University of Miami School of Architecture

Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Adib Cure

Assistant Professor in Practice

Coral Gables, FL

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Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
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Summary: Adib Cure received a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Miami and a Masters of Architecture in Urban Design degree from Harvard University. Upon graduation he went to work for the office of Machado & Silvetti, and in 2001 he established the firm of Cure & Penabad Architects in Miami. The work of the office 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 Corporation Architectural Prize for emerging architectural talent.

Gilda Santana: How did you get interested in architecture, and, how did your involvement in architecture lead you to become interested in the topic of "informal settlements"?

Adib Cure: Partly because both my father and my stepfather are architects. Growing up I was always surrounded by conversations of architecture and about cities—in different ways. My father was more artistically trained, so in my early childhood the conversations were about painting. My stepfather who I grew up with later, had the more conventional training in an American educational institution in New York in the 60s. So I grew up exposed to architecture.

I was born in Barranquilla, Colombia which a city in the north of Colombia, a beautiful place. I grew up between Barranquilla and Cartagena. My maternal grandparents are from Cartagena, so I spent a great deal of time with them in my childhood. Then there was a drastic change. Because of my father's profession in architecture we were moved from Colombia to Mansfield, Ohio. I moved on a January morning from Cartagena, to Miami, and then from Miami to Cleveland. There I was in the middle of a blizzard in Cleveland, Ohio and I loved it! I finished my schooling there and came to Miami to study architecture.

I'll tell you how I came to UM. I remember seeing a drawing that was published in either the *Architectural Record* or the *Architectural Review*. I forget which one it was. There was a series of sketches done by students from the School of Architecture that were done in *prismacolor*. I immediately thought, "that's exactly where I want to go". A school where you can engage in the art of architecture. The drawings from the school made an impact on me. That was 1989/90? It was very early on. It was a time when our current

faculty, people like Teofilo Victoria, and Tomas Lopez-Gottardi were very young. This was right about the time that Vincent Scully came in to teach. He played a very important role in my education. Looking back, I'm much more aware of that now than I was then, of course.

Going back to your question about my involvement with informal settlements and informal cities...the connection to informal cities...this is the research that I am doing now with Prof. Carie Penabad and a few people from the Center for Computational Science (CCS), and in particular with Chris Mader from CCS. This research developed almost accidentally, spontaneously, through our involvement in teaching in the "Open City Studio". This is a studio program that travels to a different city in the world every summer. It was started by Teofilo Victoria in the 1990s with a trip to New London. Eventually they went to places in Latin America. When Carie and I came to join the SOA in 2000 they asked us to participate in the studio in Rome. Immediately after, for some reason we began focusing on the Far East. We went to Shanghai, Tokyo, Mumbai. On the trip to Mumbai, we had a preconceived idea that we were going to study housing. But then we realized that we were on the wrong track because the patterns in Mumbai are so informal, and so we realized that what we should have been studying was the informalities of the city. So that's where it started, and we mapped an informal city.

GS: What year was that?

AC: That must have been 2005/06. I have to check. The following year we continued our research in Cape Town. That was fantastic. In terms of my education those have been the most inciteful, post-graduate school and practice lessons about architecture that.

GS: It seems that these are the most "naturally" occurring settlements in terms of how people prioritize their needs. [6:50]

AC: They are. What you find are places that have a great deal of common sense about how to make things, how to build things. It's often by trial and error. Sometimes they works and sometimes they don't work. When they don't work it can be fatal, so it needs to be fixed immediately. What ends up happening is that they produce these incredible environments. I'm not trying to romanticize the thing because from a socio-economic standpoint it is much more complex, but from the architectural and urban design standpoints they are fantastically organic patterns, systems and networks, which is what attracts us to them. That's how it started, through these experiences in India and Capetown. It's also connected to the idea of the vernacular, which is of has been of great interest to me since the beginning of my education in architecture. When you come here as a student, the first drawings you produce are not only of the Parthenon, but also of vernacular buildings in the Caribbean and Latin America. Through studying that it becomes part of your architectural DNA. So when we saw these informal settlements in Capetown and Mumbai we realized that they were these vernacular expressions of urbanity. That was also an attraction. We wondered how can we continue to research these? Do we go back to India every summer? In Colombia I grew up around these kinds of places, so we thought that it made the most sense to travel to Barranquilla which is a two-hour flight away.

GS: So, Barranquilla is at the focus of your research.

AC: The informal settlements in and around Barranquilla. The first analysis happened through the Open City Studio with pencil and paper and a lot of sweat and tears because it's a lot of hard work—and eventually, Autocad. We eventually took students in a sponsored studio to Barranquilla and used pencil and paper again and used basic google map tools. They didn't exist on google at the time. We presented our research at a lecture at the University, and Chris Mader was in the audience. Chris approached us and invited us to collaborate by incorporating more advanced computer software. That's where the drones mapping came in. We take aerial photographs of the settlements through a process of rectification, they're orthogonal. Then the photographs become 3D drawings, which are then flattened to become plans. The idea was to map places that hadn't been mapped before. That's the story and the connection to CCS. The research has continued. Now we are exhibiting at the Smithsonian next Friday with CCS.

GS: Can you tell me about the exhibit? What is the title of the exhibit?

AC: We are calling the studies "vernacularology" , which is a name we came up with to describe the study of vernacular patterns of architecture and urbanism. It's a made up name. It's a science that we have been developing and the name was coined at the School of Architecture. The exhibit is titled, *Vernacularology,* and it shows the mapping research work that we've been doing with the CCS. We're going to show images of the projects that we developed for cities. But, it's not just about mapping. It's also about proposing buildings and infrastructural urban design proposals. The bulk of the effort has really been

about discovering, learning and understanding the DNA of these places. It's not about going in there with preconceived ideas of what we can do, but rather to learn as to enable us to have a better understanding of them before intervening with developments.

GS: What is the larger context within which this project fits in to the Smithsonian exhibit? What is the unifying theme for all of the selected projects?

AC: It's the use of technology in contemporary academic research. In our case it's the combination of hand-drawing and mapping, but also digital mapping with computer aided software. Several groups from UM and from schools nationwide made proposals and ours was one that the Smithsonian selected.

GS: My understanding of part of your work is that you encourage the inhabitants of the places where you do your research to be active participants in the process. Can you speak about that?

AC: It happened naturally as well. The way it works is that in order to understand the nature of the place we have to have contact with, and develop relationships with the people that live there. The first thing we did was ask to speak to community leaders. We immediately discovered that they are very well-organized. They are divided into neighborhoods, and each one has a leader, typically strong women. Little by little by little we were able to develop their trust. It took time. We've been going to one place continuously since 2008-09. That's how they initially became a part of the process. What

we've been doing lately is developing methods and giving them the tools that will allow them to continue mapping as these places grow and change.

GS: What tools are they using? Are they using drones?

AC: Right now we're developing that. In some cases they're using apps, but in some cases they use simple pencil and paper with the aid of some basic digital drawings. The idea is for the younger generation to use it as an education tool as well. That's why we're bringing in people from the library now, like Tim Norris, who is a cartographer. We want to bring in other people from UM from Education, the Marine School, because we want this to grow. The research has been noticed by other people at UM, so people have contacted us. There are other people doing similar things around UM, but we weren't connected. Maybe this could lead to a kind of center that goes beyond architecture and computing, but would also include marine science, nursing and health, communication. We have amateur films that we've done ourselves. There are stories that can be told about the history of these places told by the people who live there. **18:07**

People don't know the histories of their own settlements until you start talking to them and piecing the bits of information together. You realize that they've been around for forty years. There's a moment when the settlement was established...the stories are really interesting. We're interested in doing oral histories, film. The more people we can bring into it the better. There are many layers.

GS: Your partner in life and work is Carie Penabad, who is Associate Dean at the School. You design together. You work together. Can you speak to that?

AC: So...Rome...is an important part of that story.

GS: How romantic!

AC: Well, it's actually academic. We have a Rome program at the school of architecture. When we were students here in the 90s, you got to go to Rome in your 4th year. We hadn't worked together before then, but we happened to work together on a project while we were there. We finished in 1995, and then we worked in local firms for a while. We worked in the young office of Frank Martinez and Juan Carruncho. Juan was our partner for a while. We worked with Teofilo Victoria and his wife/partner Maria de la Guardia who are incredibly talented and generous people. We collaborated with Jorge Hernandez on competition projects. We worked with people that were faculty. It was part of our training. Then we applied to grad school, and luckily we got accepted to the Harvard Graduate School of Design at the same time. We were interested in learning from and working with two of the faculty there; Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti. They happened to have had a connection to UM before we came to UM. They had been teachers of some of the faculty at SOA—Teofilo Victoria, Rocco Ceo. By the way, that year, there was a big group of students that were accepted from UM. I think there were about 10 of us, so it wasn't lonely. We were in the Architecture and Urban Design, but others were in different programs. I think the reason for that was because Rodolfo and Jorge were both directors at that time. I

guess they had an affinity for UM students. So that's how we ended up there. Immediately after finishing we got married, and we stayed in Boston working for Rodolfo and Jorge's office for about three years on and off. We happened to apply at the same time to UM, the stars aligned, and we both got offers. We came in the summer of 2000 through the *Open City Studio* in Rome. We established our practice here in Miami immediately after. We had some little projects that we worked on early on.

GS: You guys designed Oak Plaza in the Design District before it exploded.

AC: We have to thank Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk for that. She was the Dean at the time. She can tell you the story from another angle, but as we understand it, she was asked by Craig Robbins to recommend young designers in town to do some small projects within the Design District. She recommended the office of Cure and Vogt. Eric Vogt was also a UM grad. He is now the town architect for Alys Beach. And then she recommended Carie and I. It started as a small project, but we made it larger. That's how the Oak Plaza project evolved—through that relationship.

Another project that was important to our early careers, came through a recommendation from Jorge Hernandez, we were approached by a woman who had a little house in the Cape Dutch Village in Coral Gables. She just wanted to restore it, but little by little, it became a larger project of the restoration of the house. It was important for us because it introduced us to that type of work, and it was a work of love for both her and us. As of the last six years, we've been working outside of Miami, coinciding with the

economic downturn. We were asked to participate in projects in Guatemala and we've been working there since.

GS: What is your relationship to the city of Miami? [**27:40]**

AC: That's a tough question. I love Miami, actually. Miami has its shortcomings, right? It's easy to be critical of the place. It's a city that's growing. It's a city that is a kind of laboratory where things are tested. Maybe it's been said by others too, that it's a city of the future in many ways because it's a city where we have this global world coming together—not only Latin America, but also Europe and the rest of North America. Because of its geographic location and condition it has an incredible connection to the rest of the world. And, because of that I think it's a very interesting city. For a young design office it has a lot to offer. It's full of opportunities that you may not find in places like Boston, which is already full of established architects and designer. So, arguably, it's a bit more difficult than in Miami. Being a Caribbean man, and having grown up in the Caribbean, the connection to the Caribbean is very important to me. Miami had that. We taught at Yale for one semester, and I told my friends there that it was easier to get to Colombia from Miami—2 hours door to door, than it does to get to New Haven from Boston, which on a good day could be 8 hours. So, that kind of connection with the Caribbean is very important for us.

GS: What was it like working at Yale?

AC: It was a great experience. I think it was in a way, almost familiar. For me, Vincent Scully was an important figure in my education. Looking back, the period that he was here was one of the most important contributions to my education. His lectures were incredibly inspirational.

GS: Can you give me an example? [30:15]

AC: His lectures for example on the skyscraper, where he talked not just about the New York skyscraper, but also about the Mayan pyramids and the influences that they had on the skyscraper as a building type; the way he introduced art and culture into the discussion; that things were not necessarily black or white, but that things could be both black and white. He could talk about the Greeks, but could also introduce Frank Lloyd Wright, Aldo Rossi and Venturi into the same conversation. That kind of broad spectrum of interests that wasn't just about the classical, but also about the modern and contemporary, to us was incredible. It resonated. Those were great lessons to learn. That kind of open mindedness to architecture is what shaped me as an architect and designer.

When we arrived at Yale we could see and feel that legacy in the school. As a place it was very welcoming and collegial. Not like Harvard. At first we wondered if it was true, 'is it always like this, or is it that we're just new'. In that sense we thought it was very healthy.

GS: What do you like to teach? What do you think your strengths are in teaching?

AC: I used to teach lighting and acoustics for fourteen years (laughing). I'm not going to say I was forced to do it, but it was part of my requirement when I first started teaching. It was one of those things that probably no one else wanted to teach and there I was a young faculty who had to teach it. I learned many aspects of architecture because of it. I approached it from the position of how lighting and acoustics and sound are integrally connected within the world of architecture, but it wasn't necessarily my favorite. I enjoy teaching drawing. I draw. We still draw by hand at the office, not only digitally. We like to produce drawings that are a combination of hand-drawing and digital drawing. Teaching drawing for me is important and having that relationship to drawing is important. Urban design is also important to me. Right now I'm teaching a class called "Made in Miami", which is about looking at Miami from a non-conventional point of view. It looks at everyday Miami that perhaps no one really pays attention to.

GS: For example the "*ventanita*" [little window]. Sadly, the one that was my favorite was demolished.

AC: Yes, because Miami's changing. We're trying to document that Miami before it disappears.

GS: There's always Mary's on 27th Avenue.

AC: That's a good one. On the corner next to the laundromat, and there's a guy that makes noodles just behind it. So, I also teach urban design courses.

One of my favorite classes that has taught me the most even though I teach in it, is the Open City Studio because it has exposed me to the world. I'm forever grateful to Teofilo to have invited me to participate in this opportunity. I am very thankful and lucky. From the point of view of teaching, it's one of the most fulfilling.

GS: You enjoy teaching drawing and clearly, this is a very critical pedagogical legacy for the school. What is your approach to maintaining the legacy of drawing within the school while moving forward with technological advancements in the electronic graphic representation of architecture?

AC: I don't know that I have the answer to that. It's a very important question for us right now. How do you move forward without doing away with your strengths and legacy? I think it's fundamental to learn about architecture. Now that we've passed accreditation, I think that this is something that will be seriously addressed. How do you not lose the relationship to the tactile? Does a T-square have to be involved? I don't think so. Even within the circle of friends here we had difficult discussions about not doing any more ink on mylar a few years back. We had this tradition of inking by hand on mylar. We had masterpieces of drawing by students. It just didn't make sense anymore. No one ever talks about it anymore.

When we were in Tokyo we were talking to the guys at Atelier Bow Wow. They do a lot of hand-drawing. Not everything, but they still do it. It's about keeping a balance between the two. The notion of teaching students by integrating hand-drawing with digital

drawing in the first semester was an attempt to do a forward moving approach. I think that has to move forward even more. We're working on it.

GS: I would hate to see hand-drawing disappear entirely, but at the same time I understand why the need to change.

AC: Well, that's the angst within the school because most people here have that connection to drawing. I think it's a healthy conversation that we need to continue and now is the time to do it.

GS: What do you think that the identity of the school is? Do you think it's necessary to have an identity?

AC: I have less angst about that. The one thing that I think that we all share here is our connection to a city and how architecture is related to it. How we design cities. From freshman year students are introduced to the city as a laboratory. The school has had that consistent ideology, but over time it shifted. The period when Vincent Scully was teaching, in my opinion, there was a moment there when the school had a particular identity that evolved into something else, and I think that's fine. I think that's healthy. I don't think the school is a "classical" school, nor is it vernacular. I think it has gone through multiple ways of thinking about architecture and cities, but it always goes back to the city. That to me is the most salient characteristic of the school—this relationship to the city. It comes from that "Scully" lesson. Others may say that it is the influence of Colin Rowe and the

Cornell strain of faculty like Jose Gelabert-Navia and Carmen Guerrero. There is a Yale connection, and a GSD one. But if you connect them it all comes back to the city and quite pluralistic in the end. The open-minded approach to architecture is what makes this place unique.

GS: Even in the small capacity of this library, we have tried to make collections as pluralistic and the space as experimental and exploratory as possible. I would love to make the library into a giant laboratory.

AC: I think that it will have a positive impact on the way that the school develops in the next decade. [46:18]

GS: How are you documenting/curating your research materials, the photographs, the data...? Do you have an organizational system?

AC: If I told you "yes", I'd be lying. We've been scrambling to get everything together for the exhibit next week. It's everywhere. You know how it is—we teach studio and when the studio's over we compile all that information, and then the next time we go somewhere else and document that it's in another bin. This has been a great exercise. We just dumped everything we had into one bin. Now we have a sense of the drawings, the photographs, the videos, the models...you know we had models from 2009 that we're now fixing to take to the exhibit. So, to answer you, we don't have it.

GS: I would love to help whatever way I can. Maybe that's something that I can touch base with Tim (Norris) on now that he's involved in your project.

AC: Now he's part of it and he knows more about it. The more connections that we have with other people on campus, it's healthy and productive. By the way, my thing these days is about generosity. The more generous you are and the more open you are with your work the more you can contribute. Just put it out there. Now we have so many friends that want to work with us because of that.

GS: I'm all about freedom of information. It's there. Use it. Take it. How can the library help you with your research?

AC: Did I tell you that I used to work here through my undergrad?

GS: Did you? Wow!

AC: I was one of those guys that knew where everything was. The Library has helped me immensely really. We use it all the time. I know you want to do more but you've made it so much more accessible. You need more help from us to make it grow.

GS: I'd love to have an archivist so we can continue growing collections. Someone who understands not just paper archives but digital materials as well.

AC: I agree. Well Tim is part of that.

GS: This is the most meaningful work I've done professionally. Pay it forward.

AC: I know that you've been part of that conversation, but outside of those immediate library conversations that I've been a part of, it's always been there. I'm sometimes hard to find because of class scheduling and travel, but we can do this again over coffee, and also with Carie [Penabad].

GS: And that would be an entirely different conversation!

AC: You should talk to Tomas Lopez-Gottardi and Tom Spain. We haven't talked about him, but if we talk about drawing and curriculum development at the School of Architecture, you need to include Tom in the conversation. Literally, in the shaping of the school that we have now, Tom is fundamental. I think that in the future, twenty years from now, when we listen to these conversations, it will be interesting to see where we were.

GS: Thank you very much. That concludes today's interview with Adib Cure.

END OF INTERVIEW
Gilda Santana
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