with some of the most challenging urban problems of our day as they relate to

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climate change. I feel like we are at ground zero in a way. The discipline of architecture can't operate within an object-focused reality. Our school of architecture has always been about the relationship of individual buildings and the making of the collective. It continues to be a theme that unites the faculty irrespective of individual projects or even stylistic preferences which seem secondary, really. In a world where everybody is searching for a specialization, I think that architecture's ability to be a generalist profession is more important today than ever. On the one hand, it affords us the opportunity to understand the large picture. How does a work of architecture influence the environment? How does it relate to culture? What kinds of cities are we building? I think that being able to understand the macro is very important, more so today than in the past. At the same time, for me, while it is important that we are able to understand that larger picture, and, that we are able to collaborate in an interdisciplinary way—I do it every day, and I've learned so much from the scientists and policy makers that I work with. But, at the end of the day, I'm not a scientist. I'm not a policy maker. I am a designer, and, that is where I feel I can make my contribution to the world. I want to make sure that gets conveyed to students that study architecture that they don't have to make excuses about that. The challenge is that one can take all of this information of this complex world that we live in, and all the realities that need to play a role in the shaping and making of the places that we live in. I think that there's a way to do that with an open-minded, interdisciplinary attitude, but, still where the results can be channeled through the discipline of architecture as an output, and not necessarily through the mapping of data or through analysis or diagrams. Ultimately, I think that the final product can be a work of architecture or urban design. That's an important consideration for me.

GS: What are emerging areas of emphasis for the School?

CP: This is a fertile question at the moment, because with the appointment of Dean El-Khoury, it's an opportunity to look back at the history of the school, its strengths and what has made it unique, but also to look forward to a projection of the school in the international arena. I think that it's healthy for any institution to think about how to transition to the future. Commitment to the city has always been a fundamental aspect of the school and one that has become increasingly important to the curriculum as it relates to working within a complex urban metropolis. Many faculty address this in different ways. With the appointment of the new dean there's also been an interest in how technology interfaces with the making of cities. I see this as an expanding area at the school. I'd say first and foremost it's about urbanism, and then about urbanism's relationship to technology, or, the way in which technology can shape cities. And, also thinking about all of the manifestations of the city, not solely about the suburban realities, but also the dense urban center, informal settlements. The beauty of a school committed to understanding architecture in light of the city, is that it's the richest of realities. That is an ongoing focus that is expanding into a series of branches that are subthemes within the larger theme of urbanism. There is the question of sustainability at the school. It's a buzzword, and to be honest, I sometimes get kind tired of hearing about it, but at the same time it's a very important consideration for architecture, particularly in light of these massive, global, climate change issues that we're dealing with. This is an arena that I suspect will continue to grow. At a school like ours, I would hope that it would be a balance between

technological innovation and time-tested lessons of sustainable buildings. No amount of sophisticated technology can supersede wise decisions regarding form-making, place-making, and the kind of timeless responses of architecture's abilities to protect you from the sun and rain, to minimize its footprint on the earth. There are many lessons that history affords us. I think that when we think of moving forward under this larger umbrella of sustainability, I think that our school has the ability to balance both the technological solutions associated with sustainability as well as with the more time-tested solutions that come from an understanding of architecture across time.

Some faculty are interested health and the built environment. Even that topic can be seen under the broader umbrella of urbanism, because when we discuss health, we talk about urban patterns and the types of neighborhoods we can create and how they might impact our well-being. Ultimately, I think there's an interest in "making" at the school. The curriculum has been structured from the onset to think about the design, the grammar and building techniques associate with architecture. These are not seen as mundane, or dull considerations, but actually the areas for architectural invention, development, and creativity—the raw material of design. This is becoming more evident within the curriculum.

GS: What are your hopes for library support?

CP: My hope is to grow the library. At the end of the semester we're engaging with a planning effort. The school is growing physically, and that's exiting. We have a new

studio building, a design/build lab. I think that the library becomes a social center for the school. My hope is to find ways to expand both the physical presence of the library as well as developing ways of connecting the library to the experiences of the classroom. The roles of libraries in cities have dramatically changed beyond being just places of physical book reserves, which I still think is important. But, I also think that libraries have the potential for being important community spaces. They activate social and collaborative components of the discipline. It could be a pivotal way of activating student life even into the evening as a way of fostering collaboration and networks across different areas of the school. I really do think that institutions are about the people that are gathered in a particular place at a particular time. For me the goal is to produce a school that can be a meaningful, intellectually stimulating experience for students and faculty, and for finding ways to develop pedagogy. I think it is important to foster a curious mind and the library plays a critical role in that regard. We should be ambitious and find ways to make meaningful connections across the spaces that we call the school.

To be well-rounded, one has to understand how to do research. One has to have the ability to write about what one is designing, but, I think that understanding the multi-faceted nature of research as it relates to a school of architecture is very important. I think that the discipline has its own history, which has been advanced by critical texts, most certainly, but I would argue first and foremost, by buildings and drawings. I had an interesting experience taking a course in the Fine Arts department at Harvard on sets and settings of the seventeenth-century. The faculty member organized a visit to the rare book collection. Being able to open up these sources simultaneously within a physical space and with

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physical books which allowed me to look at cross-sections of stage sets we had been studying in the classroom. Finding ways to take what's currently happening with studio themes like "water in the city", which are happening with El-Khoury's appointment, it allows the school of architecture to focus on a pressing theme that is important to the school, but that also has global implications. And, then find ways to arrive at an understanding the subject—maybe it's historical texts, or, architects in contemporary practice as the lecture series points to, and then, design solutions as they are developed by students in the studio. Those overarching themes are interesting opportunities for synergy between the library and the design studio, or the library and the classroom, or the library in the overall campus that can play a really interesting role.

END OF INTERVIEW
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10.26.2016 (transcribed)