University of Miami School of Architecture

Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Teófilo Victoria

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Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
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Summary:

Teófilo Victoria holds a Masters of Architecture and Urban Design Degree from Columbia University, and a Bachelors of Fine Arts and a Bachelors of Architecture from The Rhode Island School of Design. He has been visiting professor at Harvard University and Cornell University and has lectured and participated in juries at the University of Maryland, Notre Dame University and the Instituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice. At the University of Miami he was Undergraduate Program Director from 1995 to 1998 and from 1999 to 2009, Graduate Program Director. In 1992 he co-edited *Between Two Towers, the Drawings of the School of Miami*, with Vincent Scully, Catherine Lynn and Jorge Hernandez and was the guest editor of Archivos de Arquitectura Antillana in 2009.

Gilda Santana: When did you first come to the University of Miami?

Teofilo Victoria: I first came to what was then a department at the School of Engineering in 1982. The reason why I came was because Andres Duany asked me to see if we could test the Seaside Code that we had drawn up the summer of '82. I was working in what was referred to as the night crew in his office that consisted of a group of recent graduates that were working on the town of Seaside. We'd had a charrette at Seaside with Andres and Lizz, and we had produced the drawings for the master plan and the code for the town. We were following up the charrette work at night in the DPZ office, which was then in Coconut Grove. When we first started working on Seaside it was a few years prior while they were still at Arquitectonica.

GS: So you started teaching at SOA in 1982?

TV: I started teaching as an assistant in either Lizz or Andres' third year studio—it might have been the two of them. The studio was dedicated to testing the code. What I mean by that is that the code was written, and then the students did a project based on the regulations established in the code.

GS: So it was a case study for the code.

TV: Yes, it was test because it had never been done before. It was arguably the first form-based code done in the country. It was a single based code. Then, I'm not quite sure how or why, but I was hired the following semester to teach on a part-time basis. I taught the

engineering class for the first few years. These were courses of architecture offered to engineering students. It was a course required for students enrolled in the architectural engineering program. We still offer that course, by the way. At the end of that year, John Steffian, who was Chair, was the key individual to argue for separating from the School of Engineering and establishing an independent School of Architecture. We moved out from Engineering to this campus. It was a little more primitive then, but it was fundamentally the same set of buildings. We've been here ever since. I remember that the department of architecture had a collection of models—I don't know if you've heard this story—this collection was a pinacoteca, depository of models that students had worked on. There was a procession from the department of engineering of students carrying the models to this campus. There might have been 300 students. It was not a small group. It was ceremonial and liturgical. It was a procession. They were deposited here at the reference library as it used to be called. I don't know what happened to them. I haven't seen them in a while.

GS: They weren't here when I arrived.

TV: The models were primarily from Jan Hochstim's History of Architecture class. There's a photo of students carrying those models from the School of Engineering and Environmental Studies (SEED) to the new School of Architecture campus. Then we got a new Dean who was Tom Regan.

GS: Have you always been interested in classicism in architecture or is it something that developed along the way? At what point did this become important to you in your career?

TV: I was recently asked that question. Since childhood, because of my father, my brother and I have had an interest, curiosity, and love even for the classical world. Our superheroes were Hector and Achilles. I have had an interest in antiquity all of my life, but in particular the classical worlds of Greece and Rome. I went to school to study naval architecture in Germany, because that's where my father was.

GS: Is that where your family is from?

TV: My family is from Cartagena, Colombia, but I was born in California. My father was doing graduate work there. From there I started painting at RISD, and then eventually got an architecture degree at Columbia. From Germany I went to RISD, and then Columbia. My education was not a classical education, but my interest was always there.

GS: So you knew Rocco Ceo while you were at RISD?

TV: I knew Rocco Ceo. My sister also went there and she was a classmate of Rocco's and the Dean. They were all there together. That's how I know them. I was a strong supporter of Rocco when he applied to teach here. My wife, Maria La Guardia, was also a classmate of Rocco's at the GSD. So Rocco's and my path crossed many times.

The study of vernacular architecture was a very important aspect of the thinking for the plans for seaside. A very early studio was conducted by Fernando Forte-Brescia and

Andres Duany. It was an urban design project on the naval base in Key West and there's a publication of it.

GS: We have several copies of it.

TV: It was a typological study of Key West. It was a very important initial step in the study of the vernacular here at the School of Architecture. Woody Wilkins who was also faculty, who had an interest in the vernacular. He had conducted a series of courses dedicated to the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). He would become one of the first archivists of the vernacular traditions, legacy and cultural patrimony of South Florida including the Keys.

GS: Is Wilkins still around?

TV: No he died, but something was named after him—an archive maybe? Don't we have an archive named after him?

GS: I don't think so, but it wouldn't surprise me. His name has come up often in these interviews, and always with fondness. Wilkins is remembered as an individual who was integral to the fundamental pedagogical principles of the school. I'd like to do some more research on him.

TV: I'm not sure, but I believe we started an archive of historic American buildings in his name. Lizz, might now, and Joanna too might know more precisely. I know we did

something to commemorate his years at the school of architecture. The interest in the vernacular here was a very real foundation for the eventual development into classical architecture. At the time, Andres and Lizz in particular, who had come from Yale, had an interest in classical architecture. A number of us also had an interest in it even though we hadn't been taught this at school.

GS: You came from a modernist tradition.

TV: We came from a modernist tradition, but it was already changing. Those were the years of dramatic change in both the pedagogy and the practice of architecture. There was a recovery of history and a recovery of cities. The Italians were very important...

GS: The Rationalists?

TV: Aldo Rossi in particular, who we eventually contracted to design the New School of Architecture.

GS: Would you say that the faculty was headed towards that pedagogical trend?

TV: There was a contingent of Rationalists—those that had been educated in Europe and those who were educated in Latin America like Roberto Behar, for instance, and those of us who had an interest in Italy. RISD had a program called the European Honors Program where they send students to Rome for a year. I was in that program. I became familiar

with not just classical architecture but also modern Italian architecture and theory. This was 1978. There was a contingent within the School of Architecture that had these points of views or positions on architecture that were as part of the post-modern movement what would become the essential transformation of architectural thinking in the late sixties and seventies. We were all part of that educational experience.

GS: So you were on the cusp?

TV: It was indeed.

GS: Your generation of architects and practitioners was transitioning and was part of the move forward from modernism.

TV: It was very real. We contracted Aldo Rossi, who did a full set of construction drawings for the Ziff Tower. It was called the Ziff Tower because the Ziff family were going to give the money for the construction of the tower. Tragically, it didn't get built.

GS: What happened there?

TV: I'm not quite sure what happened there. Vincent Scully was a very strong proponent for that project. He had written the introduction, "The End of the Century Brings a Poet", in the American edition of *The Complete Works of Aldo Rossi*. Vincent Scully was a professor of President Foote's at Yale. President Foote was an enthusiast of Scully's

teachings and way of thinking. There was every chance in the world that this would happen. We had the money, but eventually it stalled and it didn't get built. We regret it to this day.

GS: I do too. We would have had a reading room in the middle of the lake.

TV: That's one of my regrets in life about the school. Not being able to push it forward because we were behind it. The Ziff's are my family. My sister is married to Dean Ziff. We designed a house for the Ziff family. It was called Ca' Ziff it and it was on the bay. It was demolished by the way. It was a wonderful place.

Vincent Scully was another proponent for this. He had at the time, nationally and internationally, a great deal of influence in the transformation of architecture from the singlemindedness of the International Style to something much broader. He also wrote the introduction to Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, which was published in 1967, the same year as Aldo's *Architecture of the City*. Vincent had written an introduction for this very important and seminal work. Lizz had worked in Venturi's office in Philadelphia. So there's Robert Venturi, Aldo Rossi, Vincent Scully. The point that I'm making is that I don't refer to these individuals merrily, they were an integral part of the founding and evolution of the school. Real people. We eventually awarded Venturi an honorary doctoral degree. But, it wasn't just him, it was also his partner Denise Scott-Brown. The school had this odd characteristic of having teaching and practicing couples, for instance Lizz and Andres. There was also Denis and Joana and later Penabad and Cure, and myself and Maria. It was a kind of matriarchal school with Lizz as the Dean for 18

years. Women played an important role in the foundation of the school. We developed feminine qualities. We were unique from other schools because we nurtured out students more. I think that had something to do with it. Maybe it's changing now, but women had a hard time in the profession of architecture. Many of our female graduates all went to important graduate school programs and they're teaching and practicing all over the place. I would argue that our women students from that time were unique in how they placed themselves in both practice and teaching. Monica Ponce de Leon is a very good example. She's the Dean at Princeton. Silvia Acosta is another important figure. She's at RISD. She's someone you might want to talk to. There's the perspective of the faculty and there's the perspective of the student. It was a very integrated program we had. We were very young. Most of us were recent graduates so we were still very close to how the students thought because we were just a few years out of school.

Our interest in the vernacular, which remains intact, matured. We took part in a movement within the country that promoted the values of classicism and of classical architecture. A number faculty were part of the founding of the *Institute for Classical Architecture* in New York in the 1990s. Ernesto Buch, who is a cousin of Andres Duany, is an important figure in all of this. He and Douglas Duany, Andres' brother, were key figures both intellectually and in practice. Douglas is a landscape architect. They went to the GSD together a few years later. Ernesto got his Bachelor of Architecture degree from here, and then went on to get his Master of Architecture in Urban Design from Harvard GSD. He has a very important practice in classical architect today.

I'd like to go back to the Seaside project if I may...It was a very important project in the history of architecture and urbanism in this country. A number of studies of the

vernacular in Key West were done. The streets sections were studied, but also the typological reference and models were from Key West. That taught us how to study the vernacular from an architectural as well as urbanistic point of view. The first time that I met Lizz was in Key West around 1975. She and Andres had received a grant just a year or two after they'd graduated to restore the Captain's House on Duval Street. They were living and working there. I went with Ernesto to meet them. Key West was a very different place at that time. This was a very early experience that taught us about vernacular construction, and in particular the vernacular of South Florida and Key West. The vernacular which at the time we'd begun to study in earnest, would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of classical architecture which would become an important aspect of the school. It must also be mentioned that this was contained within a certain number of faculty. It was the younger faculty. The established faculty which included Ralph Warburton, the Chair of the department, had no interest in classical architecture. It was very contentious. They were difficult times.

GS: There was a group of faculty that were hired during the Warburton and/or Hoenigman periods that were more modernist in their approach.

TV: Eventually, because of age and the passing of time, but more importantly, the recovery of history and urbanism was happening all over the country helped to establish itself in the school. But it wasn't easy at all. It became a battle ground in the planning curriculum at the school. There was an intention on our part to do away with planning and replace it with "new urbanist" curriculum, which we would call Master of Suburb and Town Design. We

replaced it eventually with that program which was a big mistake. We thought at the time that New Urbanism would replace planning in the country and that didn't happen. Didn't even come close. So rather than adding a degree we replaced it. Now we don't have any planning and planning is critical. We thought it would disappear, but far from it, right?

GS: But you still felt you needed to make some programmatic changes in the way that planning was taught, right?

TV: Definitely, but in hindsight, and I haven't ever discussed this with Lizz and Andres, we shouldn't have done away with planning. It was also propelled by youthful passion and ideology, which were greatly compelling arguments then, but it just wasn't the right thing to do. We would be a different school if we had a planning degree. Anyway, I was part of that decision, and that's another one of my regrets. That's two already in fifteen minutes, but I think those are the only two.

GS: Were you involved in the Architectural Club of Miami?

TV: Yes, I was. After Andres and Lizz, and Bernardo [Fort-Brescia] and Laurinda [Spears], who were the founding members, myself and Roberto Behar took it over. I was Vice President and Roberto was President. There might have been another fellow there who was also from Yale, and Hervin Romney, the other partner in Arquitectonica. The Arquitectural Club was our first lecture series. It was very prominent and we invited everybody...Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Eisenmen, Krier, Robert Venturi and Denise

Scott-Brown, Tutti, Colin Rowe, Vincent Scully of course...they were all young. It was quite extraordinary.

GS: I'm trying to archive as much of the proceedings from that Club as possible. I have bits and pieces. Andres says he has some things, Lizz has some things. But Roberto Behar has the majority of the holdings.

TV: Roberto has the bulk because it was the official repository. They should be here, most definitely.

The Architectural Club also sponsored exhibitions and other events. I still have a poster from an exhibition called the "Eternal Return", which in the twenties was a very often used thematic. Jean Cocteau, for instance did a film called the Eternal Return. It was an exhibition on UM graduate projects in graduate school. So Derek Smith was there, Silvia Acosta was there, Maria La Guardia...all the students that had studied at UM and had gone on to graduate school elsewhere were invited to exhibit. The exhibit took place at the Biltmore. They were all great lectures. That was the beginning of both our lecture series, and perhaps more importantly, of our visiting critic program. We had a very rich visiting critics program that invited two architects per semester. By the end of ten years, we had invited forty faculty and they were shared with the Architectural Club. If we invited someone as a visiting critic they would certainly talk at the club, and vice versa. We had a parade of exceptional architects and teachers participating in the visiting critics program who would later became famous. And then it dissipated, and I'm not sure why. It was transformed into something else. It lost the vitality of the young people. At the time we

could only afford young people, but at that time Rem Koolhaas was a young guy. It was an extraordinary experience for our students. It all connected very well—the School, the Architectural Club, the Visiting Critics program. These integrated platforms created connections to graduate schools for our students. Many of the individuals who participated in the club and in the programs were also teaching in graduate schools throughout the country. Otherwise we were kind of invisible. It was a network based on ideology and of mutual interests and values. They were exciting times. I've often thought about those times, but I don't know if I should evaluate or judge the period on the basis of our youth, or because we were special.

GS: I think a little bit of both. The conditions were there. It was an exotic location with a Latino contingent, women are also rising to the surface taking ownership in certain disciplines and architecture being one of them. And you had this faculty that was amazing.

TV: Yes, I agree with you. It really was. And the students were also amazing because they wouldn't have made it into these hotshot graduate programs if they weren't special.

GS: Andres Duany said that the school was a feeder for the Ivies.

TV: Absolutely, no question about it. The proof is in the pudding that we actually did this. I don't know if Latino is the right terminology by the way. I think that's more appropriate to California and the West Coast. I don't know if Cubans are Latinos. It used

to be all Cubans in Miami. There were two places on Miracle Mile where you could have a Cuban coffee. You could have a café con leche with tostada. That's long gone.

GS: It was the hegemonic culture at the time. It's a very important part of the narrative.

TV: Andres is Cuban. He might have been the first Cuban faculty.

GS: Maybe, unless we're talking about way back in the twenties when they were targeting Hispanics.

TV: The University was founded as a Pan American University. There was Felipe Prestamo was probably the first and foremost.

GS: We have his papers at the Cuban Heritage Collection. Your work is exquisite. It is beautiful. Can you talk about your practice and how it evolved and how it may have impacted your teaching?

TV: Thank you. Can we pick this conversation up again because I'm very interested in this subject! I'm leaving for the Open Studio City in Tokyo. You should come with us next year.

GS: That is the other thing I wanted to bring up with you—the Open City Studio.

TV: The Open City Studio which was started by John Steffian is thirty years old.

END OF INTERVIEW
Gilda Santana
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