

University of Miami School of Architecture
Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Katherine Wheeler
Professor, School of Architecture
Miami, Florida, October 16, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
Interview Length: 35:00 min

Summary: Professor Wheeler sees her research as a reflection of her transition from practicing architect to studio professor, and ultimately to architectural historian. How these three aspects of architecture—practice, pedagogy, and history—intersect is at the core of her work. Her current project, *The Redemption of the Renaissance: Changing Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture in England, 1850-1914*, addresses this most directly. Her teaching investigates these intersections in a seminar on the history and theory of architectural drawing, which studies the way drawing impacts architectural thought. She also teaches a seminar on the writings of great architects as well as the second half of the survey of the history of architecture

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Gilda Santana: How long have you been teaching at the School of Architecture?

Katherine Wheeler: Since the Fall of 2006, so...10 years.

GS: What brought you to Miami, and this particular position?

KW: It was my first job offer. I was still a PhD. student. I defended my dissertation the first week of class.

GS: What are some of the present challenges, or, opportunities that you experience as a teacher and as a researcher?

KW: I'm wondering if after 10 years that I need to step back because the demographics of the student body have changed so much. I need to go back to basics, particularly with the graduate students, assuming a higher level of knowledge than they might have because their coming in from all over the world, and with very different backgrounds from when I first started teaching here. I love the diversity, but it also means that there's also less of a continuum of basic understanding of things. I'm struggling with that a little bit in my teaching at the moment.

GS: What about your research?

KW: Currently my research is a little scattered [laughing]. I'm co-authoring an article with someone from Winthrop College on the Kaleidoscope Dollhouse, which is a dollhouse by the artist Laurie Simmons and the architect Peter Wheelwright. They designed it in 2001 and marketed it. So, we're approaching it from the perspective of Laurie Simmons' work, which is about gender and the home. My job is to look at it through modernist ideas of utopia. So that's one thing. And then I'm looking at the development of the architectural working drawing as my primary research for my next book. Also, I'm finishing up a piece on Ruskin and emotion in the 19th century, so I'm kind of all over the map in the moment. My current challenge is what do we do with all these books!? It's all coming at me and together at the same time. But, I'm loving the research. I don't have a problem with that. I am finding that I need to Interlibrary Loan a lot more things than I thought that I would need to, but that's fine.

GS: Do you find that the majority of the materials that you use are found abroad. You work on English Architecture.

KW: Yes, to a degree, but I'm trying to get back the America perspective at this point. I just did two weeks at the Winterthur archives, and I'm getting ready to do a series of proposals to look at the Philadelphia Athenaeum and the Boston Athenaeum collections. As wonderful as digitization is, it really hasn't gotten into the realm of the working architectural drawing yet. My one problem with architectural working drawings is that they are generally not well cataloged, if they are kept at all. Even at Winterthur, they were

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just cataloged as “architectural drawing”. As long as there isn’t a prospective, nobody really know what do with them. So, that’s been an interesting journey.

As an educator faculty, I’m supposed to be primarily teaching not researching, but I can’t progress in my own teaching without pursuing my own research.

GS: How do think the field is changing? The field of Architecture, and the field of teaching architecture?

KW: Architecture or architectural history, because those are two different fields?

GS: Whichever one you want to define, or both.

KW: Architecture is at an interesting moment right now. I am beginning to see a backlash against the parametric law of architecture, and, some of the high theory. But, now it’s having to ground itself in issues of sustainability in a way that I think is hard for some schools, because they were more high theoretical and less on the practical nitty-gritty, engineering basis. Architectural history, however, is splitting to a certain degree. In my mind, what you have is a group of people who work with buildings, and a group of people who don’t work with buildings. Well, what is this other thing? It’s not that I think that the research isn’t valid, but I find it interesting that there is beginning to be a bifurcation. I felt this most when I was at the South Eastern Society of Architectural Historians (SESAH) where the majority of the speakers were historic preservationists, not architectural historians, so they’re coming in with a different kind of training, a different way of looking

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at buildings, a different mode that's much more hands-on a building. Whereas, with SAH (Society of Architectural Historians), it's much more theoretical discussions. So, theory vs practice, I think that split in architectural history is happening. It has already happened in architecture schools. We know that.

GS: You started out as a practicing architect. What made you decide go into teaching architectural history?

KW: Yeah, guilty. I'd always wanted to be an architectural historian. The school that I started at, which was the University of Tennessee, had a track system where everybody was together for three years, and then split into different tracks. There was construction management, preservation, history, design, and architectural engineering, or, structural engineering. In the last two years you specialized. I got through the three years, barely, when they discontinued the track system, against University policy. So, I took a year off to figure out what I wanted to do. I thought, well, I have 3 years of architectural education that don't transfer to anything, so I'll finish the degree, I'll try practicing, and see how I like it. Then ten years after I graduated, I thought maybe I should go back and do what I really wanted to do in the first place. The guy I was dating at the time got into grad school at the University of Virginia, and we went to the open house. I saw a sign that said "architectural history this way". I followed that little sign to their open house. I applied to the program and got in, and that was that.

GS: One of the challenges you're experiencing is having to deal with a much broader base of international students. In the field of teaching, you must see some changes as well.

KW: Of course, absolutely. One of the sections that I teach in the graduate architectural theory course, is a section on language and drawing, comparing those two modes of communication and how they relate to architecture. The students led a debate about which one is most relevant to architects. The room was divided into two sides of those who thought that language was better vs. those that thought that drawing was better. Somehow it split so that the Chinese students were on the language side of the room, while the western students were on the drawing side of the room. Initially I thought it was weird as a demographic split, and then I realized it was because the Chinese language is a pictogram system. It was at that moment that I realized, whoa, we're really dealing with completely different backgrounds in terms of the fundamentals of language, and understanding what language is. I thought, I have to rethink all of this, because they see everything so differently. It's fascinating, but what is the implication, then, of me teaching the standard western theory to a group of people who are coming from a completely different trajectory? Whereas I can't bridge in and teach Chinese theory because I just don't know what that is. Most of it hasn't even been translated into English.

GS: Is there a Chinese theory of architecture?

KW: There must be. There must be. Because you have high-end architects, people like Wang Tzu (spelling), doing prominent buildings that clearly have some theoretical basis

when you look at their architecture, but, I don't know what's producing that. I don't know what that research and publication is.

One of my concerns is the issue of plagiarism and its cultural implications. Is it that the material is not engaging them because it is so culturally different? So, how do I get a group of Asian students, who have come to the West to learn in a western university—is it my job to teach western theory, or am I supposed to teach a global theory? At what level do they become engaged in that process? In terms of plagiarism, some of the frustration, from the students' side, is that they may feel that the work is not relevant to them at a certain level. So how can I make the assignments and the projects more relevant to them, so that they don't feel that this is somehow separate from their actual practice of architecture when they're taking a history course because it's a history of western architecture. Although most of my classes include non-western architecture as well, the readings that we do are still generally western. So, I think that it's on my shoulders to bring to pull some more of that in there, but I don't read Chinese, so I don't even know where to start, or, who to ask.

GS: Is there anyone in the United States who teaches Chinese architectural theory?

KW: That's a really good question. I have friends who are Asianists, but they tend to look at Japan, Indonesia, and sometimes India, more than they look directly at China, in part because of the inaccessibility of archives. That's the other problem. You're dealing with a government that is not going to allow you access to certain kinds of information, so how do you address those kinds of issues and create a course as well. When I taught at

Michigan, there was a majority of Korean students, and they were taught straight western architectural theory. They seemed confused, not so much because the reading itself is quite difficult if English is your second language, but, what is the relevancy of this to a fundamental architectural system which is radically different to one that they've come up with, particularly with graduate students who had training in China. Not so much with undergrads because they're learning western architectural system from day one.

GS: That is, I think, part of a larger discussion beyond architecture education. It begs the question of why would you come to an institution with the expectation that you'd be learning the same thing you'd learn in your own country?

KW: Right, exactly. That's the question. They're coming to Miami to learn American architectural training. I don't go to France or England and expect to learn American architectural training. I think that difference is important.

GS: It is a fundamental difference.

KW: It is a fundamental difference, and I do think that plagiarism is something that spins off of that. I really think that plagiarism is a cultural issue on many different levels. And here we still have this bound honor code that links to into the library because it's about citations and references and research and all of these things instead of Google translating a Chinese blog?

There's so much more that's digitized now that when I first started doing my dissertation. I was doing research the other day looking at nineteenth-century, Scottish, earth records from some small town! I was fascinated that I could look at a scan of the actual document, and I actually caught mistakes in well-known histories of people's names, and people's histories.

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

KW: I think we're moving more towards the "rad lab" model where you're making, and that's great. I think that's the trajectory at the moment, with a firm hand on sustainability and sea level rise, because we have to. We're just catching up to where schools were 5-6 years ago. At FIU, every student desk has a maker bot. We're still well-behind in the technological infrastructure support for students. I think the problem with those toys, though, and, I sometimes see them as toys instead of tools, is that we don't have enough faculty who know how to engage those things to truly teach the students to use them as anything more than an interesting clay, or a faster way to cut balsa wood. I don't really think that they're being explored as design tools in the way that they should be. We're short-staffed there.

GS: As a woman in the architectural profession, and in academia, have you found that it's been more challenging than if you were a man? Perhaps you had opportunities that a man might not have.

KW: In response to the last part, no! I have a friend in particular who is about ten years older, who wanted to be an architect, and she was told, “sorry, no, women can’t be architects. Interior Design is over there. You can study there”. Now classes are more than fifty percent women. I think there were six or eight women out of my class of ninety. It was a pretty rough atmosphere coming through at times. I’d say that there was a good deal of sexual harassment, which we all just assumed was par for the course. Some of that on job sites. It wasn’t easy as a young architect, intern, to walk up to a sixty-year old male contractor and tell him what to do. That didn’t go over well in the late 80s, early 90s. Finally, I got a client who was a female, head of a very well-known law firm in Washington DC. We had many bathroom conversations and I thought, well this must be what guys did. I think women now have many more opportunities.

GS: What are your hopes for library support?

KW: Scan everything! No, actually, I like having books. But in terms of library support, I am fully a proponent for a space where we really can have a full architecture library, whatever that means, if that means we have materials and models that students can use. We just don’t have the space for that right now. If I have a dream vision, a utopian idea of library support, it would not be so much in support of my own research, because most of what I use isn’t in Miami, and quite frankly, it’s not an old enough city for what I do. In terms of teaching and library support, it’s as good as we can get with what we have. If we had a bigger space, larger teaching rooms within the library that would be amazing.

One of the things that I am struggling with is the lack of diversity in the architectural history and preservation fields. I have a student that wants to look at African American architect drawings. Where the heck am I going to find them?

GS: Well, we have the Joseph Middlebrooks (former SoA faculty) archives. They are at Special Collections. We collected the contents of his office when he retired. Middlebrooks, I believe, was the first registered African American architect in the state of Florida.

KW: I will tell her that. She's been trying to look up Julian Abel at Duke, but they haven't got any of the drawings on line.

The issue of diversity struck me while I was at a board meeting at SESA and I realized that there is a real lack of diversity in architectural history and preservation. I think we've gotten a little bit better, not very good, still pretty lousy, in architecture. But I think that architectural history and preservation are particularly difficult to break through. How do we bring diversity into the field where it does take a PhD, and universities only accept one or two people? Well it takes the people to do the research to get other people interested, so we're in this double bind at the moment of diversifying in more substantial ways in large areas of the profession, preservation being number one.

Even if we had a little space, like at the Wolfsonian, or like the glass cases in Richter, where we could do exhibits that present African American Architects, bring in high school kids, get people to connect these things. It really takes growing from the bottom up.

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I see the library as being the heart of the university, any university. Even if we digitized everything and there's no building anymore, research is still the heart of the university. I think that the library should be more prominent on our web pages. The library should be one of those instant clicks along with *admissions* and *student life*. Where to buy a salad is easier to find than directions on how to get to the library. I hate to say this, but I often judge a university by how easily accessible the library search engine is from its opening web page. How much do they value research within the institution? If I have to go through six clicks to find the library catalog search engine, that's crazy. It should be absolutely clear. By the way, that's not the case here.

END OF INTERVIEW
Gilda Santana
10.16.2016 (transcribed)