University of Miami School of Architecture
Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Rodolphe El-Khoury
Dean of the School of Architecture
Miami, Florida, October 18, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
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Summary: Rodolphe el-Khoury is Dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture. Before coming to UMSoA in July, 2014, he was Canada Research Chair and Director of Urban Design at the University of Toronto, Head of Architecture at California College of the Arts, and Associate Professor at Harvard Graduate School of Design. He has taught at Columbia University, Rhode Island School of Design, and Princeton University and has had Visiting Professor appointments at MIT, University of Hong Kong, and Rice University (Cullinen Visiting Chair). After earning a Bachelor of Architecture and Bachelor of Fine Arts from Rhode Island School of Design, el-Khoury obtained a Master of Science in Architecture from MIT and his Ph.D. from Princeton University.

El-Khoury's current research in architecture focuses on applications for information technology, aiming for enhanced responsiveness and sustainability in buildings and smart cities. He is also working on the application of robotics and embedded technology in architecture in projects and prototypes for interactive and responsive environments, including immersive environments and multi-sensory architecture. With the tools and resources of RAD-UM, his lab at UMSoA, he aims to put every brick online and believes that "embedded technology empowers networked environments to better address the environmental and social challenges we face today."

Gilda Santana: What are some of the challenges that you're facing in teaching and/or research?

Rodolphe El- Khoury: The research I do now is the Rad Lab which I direct and which I basically migrated from Toronto to the University of Miami. We have one full-time staff member, Christopher Chung, dedicated to the research lab. It's a platform that is open to faculty to bring research projects to the lab. The research is really about embedded technology, applications of information technology to architecture, and, exploring the potential of the internet of things and how architecture can participate in this field. I teach only one course which is directly related to that and it's meant to get students interested in that area of research so they can participate. The challenge is that we don't have enough faculty and students who are equipped for this kind of research, so we are building this culture from scratch here at the School of Architecture. We have people from engineering and computer science working with us, but I would like to see more of the architecture students acquiring the knowledge and the skills necessary to participate in this type of research.

GS: What are areas of emphasis for the SOA going forward?

RK: Continuing with what the school has built a reputation for which is urbanism—thinking of architecture in the context of the city. I think it has always been there and we'll continue with that. Adding to this is now environmental issues, green building

technologies, coastal resilience, and what I bring also is a general interest in technology and how it is basically transforming the field, opening doors for new possibilities.

GS: How do you perceive that the field is changing?

RK: It's changing like everything else because of new technologies, which is not only changing the way that we build, but allowing us to build new kinds of things. It is also changing workflows and the way that offices are organized. The field is radically conservative and hasn't changed dramatically. Because of all the liabilities involved there's a lot of inertia. But now actually it is transforming very quickly because of the new forms of construction but also because of communication.

GS: Do you find that there are new professional titles coming out of this?

RK: I was at an event yesterday where the President quoted from an article that stated very confidently that 60% of freshmen students now will be working in jobs that do not exist now when they join the workforce. So, yes, in architecture, things are changing and what is getting to be more and more important is the capacity to access information and be able to do research rather than the basic skills which are now being outsourced. Rendering and drafting are becoming low-level skills. Being able to think and to know how to do research is becoming more and more important for architects. So, they should be spending more time in the library.

GS: What do you envision as the architecture library model of the future?

RK: I've been thinking about this. Part of it still has to do with being a portal for research. If it's not the printed book on the shelf it's still a framework that gives access to information, digital or otherwise. But also, I think, it's becoming a social space, more and more. That's a more difficult role to transition into because libraries have always been conceived as very quiet and calm environments. To accommodate that social, vibrant interaction is harder and requires more ingenuity and reinvention. What do you think?

GS: I think that in order for libraries to remain relevant they need to be environments that are flexible and open to all kinds of introspective and collaborative research. I believe that there's room for both. I think you can have quiet spaces, and I think you can have factory-type spaces, where things are happening all the time. People are having discussions, and people are making things.

RK: But I think that libraries just cannot give up on the idea of the quiet space. It's very hard for libraries to think of the library as a studio, something that is very noisy and messy. For the charrette that we're doing, you might think about the Korach gallery as a library space.

GS: That idea has been entertained before. Would it be in addition to the existing space, or the only space? How would that work? It would have to be thought out, but I think it would definitely be a better use of that space.

R**K:** Do you think that as the only space it would be too small even with a mezzanine?

G**S:** Yes, maybe. Would it accommodate the necessary linear footage? I imagine that we'd use the wall space going up to the ceiling and large tables for group collaboration. I can't imagine any quiet spaces in there. My concern with that space is the acoustics.

RK: If you fill it up with shelves and furniture that will take care of some of that. I think about the library at RISD. The old one was just one big room with a mezzanine.

GS: How do you think the library should support the architecture school?

RK: I think I saw somewhere that architecture students have a high rate of circulation. It's not so much that they read a lot, but that they look at images. I suspect that the periodicals are very important. I think it would be interesting to find out more about this shift from skills to a culture of research and knowledge in architecture. The architect as researcher. Maybe we could explore this as an argument for beefing up the role of the library as important in the role of the studio. What about having satellite library stations in the studio building? Bookshelves or stations for periodicals.

GS: Sure. Anything is possible. It just needs to be well organized. Students already do this in their studios. They have micro-libraries at their stations and then they have a

communal bookshelf in the studio. That studio micro-library model, in a way, could function as an alternative to the course reserves shelf in the library. It's an option.

RK: I like that idea of micro-libraries. It could be something for the new building. Maybe mobile bookshelves on wheels that could be stationed in the studios.

GS: I'm all about more access. I'm sure we could manage a way to RFID tag our assets so that we can track the items throughout the campus.

RK: Maybe they can have RFID tags with an alarm that would alert you to be more mindful about staying within a specific radius. We could probably get grants for their execution.

GS: I thought it could be something that I could work on with Chris [Chung], to develop a technological solution that we could implement here. I don't have the technical expertise.

RK: That's definitely something that we can work on here.

END OF INTERVIEW
Gilda Santana
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