

University of Miami School of Architecture
Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Wyn Bradley

Lecturer, Director of Special Programs

Coral Gables, FL, October 20, 2016

Interviewed by: Gilda Santana

Recorded by: Gilda Santana

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Summary: Wyn Graham Bradley is the fourth generation to claim architecture as her profession. Her early studies of architecture were at Columbia University, NY and the University of Nottingham, England. In 2004 she earned her Master of Architecture from the University of Miami. She is currently a member of the faculty at the University of Miami School of Architecture. In 2014, the Mayor of Miami Beach honored Ms. Bradley with the appointment to Miami Beach Historic Preservation Board where she currently sits as board member of the judicial body of Miami Beach's Planning & Zoning Department.

Her projects have included single-family residential and small- scale commercial. She has worked on projects in the Bahamas, New Mexico, Costa Rica, California and her home of South Florida. She has acted as architect, owner and developer for several historically sensitive projects. A Northern California native, Wyn has long been an advocate for sustainable design

Gilda Santana: You're in a new position. Can you tell me a little about the program and what this new administrative role signals for you?

Wyn Bradley: I'm in a hybrid position here now—faculty and staff. Around the country right now there's a dialogue about how to create a fluid learning environment by bridging the world of academia and the professional world. Bringing academia into the professional world through research and scholarly activities that often times the professional world doesn't have time for, or the resources, or the methodologies to dedicate to that, and on the other hand, giving students early access to practical, real-world experiences in architecture in all kinds of venues. An architect can take on any kind of a role. It can be a governmental role, it can be a role in theater, the obvious traditional role through an architecture and/or urban planning office, interiors, landscape, real-estate, construction. Another common venue is the corporate world that has in-house architectural offices, like Starbucks that has their own architectural division. Giving a greater access, and an earlier introduction to internships for graduate and undergraduate. It needs to be upper level because you need a solid foundation and practical skills before we want to send them out into the world.

GS: What are the challenges you are facing as a researcher and teacher?

WB: Some of the more challenging aspects that come to mind, because I'm in the throes of it, are institutional cogwheels. Getting through legal, making sure there is transparency, making sure there is a code of ethics...they're not always the fun things to do, but they have to be done. Protection and preservation of whatever research is done, from the University's side, the office's

side, and then the student side. Dealing with the logistics is challenging. There are resources here. You just have to navigate to find the right vein to tap into to find the information that you need. I find it challenging because it's new to me.

I love teaching in the classroom. That's what fills me. Whether you're a teacher in Pre-Kindergarten, or in higher education—anywhere in that spectrum—teaching is a calling. It's something where you get more than you give. And the real reward is when students come back and share with you where they've been and where they're going.

GS: You were a student here. Do you recall any memories that are near and dear?

WB: I was a student in the late 90s in the three-year graduate program. When you're in school it's a special time. I started with a fabulous class. We've all gone on to do interesting and diverse things. I was married at the time and had a child. Although I had outside responsibilities, school is a time that you get to bracket your life. It allows for a certain level of exodus from the everyday.

Currently in my practice we are working on three homes all of which have a historic nature; one from the 20s, one from the 30s and one from the late 40s-early 50s. All of them have to do with bringing the home to the new standards of the family and living in today's world. What is good is that our clients have a basic appreciation and understanding of the core design intention. Very rarely do I have to convince a client. I sit on the Historic Preservation Board of Miami Beach, as well as the Sea-level Rise Committee which combines my interests in historic preservation, resiliency, and sea-level rise. How do you write a code that allows for, or, encourages adaptation

and preservation? There are a lot of heartfelt discussions happening at high levels in the city right now. Everyone's intent is to try to preserve the identity of the built environment thus leading to a cultural identity. It's cyclical. The culture and the built environment are inter-linked. One cannot be without the other successfully. There are no answers yet, but the discussions are happening, and we have our students listening to those discussions and working with the same topics. I've also been helping with the Harvard GSD which is working with the city and doing studios on similar topics of resiliency. They have a program similar to our MRED program. The typical stance that a student takes is, "well, give me the answers, what do we do?" We're all looking at them—they have the answers. You have the answers! You tell us! I can lay out all the problems and make all sorts of suggestions, but you have the answers.

GS: Can you speak about your experience as a leader in a historically male-dominated profession?

WB: Right now, here and in other institutions, we're at a place in architecture where often times more than 50% percent of the student population is women, and that's a real shift, but that's in the academics. After they graduate, the next tracking is to look at licensure. How many of those who studied architecture are moving on and getting professional licenses in architecture? What we are seeing is that there is a cliff. Few women are getting licensed in architecture. We don't know why. There's an academic realm and there's a professional realm, which brings us back to our original discussion about the program I direct which is about bridging those two realms. I do have a particular passion for women and girls in leadership, successfully moving through society as fully participating members. That's part of the internship and research piece is to give them access to that, all students, but particularly the female students.

I have a long lineage of architects in my family. I'm fourth generation architect. My great-aunt before me was an architect. She worked in Asia in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. I remember her telling me that when she was going through school that she had to sign all of her work, "H. Graham". She won a number of competitions under "H. Graham". When she applied for graduate school, they realized that she was a woman, but then she had all these awards that she had won under her initial, which stood for Helen. I come from a strong lineage of women. My grandmother was definitely a matriarch of the whole family. She was married to a very strong man, an architect, my grandfather, who did not encourage me to go into architecture.

GS: But, not necessarily because you're a woman, but because of the profession itself?

WB: Predominantly because of the profession itself, but, he was of another era. He designed ski areas as a hobby because it was his passion. My mother was an athlete. She grew up skiing. She was asked to be on an Olympic ski team. He refused to allow her to do it, because females were not supposed to be athletes. It was a very different era. But, you can still see the cultural residue.

I identify as a feminist. I went to an all woman's high school and went to an all woman's college, and I wear those proudly as badges of honor. Sometimes, at a job site, or a cocktail party, it is still very common to get met with the assumption that I'm the interior designer, as opposed to the architect. Even when I'm introduced as the architect of the project, I'll get the soft-ball, fluffy questions, like "you'll have to come help me pick paint colors, or the fabric for my drapes". You might as well put me in a scientific lab where I'd get overwhelmed. Give me a good building

section! How do you build that wall? Give me that and I'm comfortable. I have worked on projects where the work is done through email. My name, Wynn Bradley, doesn't really indicate any gender identity. In fact, the majority of the people will assume that I'm a Mr. And, sometimes I don't even correct, I go with it. It's fun to dabble and continue the illusion. I was working on a project in the Caribbean. I had never met one of the subs [sub-contractor] who'd done all the millwork and the finished carpentry, but I'd communicated with him quite a bit. Suddenly, I was on the site and he blew his lid. It was a complete switch, and it became almost impossible to work with him after the meeting. Interestingly enough, the home was being built for a woman, a big CEO, an entrepreneur. The general contractor mentioned it to her and she fired the sub-contractor. She didn't want that in her house.

GS: How is the field changing?

WB: I think this is a really exciting time. It's a new era. Some major problems are coming up that we have to deal with. It's not just climate change, but the residuals of that like sea-level rise and drought. We talk about sea-level rise here because of our geographic placement. We are at a time when as a species have inhabited space, built cities, found places for habitation that involved clean water, fertile ground, that had some form of shelter. We went through a period where we challenged those things. We've built communities on arctic tundras. We built Las Vegas in the middle of the desert. We have the ability to do that. We're at a point now where we can see that negating the existing conditions might not have been the best choices. The existing conditions of most of our cities are now shifting. Now what? Do we become a modern day Atlantis? Is that ok? Is that the responsible thing to do? Or, do we deal with resiliency and adaptation, which is the

camp that I belong to, not do an all or nothing split, but work with the grays? It's a really interesting and exciting time. The scientific pieces are really coming into this. This is more of a nationalistic view, but a lot of our infrastructure, our national identity that started with FDR is crumbling around us and needs attention. But there's another renaissance there.

GS: What are your hopes for library support?

WB: I would like to see an integrated library. It's very easy nowadays for students to sit at their desks, and bring up examples through google images. They get a very myopic view. I don't know how we'd do it, but it's almost like you don't go to the library, but you're in the library at all times. I use this room [Architecture Seminar Room] as a classroom partially because you're surrounded by books. It also puts students at a really beautifully crafted table [Nakashima table].

GS: I'm all for dissolving the barriers between the library and studio, and the studio and workshop, and the library and the workshop, and the rad-lab and the library. I'm not sure how to do that. It's good to hear what you are thinking.

WB: The New Urbanism Archive, which I worked on in my graduate years is here, and that's a one-of-a-kind collection. Those kinds of materials are more accessible. We have to show that we can steward these collections.

END OF INTERVIEW

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