

University of Miami School of Architecture

Faculty Oral Histories

Interview with Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk

Professor

Coral Gables, FL April 10, 2018

Interviewed by Gilda Santana

Recorded by Gilda Santana

Interview Length: 56:55 min

Summary:

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, FAIA, LEED AP, is Malcolm Matheson Distinguished Professor of Architecture and Director of the Master of Urban Design Program. She has a joint appointment in the Department of Public Health Sciences at the Miller School of Medicine. She was dean of the School of Architecture 1995-2013. She teaches courses on urban design and built environment adaptation to climate change.

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and her partner and husband, Andres Duany are founders (1980) of the firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ). She was the Dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture from 1995 until 2013. She teaches courses on urban design and built environment adaptation to climate change. Plater-Zyberk is recognized as a leader of the movement called the New Urbanism, promoting walkable resilient urban design. A co-founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism in 1992, her teaching, research and consulting professional practice has ranged across new community design, community rebuilding, regional plans and zoning codes.

This particular conversation took place in the Paul Buisson Architecture Library at the School of Architecture.

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Gilda Santana: How many years were you the Dean of the School of Architecture?

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk: Eighteen years.

GS: What course are you teaching this semester?

EPZ: This Spring I'm teaching *Adaptation to Climate Change*, which is a seminar I began several years ago, and, for the first time, the *Vincent Scully Seminar*, which features three guests invited by the Dean, who give guest lectures and work with the students who are in the seminar.

GS: Climate has always been important in your approach to planning. When did you first become involved with that?

EPZ: I would say that it started when we started working on architecture in school. When we were undergraduates, already there was already a nascent environmental movement. One of our colleagues at Princeton was a graduate student named Doug Kelbaugh, who became Dean at Michigan. I think his graduate thesis was the first *Trombe* wall house, a house which he designed and built in Princeton which had columns of water which heated up during the day and exuded heat at night. There were certain technologies that people knew of at that time and were experimenting with, and we were very much aware of those things. Solar collectors were not new, but the tromba wall was then. There was a lot of experimentation related to environmental issues. Not only energy, but also resource

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issues—an early understanding of the limited resources and how we generally tend to be wasteful. I think this concern was always visible in our work, especially here in South Florida where the interconnection of indoor and outdoor spaces is always an element of design. Seaside, of course, very directly incorporated those issues, which we have recently re-articulated in a lecture we call *Green Coast* that illustrates them—the fact that it's walkable and reduces dependence on vehicles, the fact that the porches cool the houses, the fact that we weren't clear-cutting to build on the land, the set back from the dunes, among a host of conservation moves.

GS: How old is Seaside now?

EPZ: Seaside was planned in the late 70s—1979. The first buildings appeared in the early 80s. We were in school in the early 70s so we were applying already then broad strokes of sustainability. I recently read that the first prediction of the irreversible impact of climate change appeared in research by Chevron in 1988. Of course most people didn't focus on it back then. Most people became aware that needed to be responding to climate change in the 90s or early 00s. Andres and I were recruited to move to Minnesota during a dean search there in the late 80s. We realized how different the weather would be when we visited, that the types of buildings we would be designing would have to change. We essentially decided not to give up high perimeter buildings, which is what you serve hot climates. We made our own climate decisions along the way.

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GS: Were you teaching here before the school separated from the School of Engineering in 1983.

EPZ: Andres taught here from '74-80, and I arrived here in the following Fall. We were still a department in the School of Engineering and Architecture. At some point it became the School of Engineering and Environmental Design. When we became a School in '83, the Engineers renamed themselves a College.

GS: Were you in favor of splitting from the School of Engineering?

EPZ: I'm sure I was. I don't know anyone among the architects that wasn't. I remember there was a very tough engineering dean. I don't remember the number of students or faculty there were, but I do remember there was only one staff secretary that served all of us. Our Chair was John Steffian, who left to become Dean at Maryland. In his last year, he wrote a paper stating all the reasons we should be an independent school. Tad Foote was the relatively new President, and one of the things he did early in his presidency was to establish several new schools. We were all very pleased to be here in our then new quarters. David Weaver was a trustee at the time and he was asked to lead our visiting committee. I remember we were in Building 49 in one of the jury rooms with Weaver asking us to "dream big and tell us what's the biggest ambition for this school?" I have a memory of that gathering and of the group coming to terms with, "we're not Harvard, and we're not going to have those resources for a long time, so we need to make our name with something unique to us—that is how we began the school's focus on urbanism." When we

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were students, our faculty weren't really interested in cities, and they weren't talking about urbanism. We were just asked to focus on one building at a time. The burgeoning interest in urbanism came from Europe and we picked up on it: we realized it was something that could bring us together and at the same time allowed everyone to blossom individually.

GS: Were you looking at specific European cities or schools?

EPZ: No, but when the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies sent around several lecture tours with visiting speakers. A new wave of European architecture was included: the two Krier brothers (Leon & Robert), Elia Zenghelis, Rem Koolhaas, Massimo Scolari. And soon we learned about architects like Aldo Rossi and Giorgio Grassi. They were all talking about architecture and cities because Europe was still rebuilding cities after World War II—essentially unhappily—they were rebuilding modern cities on the Corbusian model, on the CIAM model, and people could already see that they were inferior. Krier was working with James Stirling when he did the museum in Dusseldorf that was a kind of metaphoric urbanism of one building that was made of many pieces. Our first work on urbanism—I used to use three terms—one was real architecture, projects that referred to the city metaphorically. The analogous city, which was a term that Aldo Rossi used.

The new wave of European Architecture was an important influence. While we were still with *Arquitectura*, we started the *Architecture Club of Miami*. At the time, the University was not having public speakers. So, we brought the New Wave to Miami, and then we started bringing other speakers. The local AIA followed in and brought in many of the same people to their annual conference in Key Biscayne. One of those represented

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an apotheosis for Tomas Lopez-Gottardi. He had several degrees from Penn, he admired Marshall McLuhan, and he was a rabid modernist. He kept talking about Marshall McLuhan. He was a rabid modernist. He was frustrated because he had a lot in Coral Gables and the City wouldn't allow him to build a house without a pitched roof, so he built a modern house with a pitched roof which he still lives in. It's a very interesting house. Listening to Krier at the AIA conference he said, "I got it all wrong. It's really about classicism and traditional architecture." Ever since then he's taught courses in classical architecture. And he's designed some very beautiful, contemporary classical buildings. So, all of these visiting architects had a big effect on us.

The first plan for Seaside was a metaphor of urbanism on a small piece of land. It was an intersection with a building on each corner—the *caido* and the *decumanus*, Roman forum founding elements. The first act of urbanism is the intersection, and later the Seaside plan evolved to be more complete. But there was a lot of theory about how you make urbanism, and, it was the moment in postmodernism in which interpretation seemed to be more important than advancing the ideas directly. Eventually, many of us moved out of interpretation and into direct reality.

We might call ourselves the "Mother School" of the New Urbanism. At the time that the Congress for the New Urbanism was started, the Institute for Classical Architecture and Art (ICAA) in New York was started. Smart Growth America started, and I think maybe the USGBC was founded more or less at the same time—that was all happening in '92/93. We didn't necessarily know that these were all happening till later on. Apparently, that was a kind of special moment. In much of the states there had been a severe recession

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in '89 and '90, and very often when that happens the academic world becomes more active.

It didn't affect the economy down here as much as it did in places like New York.

GS: Miami was rather isolated culturally, environmentally, geographically from the rest of the United States. How did that affect how you practiced and taught?

EPZ: That is true and we were very aware of it. Now it's different of course because of the Internet and the ease of travel. We tried very hard to stay in touch. I think when many of us arrived from northern schools we felt that it was a provincial place. We didn't realize at first that architects like Interestingly enough, people like Alfred Browning Parker and his peers were working on a regional language of design. It has subsided in a way, and the *Corbusian* brutalist influence was making its appearance. Our generation was trying very hard to stay in touch with what was going on in other places. We did it by staying in touch with the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York and our colleagues in other places, like Moule & Polyzoides in southern California.

GS: So you and the people that you studied with, your colleagues, were spread out?

EPZ: We were dispersed because of the oil recession of the 70s. Polyzoides went to California, Arquitectonica—Bernardo [Fort Brescia] and Laurinda [Spears] came here. We were all trying to stay in touch with the people who had taught us and what they were working on, but we were also contending with the realities of the locations that we were in. We were all very aware that we could make the choices of what those influences would

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be without being under the pressure of being there under the scrutiny of Peter Eisenman (the Institute) in New York, or whoever was leading the pack at the time. I think we used the distance to our benefit. We could be reaching out for the knowledge, but we avoided the kind of professional and academic pressure of being there.

GS: You had been courted for a deanship at another institution while you were teaching here. Can you talk about the decision to not take it?

EPZ: The University of Minnesota asked us to apply. We had been lecturing around the country and had a reputation as rising young architects. The opportunities seemed endless. We explored it, and, we seriously considered it, but then we decided that we could best continue our work from here. We didn't need to be somewhere else.

GS: How did your deanship here come about?

EPZ: Roger Schlunz the Dean, and he could not resolve divisions among the faculty. The central administration asked me to step in when he resigned. I thought maybe I could get a few things advanced in a few years. It took more time than I thought to get the new building.

GS: You had already started the program in Suburban and Town Design, right?

EPZ: Yes in '88. That was underway and doing well.

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When we first moved here, our buildings included a big ground floor space in Eaton. The central axis of our buildings ended in the double doors of what was a jury space, on both sides of which were the freshman and sophomore studios. Many of the faculty remember that arrangement and I think that's why we have always dreamt of a single studio building. They remembered how nice it was to teach in those spaces. And we had our own jury and lecture space. It was given up when Eaton was turned into a residential college and we were left with several apartment building's worth of small spaces. Eaton was a dormitory and we had the ground floor. When the University made it a residential college they needed the ground floor. We were supposed to get space in exchange for that which never really happened.

GS: What came first? The campaign for a building, or the idea for the type of building that you wanted to create here?

EPZ: Before my time, they got started on the Aldo Rossi building plans. He produced a plan that was difficult to implement.

GS: ...Which included a reading room in the middle of Lake Osceola. Poetic as it seems, I don't know how sustainable that would have been.

EPZ: That was eventually moved off the lake to another design, but the Board of Trustees just couldn't make that stretch. At a time when other universities were beginning to start their collections of "starchitects" buildings, UM was very cautious because it was a young

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institution and it didn't have large endowments. So the trustees wouldn't support it. Dean Ziff's father who was married to Jania, Teofilo Victoria's sister, liked the design and they gave a donation towards the Rossi tower, but the University just didn't move on it.

GS: How long after did you start a building campaign?

EPZ: When I became the Dean, I resolved to get us a building. I remember meeting with Provost Louis Glaser, maybe with the president, and asked if we ask Aldo Rossi to design a simple lecture hall. Earlier under Tom Regan's deanship, Dickinson Drive had been closed to become the site. That's where the big deck of Rossi's building with the pavilions on top was to be placed. I said, "We'll just put it there". Jorge Hernandez and I visited Rossi in his office and he agreed that he would design a simple building for us. Within a few months, he hadn't even started it, he died in a car accident. So we had to start over. By then University administration had a process for hiring architects. So we interviewed several architects including Venturi, Graves, and Krier.

GS: For a new building. Did you know what kind of building you wanted?

EPZ: No. We sat down with University facilities to discuss the cost for a building of a certain size. The faculty produced the program for a lecture hall, gallery, jury space and a classroom. Until then, every lecture class, whether it was structures, or history or any of the large core courses of the first three years, had to traipse to the other side of the

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campus—students and faculty. Coral Gables architect, Stanley Glasgow's estate provided something like a million or a million and a half dollars, and that allowed us to start.

GS: What was Glasgow's relationship to the University, or the School?

EPZ: He was a local architect with the firm Ferguson, Glasgow, Schuster and Soto (FGSS)—they were one of the firms that we interviewed. It was decided that Krier should design the building and that FGSS should do the production drawings. It was not an easy relationship, but it worked out in the end, and the building got done.

GS: You were influential in the selection of Krier.

EPZ: I didn't raise the money that allowed us to start. That was completely providential, but I did choose Krier. At one point the President said, "You've interviewed people. We followed the correct process, so who would you choose?". We polled faculty and decided that Krier represented an intellectual influence that was important to our school, reflecting our early decision to make urbanism our unifying element. It wasn't post-modernism. Venturi was important to me, but he was not really an urbanist, nor was Graves. Krier was a kind of intellectual father for us. That seemed important. Jorge Perez was identified as the trustee most likely to help us he liked the Krier design. Janet Gavarrete, the University Planner, didn't like it because there were too many underground utilities that would have to be moved and she thought it would be too expensive. Krier went back and designed two buildings on either side of the space that would have allowed all of the pipes and lines

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to run underneath, but, Perez didn't like it. He said it wasn't good enough. It would have been interesting. He insisted we should raise money to move the utilities. He committed to a million and a half of which he gave the largest part but he asked other in the industry for the rest.

GS: I'll have to ask JG about those dang pipes.

EPZ: And the pipes and wires were moved. They're now under the tree at the front. They were running straight down Dickinson and they had to jog around the building site. The connection occurs where you see the big green box and under the tree where Krier drew a fountain. He always wanted a fountain there. I said, "I don't think we can move the pipes again." To which he responded, "I don't see why not."

GS: Did I hear you say that you actually participated in the laying of the giant concrete slab tiles in the gallery? Those look really heavy!

EPZ: No we didn't lay them. We drew them. If you look at the floor in the main building and in the hall, it's patterned in what's called a cyclopean pattern which looks like the big rocks in the Via Appia. They are irregularly shaped and the joints are irregular. When Krier realized that the budget required a minimal cost concrete floor he drew the design. He could rise to any problem that the budget or the construction raised. He would complain about the lack of understanding and lack of money, but he would always come back with a resolution.

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GS: What did he want?

EPZ: I don't remember, but he probably would have wanted real stone. He drew this pattern very carefully. He didn't just note, *Cyclopean pattern* and draw an arrow on the documents. He actually drew the pattern very carefully. The contractor, who knew how much he cared about everything, said, "There's no way we're going to get this right". So, Associate Dean, Denis Hector and I said we would draw it on the slabs so the contractor would have a pattern to cut. On a July afternoon, the slabs were poured. The walls were up, but there was no roof. We were out there in the sunlight drawing the patterns on dry concrete. Denis had an enlarged copy of the drawing and we set about scaling and putting down the lines in blue chalk. And then the cutting was done. The building opened just before Hurricane Wilma. Some of us has just flown in for the opening from the *Mississippi Renewal*, a charrette for rebuilding Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina that the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) and Andres Duany organized. Andres brought a friend, Irene Sanchez, who had been filming the charrette event. She is now Krier's companion!

I should say that when we thought about expanding, my first thought was the library. But, the new building really had to be what the faculty wanted and that was related to their experience with the students. We revived the library idea again when the Perez building was completed. I tried to get Rita and Ben Holloway interested—they were friends of Vince and Tappy Scully. The faculty once again set aside the library; said they really needed studio space, and that seemed like a doable project. You've seen the 20,000 square foot program for the library that Tom Spain helped us put together.

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GS: What do you think about the NAADAA plan for the campus?

EPZ: I haven't gotten to spend a lot of time with it. I'm not sure we need the extensions that much—all those new buildings on the edges. There's one that would be the library. I understand why the Dean set it up now because of the upcoming campaign and he'll need documentation. Everything changes in the course of a campaign anyway. But I think that one of the things we should do is live with the new building for a while and see how we're using the old buildings before we make any major moves.

The idea of the covered walkways has been around a long time. One of the schemes, pre-Rossi, I think under the Regan administration, involved walkways in front of these buildings with a roof over those spaces before the trees grew up. That would be an interior space and people could walk along the edges, because right now walking through the spaces is difficult. It would have been nice if we'd had the money to do something like that before the buildings were designated for historic preservation. That idea for getting out of the rain has been around for a long time.

GS: This is a most selfish question. Were we to have 20 million dollars to build any space, do you see a library as a priority, and is so what would you imagine it to be?

EPZ: I have one new perspective on that. One of the things we talked about was connecting the computers and the library—connecting the existing two floors. I taught at Yale last Spring and I realized that the students weren't really using the library—they have a beautiful library. I went to the library with a student to look for books on the Charleston

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side-yard house. There was one book on the topic. I had expected that you could go into the stacks like I could do in my undergraduate years, find the book you were looking for and then find twenty other books next to it on the same topic. At Yale the library was beautifully renovated but the stacks areas were dramatically reduced with most of the books going into off-site storage. If you don't find them in the library catalog, you don't find it or necessarily know it exists. I think the beauty of finding things in the Paul Buisson Library is that you can find things next to each other because it's limited topically. I think that's really valuable. If we could maintain that, rather than going into that mode of having one of each topic and the rest going offsite, we could be unique.

GS: All models have their own measure of convenience vs. inconvenience. I would love to bring over all the "cities and towns" and core urbanism collections that are at Richter here.

EPZ: I think we should make that distinction: that we know that there is a current pattern of library off-site storage, but we would like to be different. There is a loss of browsability. Obviously space is a problem so we have to decide what we want to be able to browse—maybe it's the more historic things that require more browsability. Maybe materials about the latest trends, like the Internet of Things, or Maker Architecture, which tend to be electronically available don't need to be so physically available.

GS: When I ask students what their preference is—electronic or print, most of them choose the book. It's difficult to make that judgement call when choosing between formats. If

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it's a heavily theoretical book that is mostly text, I tend to purchase the electronic version.

And they still tell me they want the book. I'd like the library to represent a better model of bridging the intellectual and the practical and design aspects of architecture.

EPZ: I think that there are two different practices going on these days. One is the kind that BIG [Bjark Ingalls Group] represents which is the contemporary reaction to contemporary concerns and forces. It's very focused on the project and it's isolated from context and history. It's about getting the project right—giving it an identity, and getting the functions right. Then there are the architects that really trying to put it all together and include responses to climate, sustainability and history.

GS: Who of the more contemporary architects and firms do you like? Who do you think is following that track?

EPZ: Across the range, I love the classicists—that's a taste I acquired late in life. Beyond that, I think Herzog & DeMeuron are very good about taking on the bigger issues and the complexity of the profession. They are very much about the place. The PAMM [Perez Art Museum of Miami] just couldn't be anywhere else but on that site in Miami. They are very knowledgeable about the kinds of things that architects have learned over the centuries in terms of perception, siting, and response to vernacular conditions.

GS: I even love parking in the garage at the PAMM.

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EPZ: It floods. It's supposed to. And it works. That's remarkable. They have transformed garages by the one they did [Miami Beach, Lincoln Road]. They are incredibly intelligent, knowledgeable people and they are clearly much less about brand than others.

GS: Do you see any up and coming that you get excited about?

EPZ: You know, I'm sorry to say that I don't know. I'm an old person now, much more focused.

GS: No, you're not.

EPZ: I think it's not easy to keep up with it, because it's pretty random. Did you go to the Smart Cities conference? The keynote speaker was very interesting because he showed designs that derived from biology and electronics. It turns out that he has a big team that *Autocad* is paying for. I could see the excitement that he was experiencing as a young innovator. He was connecting the action seen under a microscope with ideas of artificial intelligence. We're learning how to mimic or recreate natural processes through computing and create forms that way. It could be scary, but I can also understand the excitement of discovery. How you transform ideas into the statics of building is another story. When he showed one of the building he was working on, it looked pretty standard. He was being inspired by something new and he was trying to apply it to the familiar limits of building.

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GS: I think this generation thinks virtually.

EPZ: We all are focused on the virtual. I sat in on one of the panels and it was clear that everyone from a variety of disciplines was thinking virtually. And I said, “That’s great, but you’re in a physical environment. You took the train to get here, and we’re sitting in this hall.” All the thinking that has been happening about this and all of the creating has been emerging from some urban, physical space where people are interacting. Somehow we need to understand that there is still importance to the physical place even though so much of what you look forward to is supposed to be resolved with the virtual. And no one brought up the Facebook scandal!

End of Interview

END OF INTERVIEW

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