

University of Miami School of Architecture
Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Rocco Ceo,
Professor & Director of UM Design Build Program
Miami, Florida, October 14, 2016

Interviewed by Gilda Santana
Recorded by Gilda Santana
Interview Length: 53:42 min

Summary: Rocco Ceo, AIA, LEED AP, Professor of Architecture, teaches courses in design, foundation courses in freehand and mechanical drawing, color theory, Michelangelo, HABS and HALS. He has produced drawings of the elements of Florida's landscapes as well as the documentation of seminal sites in the history of South Florida such as Vizcaya and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas home.

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

Rocco Ceo: One of the challenges of visiting any archive and working with primary source materials, is being disciplined to stay on track, focus on the areas that you're there to do work on, not getting distracted by other cool and interesting things you'd like to look deeper into. At Vizcaya, the collection is broad and includes a digital collection of drawings, thousands of letters, objects, historic photographs. It was a very well documented project while it was designed and built, and that archive, luckily, was saved, and then recently digitized so it's accessible.

I recently gave a talk on Vizcaya at an art and architecture conference. I discussed how the two previous books on Vizcaya—one by Rbczynski & Olin, and another by Harwood—neither one of them had more than just a couple of drawings in the book. Probably because the material was not accessible, not cataloged, not digitized, so it was really difficult to use and reproduce the work. One of my goals, now that it has been digitized, is to co-author a book with Kathy Wheeler on the drawings of Vizcaya. So, this paper which focused on full-scale drawings, I'm hoping is just the first essay on the larger collection of topics that we might write about. The reason that it could be such an interesting book is that Vizcaya looms large in the national picture as a gilded age project of great accomplishment. It's a place that was built by artists and architects at a very high level of finish. It was all documented at the time. One of the great lessons of Vizcaya is that it predates Coral Gables, and many of the important projects that happened immediately after. Vizcaya was a tabula-rasa. It was the first project of a certain scale and

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

quality and level of finish, but it was grappling with all those questions of how to build in the tropics. How do you build a Venetian palace? How do you build a formal garden in the tropics? Nobody knew anything about hurricanes and tidal surges. They didn't know what would grow here easily. So you get an incredible weaving together of local knowledge, and local builders and naturalists intersecting with these people trying to do this unprecedented project, which makes it an interesting piece of research.

One of the great things about Miami is that it's a young city. I've done lots of documentation of historic landscapes and architecture here. It started in 1896 for all practical purposes. Other cities like Coral Gables followed not too long after that. There are a lot of people still living and some people that recently passed that were here at the very beginning. I remember going to Marjorie Stoneman Douglas' house in Coconut Grove on Stewart Avenue, and documenting it for the Land Trust of Dade County. It looks like a little English cottage with half-timbering and what would have been a thatched roof. She lived in that house from the moment she got here until she passed at the age of 104 or 105. She could talk about putting in the floor in 1917. That's an incredible thing about Miami, that there's still people around that can tell you about what was going on in the 1920s and 30s--not so much anymore. One of the great things about this place is that you're in it as it's happening. You're not looking at material that's hundreds of years old. You only need to go back a hundred years in Miami.

I started the Design Build Program with Jim Adamson of Jersey Devil fame in 2009. We started the project as a way of expanding the experiences of the students by giving them an opportunity to have a hands-on experience with architecture, to put into real terms things

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

like tolerances, what's a reasonable dimension to build to, what does it mean to work with different materials. It spawned a new interest, in my view, of the role that the architect played traditionally in construction as well as design over time. Things are changing in a way that we're returning to a much earlier period when architects were much more involved in the building and construction of their projects, not so much drawing, designing, and then handing off to a contractor, and doing a little bit of supervision. In today's world with digital fabrication and being able to make things fairly readily and quickly with CNC routers, and so on, students are getting much more involved in the production of their own projects. I think that's going to be a trend in practice. Being a small firm that is happy and in complete control of their projects rather than aspiring to be the large firm and grow and grow. From a research point of view, I think that having access to materials, being able to show students the real thing, being able to hold it, feel its texture, its weight and quality of materials is another level of research and interaction with materials that's different than opening up a book and looking at a project that was built in Spain and trying to really imagine what it looks like. I had a professor at Harvard, Edward Seckler, who told me that he never lectured about a building that he had not experienced in the flesh. He found it dishonest to talk about a building that he hadn't experienced physically. You can end up being a scholar about the history of a building and architect who built it, but that somehow only tells a part of the story. I feel that design/build is like that. You can draw architecture over and over again, design models, and that's good, but until you build something at full scale you won't have a full understanding of it.

I think what the students get in design/build is that exposure. They suddenly understand that buildings aren't made out of graphite and colored pencil, but that they're

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

made out of things that are solid and heavy, and that they have to have tools to put it together, and that tool has to fit into someone's hand. They start to realize a whole different dynamic in terms of the building. What something looks like physically and what is actually weighs is an interesting problem. For me what's going to be interesting in the future is to be able to go to a place where I can do materials research and take students there and have them think about it. Materials can inspire solutions. I think it would be really neat—this is a fantasy—to have a building that has a permanent collection of samples inside, with a palimpsest wall on the outside where the same materials are installed and exposed to weather so that students could see how they would perform over time. Is the material holding up? Is it degrading?

I went to art school. Art students always had filthy dirty hands. Then they would go to the library and get their grubby hands all over the books. You could tell which ones were the most popular. It tells you something about the way that art & architecture students use materials, which is very physical. Proximity is extremely important. One of the great things about our library is that it is so close to the studios. Students can pop in and get an answer to their problem right away.

I do a little bit of everything. I'm a generalist. I was trained back in the Bauhaus days when you were taught that any design problem is a problem you can handle. It doesn't matter whether you're designing a paper clip or a city. If your mind is trained the right way and you learn certain design principles, you can apply them to a range of scales and projects. That was definitely the way the RISD curriculum was set up. As freshmen everyone took the same curriculum regardless of what you were studying. So painters were

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

mixed with glassblowers, were mixed with architects, graphic designers...we all took 3 dimensional design, 2 dimensional design, drawing, English, and Art History for a full year. Then we got to go into our different disciplines. That was foundation studies at RISD. I still believe in that today, that even though you may have a particular focus in an area as an architect, or urban designer, or landscape architect, you should be able to either cross those boundaries, or be able to pull from different disciplines in a way that is interdisciplinary and works for you. Today everybody talks about interdisciplinary work as the future of education. For me, being trained as a painter is essential for architecture because the way that I look at problems in painting or drawing is to have a thesis, have something to say that I'm interested in talking about. I make a project out of it. It's kind of like an architecture project, but I focus on it in a way that has to do with drawing rather than making a building. One of the projects, as an example, were the tree drawings that I did over a number of years, and still do. I saw trees as important as buildings. They have maybe even more of an impact in the character of South Florida and the tropics than a lot of architecture. So, I started doing research on trees, and found that there are certain trees that are really important to the history of the place. You can read books by Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, or Monroe [Kirk?] and they talk about very important specimens and trees that were significant in the history of the making of the place. Or, they're lost, like the pinelands. It's mostly gone. I started documenting those trees as a way of telling the story that they were talking about. I drew them in such a way that they were like maps. They were scaled things that people could measure, as a way of being more proactive to say you could plant them again. You could bring these trees back. You can use them in

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

architectural ways. You can do things with them that will allow people to see them as monumental not just background fabric.

If you were to remove the landscape in Coconut Grove, what would you have? Most people associate Coconut Grove with the dense hammocks. Do you think people come here to go to restaurants? No, it's the beach, it's the Everglades, it's Biscayne Bay...it's the landscape that draws people here.

GS: How do you see the field changing?

I don't think I'm always the best measure when I talk about the profession. What I mean to say by that is that I have a very modest, and maybe alternative notion of practice within the profession. I'm an artist/architect. I choose my clients really carefully. I don't do projects that I don't believe in, or that are harmful in any way, socially, economically, politically. I'm very particular, and that's not a very business model, and it's not very sustainable. I think teaching has allowed me to be that kind of architect.

GS: What sorts of projects interest you?

RC: I like projects that are outside the norm, and typically with clients that are atypical. I designed a pool for a client in a wheelchair because I thought it was an interesting problem. How do you design a pool for someone who needs to be able to transfer from the wheelchair easily into the pool? One of the projects I've taken on is to document the Coral Castle in South Dade because the story is personally interesting to me. It's a quirky project.

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

It's basically folk art, and, more of a landscape than architecture, so it doesn't fit into any neat category. Even when I submitted it to the Library of Congress to start a file for them, they had to determine what it was. Is it Historic American Buildings Survey? Is it landscape survey? Is it engineering? It didn't fit into any of those categories neatly. We eventually decided that it's a landscape.

For me the project is great because of the story behind it. Here's this little man who came from Latvia with a broken heart, who designs and builds a monument to his lost love that morphs into a roadside attraction that he continues to work on until his death. That's a cool story. That's the kind of project that interests me. So, how do you teach that? How as a professor of architecture do you teach that?

What I tell students is that I'm not here to be the arbiter of what the profession is or should be. What I can do is show them the value of cultivating their sensitivity to the culture around them even more so than cultivating their talent. Architecture is a discipline that allows you to do many things. You can carve out the kind of life you want for yourself. I've carved out a path for myself that I find very satisfying. I love teaching and working with students.

I tell students, "if your primary objective in life is to make money don't study architecture". It's not the best vehicle for doing that. Learn how to write software, find other ways if that is the objective. But, if you like people, and you want an interesting life, and you want a life of study and collaboration in interesting ways, then yes, architecture is a great discipline. Architecture is a discipline that is a lifelong pursuit of study. You never stop. You can never say from a position of authority, "this is the way it should be done". When you look at all the great architects, you can see how their work changes over time.

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

For this school, I would say that we've come full-circle to "making" again. There was a period where architects draw, and somebody else builds, or, the drawings are even more important than the building. We had a really interesting niche in terms of representation, and I was part of that. I promoted it, and encouraged students to do new and unusual drawings, and think about how documentation informs architecture. But I think what's changed is that as the computer became more and more central to the way that students have grown up, not just being in school. They were born in 1994-96? That immersion in technology, has also created, I think, an appetite for making things and being more directly involved with making things with your hands. In this world of constant texting, and the dislocation that happens from making something on a screen and then have it printed somewhere else, makes student want to have an original experience. They want to make a drawing. They want to make a piece of architecture. They want to make things with their hands. They want to be able to say, "I made this. It wasn't made by the 3-D printer. It wasn't made by a plotter". It's a shift.

The bright side of the digital, virtual world is that there is so much more visual material and written material that you can get to right away. But, the down side is that the level of intense engagement is hard to get students to connect to. The five-minute attention span is fine, but the three hour, or five-hour attention span on one thing is difficult because their brains have been wired differently. I think that this interest in making is going to be a kind of mending of that, because when you make something, it doesn't always go the

way that you want it to. You have to correct, you have to change, you have to re-do things again and again. It teaches a level of engagement I think it's positive, and I think it's going to change the way that we do architecture.

It also makes you more self-critical. It builds a level of self-criticism into your work that. If you don't have the critical antenna to say, "Ok, this is good, but I think it could be better". The cumulative attack of problems and solutions begins to give you a level of confidence that you couldn't do before.

GS: What are your hopes for library support?

RC: I've always held the library in extremely high esteem. It is the School of Architecture's piazza, it's public space. The knowledge of the discipline is housed here, so it's kind of sacred in that regard. The answers and the questions are in the library. The library has evolved from the quiet research and reading space to a space of production. Production is happening everywhere. You don't just go to the library, get the information that you need and then go off elsewhere to do production and conversation. I still think that it's great to have quiet spaces in the library. There's something sacred about that too, because we live in a world where that doesn't exist anymore—a place of refuge where you sit down in a quiet space where you can focus your concentration on one thing. I do appreciate that. I guess the library is growing to accommodate more programs and social interaction, but in a way it's homeplate for the school because everything starts and ends here. Even in a regular course, you write a syllabus, you have a reading list, you do lectures and design studios, students go into the library to do research, and it somehow ends back

here. It's the place that everything in the school revolves around. It is the physical fact of the discipline. What you know about architecture is here. The building and the city are the physical facts, but if you want to know how they're made, you have to go to the library to find out.

GS: So that you can make new knowledge, new production.

RC: That's one of the things that I remember that Henry Cobb, who was the chair at HGSD when I was a student there, said "the great paradox of architectural education is that you're there to learn the knowledge of your discipline, and, be critical of it at the same time so that you can produce new knowledge for the discipline." So you have this dual role of learning and creating at the same time. When Henry Cobb stepped down and Rafael Moneo took over as chair, one the most impressive things about him beyond his great ability as a teacher and as an architect, was the fact that he was in the library every night—longer than most students. He was in there three, four hours every night looking at architects, flipping through books. I was so impressed because here's a guy that I would think already knows everything about architecture. When you sat down for a desk crit with him he could tell you the entire history behind the composition or the plan you drew. He never stopped being a student. That to me said the most. Here was a Pritzker Prize-winning architect in the library every night looking at books and magazines as though he was missing something. That tells you something about the importance of the library for the architect.

GS: What are your hopes for support from the library?

RC: What is essential for this library, and what is really helpful for me, is when I come in here and I have a topical question or problem, you can suggest databases and books that might be useful? Because you're surrounded by these resources all the time, you know how to navigate it. We're ships at sea without a navigator. We're not part of the world that understands how all that works.

GS: Yes, I'm the navigator, but it is a symbiotic relationship because if you don't talk to me about your topical questions or problems, I don't know where or what to look for. The process is an iterative one.

RC: Obviously you need more space. I think the future is going to be about more stuff. As much as the future is going to be about navigating the internet, it's also about putting your hands on stuff, just like you had the other day when you brought out materials from the rare book room. This topic came up in the art & architecture conference round table. At the end of it someone brought up the point that we'd spent that last three days talking about the art of architecture and the art of hand drawings, but we'd been looking at nothing but digital images projected on a screen. Wouldn't it have been great if at one point we'd sat around a table looking at original drawings?

I think there's something there that needs to be maintained. It is a space problem, but it's a good space problem to have. Imagine if you had five original Michelangelo drawings. People would come from all over the world to see them. You can look at them in a book, but it's not the same as being with the real thing no matter how good the quality

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

of the image is. When you put the real thing out there, it's almost like you're with the person who created it.

I just popped in to see the Alfred Browning Parker exhibition at History Miami. I have his books. I met the guy. I've looked at his work, been to his lectures, but when you see the work in the flesh, it's a really intimate experience—you're wowed by how beautiful they are. The guy comes alive for you through the work in an interesting way. I think Alan Shulman did an incredible job. He went above and beyond. The exhibition has certain scale and quality that connects you to the work even beyond the content.

The library as a place that has these different dimension to it is super important. I like our library because you can come in here, pick something up, have conversations with other people, you can pick up the latest magazine, and you can look at drawings from the rare book room. There are all these options that encourage you to visit it every day. I like it a lot. Other people from other parts of the university have told me the same thing. I was talking about libraries with John Paul Russo, and I referred to our "little" library. He said, "You have one of the best libraries on the campus. I love going to the architecture library because it's like a jewel. It's dense with stuff". He was very complimentary of our library. He thinks libraries should be places of browsing too, and, I agree with him. Just like you would walk into a museum, even though you're there to look at a particular painting, you see other paintings that can inspire you. I think libraries should be that too. Places of inspiration.

We are doing an exhibition at the public library downtown. It's going to be called "Four Architects". It's about architects that are focusing on art, not architecture. We are

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

putting together a collection of drawings for this exhibition that are not about our architectural projects. It's about architects drawing from the point of view of fine art.

Everybody thinks of libraries from the point of view of their content, but the architecture is important too. Some of the most impressive libraries that I remember most are not necessarily because of the content, but because of the architecture of the library. The Providence Athenaeum is one. The little private Boston library in downtown Boston is another. The Weidner Library because it's like a labyrinth of books. Each library has its own character, and I think that's part of the collection too. In my view it goes back to medieval library—the origins of libraries, which is that it started out as a book cupboard in a monastery. It started as a piece of furniture, then it grew into a lectern system, and then stacks. I think that doing a special book cupboard for here would be a really good Austin [Matheson] project.

GS: According to Jorge Hernandez this library started as a cupboard in the “old gallery”.

RC: I remember that story from Jorge. That was a year before my time, but, I remember that when I arrived we didn't really have a library. We had a stack of books over where the old gallery is now. We were coming up for NAAB accreditation, and Tom Regan, who was the dean at the time, said we really need books. There's books at the main library, but we don't have any books at the School of Architecture. We'd just started the school of architecture in 1983. So he came up with an unpopular idea for faculty to donate their book libraries. He figured if we all donated books we'd meet the NAAB the criteria of 5000 books. We couldn't figure out how to manage that. The idea fell apart, but it was a clever

Rocco Ceo
October 14, 2016

way to start a library. I think maybe that's the way to start a fundraising campaign for a new library, is to say, we're starting with a cupboard, but we need a building--conceptually. Let's start thinking about how to get there.

END OF INTERVIEW
Gilda Santana
10.14.2016