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Amale Andraos and Dan Wood: The conversation at the heart of the design process

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Amale Andraos and Dan Wood: The conversation at the heart of the design process

Interview by Claudio Palavecino

Conducted by email (July 5th, 2018) and through Skype (July 6th, 2018)

In 2003, Amale Andraos and Dan Wood founded WORKac with a clear objective: reinventing the profession through new relations between architecture, city and nature. The Public Farm 1, the Edible Schoolyards in New York and the future Convention Center at Libreville, Gabon, are, among others, the result of this objective. Their work has been extensively awarded, including capturing the recent number one spot at 'Architect 50': Top 50 Firms in Design 2017 by *Architect Magazine* and AIANY Architect Firm of the year 2018.

In parallel to the profession, Andraos and Wood have become leading actors in different architecture schools. Amale Andraos has taught at Harvard, Pennsylvania and Princeton, among other schools; and Dan Wood at UC Berkeley, Princeton, Yale, Cooper Union, among others. Nowadays, both are faculty at Columbia GSAPP, where Amale Andraos holds as dean since 2014.

In this interview, Amale Andraos and Dan Wood pose their office as a subject in dialogue, which is, at the heart of their work; and through this, they build their way to think and to make architecture 'in the world'.

In a lecture at Columbia GSAPP in 2014, Mark Wigley presented WORKac as a 'no compromises' office, that is to say, if you have the resources, the capacity and the correct people, you can formulate any kind of architectural solution. In fact, your career path shows multiple interests and ways to produce architecture, what allows you to conduct a work agenda with complete flexibility. However, and just as your website describes, the WORKac profile follows very specific concerns, by placing architecture at the intersection of the urban, the rural and the natural. In this sense, is your architectural production the result of these interests? or on the contrary, is your profile an ex post construction produced by your ability to make architecture 'without compromises'?

AA: You seem to be referring to the constructed opposition between 'project' and 'practice.' We don't subscribe to this opposition, and do not believe it is relevant to architecture today. And so, the 'no compromises' that Wigley generously assigns to our practice is exactly about refusing these kinds of binaries which have been framed by others.

DW: Although, as an aside, the idea of 'no compromises' in architecture is frankly a little absurd. You cannot practice architecture without making compromises for program, budget, site conditions, etc. Our strength is to focus on a set of main concepts that are flexible enough to accommodate change but that can also take what may be seen as potentially negative compromises and flip them to where they actually make the project stronger. You need to be able to react to situations.

AA: To give an example of a more dialectical 'feedback loop' which we describe in our duograph: our interest in environmental questions started through practice, with an encounter of real conditions. We were invited to do a residential project in Panama. The research into that context opened up our academic research into the question of ecological urbanism. Dissatisfied with the technocratic discourse around sustainable design already at that time, we launched our *49 Cities* research. This, and the reading of Michael Pollan's Omnivore's Dilemma directly shaped our proposal for Public Farm 1 at MoMA PS1, which then resulted in our practice's engagement with the building of urban farms working with Edible Schoolyard NYC amongst others.

We may understand this idea of 'no compromises', not like the absence of an agenda, but about how flexible this agenda can be to convey topics related to ecology, infrastructure and other interest fields that you have worked.

AA: Yes, I think we are in a moment where what is interesting is how you assemble things, where design is becoming an assembly of different parts into something new. We live in a complex time, and we are not interested in simplifying issues.

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Mark Wigley (New Zealand, 1956) is an architect and theorist. Professor and Dean Emeritus at Columbia GSAPP. His most recent books are *Cutting Matta-Clark The Anarchitecture Investigation* (Lars Müller, 2018) and *Buckminster Fuller Inc.: Architecture in the Age of Radio* (Lars Müller, 2015). He is co-founder of *Volume*. Sources: arch.columbia.edu; moma.org

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WORKac: We'll Get There When We Cross That Bridge (Monacelli Press, 2017) is a 360 pages book written by Andraos and Wood. "Structured as a conversation between the two partners, the book alternates between explorations of seminal projects and discussions framing a series of issues that are key to their work". Source: monacellipress.com

★
49 Cities (Storefront for Art and Architecture, 2009) emerged first as a research project and then an exhibition and catalogue. Expanded and updated it is now available in its third edition (Inventory Press, 2016). "Rereading seminal projects and visionary cities of the past through an ecological lens (…) 49 Cities is a call to re-engage cities as the site of radical thinking and experimentation". Sources: storefrontnews.org; work.ac

★
The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (Penguin, 2006) is a book written by Michael Pollan, who demonstrates that our food choices "may determine not only our health but our survival as a species". Source: penguinrandomhouse.com

★
Public Farm 1 (2008) was a cardboard tubes temporary installation in the courtyards of the MoMA PS1 in Queens, NY. It was conceived as "a new symbol of liberation, knowledge, power and fun for today's cities". Source: work.ac

★
Edible Schoolyard NYC is a nonprofit organization that "partners with public schools to cultivate healthy students and communities, transforming children's relationship with food". Source: edibleschoolyardnyc.org

We are interested in looking at the world through architecture and bringing architecture to the world – using the world to re-invent architecture and vice-versa. As the world changes and critical issues emerge and change, so does our approach to architecture.

DW: I think it's also about being political. While we are not overly political, WORKac can be imagined like a political platform, which encompasses a range of issues as transportation, urbanism and sustainability, for example. A political platform, by necessity, has to be quite wide.

AA: It's like a platform for a progressive agenda in architecture.

DW: We are interested in looking at the world through architecture and bringing architecture to the world – using the world to re-invent architecture and vice-versa–. As the world changes and critical issues emerge and change, so does our approach to architecture. At the same time, there are also consistent questions and interests we have about architecture itself, and we look for design opportunities – through theoretical projects, competitions, writings, exhibitions – to test and advance those ideas.

In parallel to professional activities, you started to work as teachers and researchers in different architecture schools. These schools are constantly opening new frames to explore architecture, but maybe they're not framing how to apply these ideas – sometimes, 'over-theorized' – through practice. Do you think that academia is approaching to practice?

DW: Yes, it's changing. It certainly was not the case in the 90's, when I was in school.

AA: There are moments when academia has to drive what's under change in the world. Right now, in my role as dean, I'm finding a way to articulate – not in a technocratic way but rather through design solutions –, how architecture can engage issues of climate change, for example. Some schools ask these questions without focusing on ways that architects can impact the solutions.

You have emphatically stated your engagement to reinvent the profession by collaborating with different fields of knowledge, and then to imagine alternative scenarios for cities in the future. How do you apply this idea of 'reinvention' in your practice?

AA: The way we 're-invent' is by questioning every single assumption that is taken for granted in a project in terms of how we live, move, work, share, etc. That is where the research part comes in, to find alternates in history or in different places and to realize that things were not always how they are now, here. Sometimes, those alternatives are theoretical, or speculative. So, the experimental part is only the excess of options and scenarios, which we then test to see how they perform and what they produce. With time, we have come to rely more on our intuition than we used to – or maybe we simply have more experience – which has narrowed down the testing. Dan and I don't always have the same intuition, and this is where it is interesting for us to question each other's assumptions.

DW: And I would add that it is critically important to acknowledge limitations, especially in research and challenging the *status quo*. We are always happy to admit what we don't know about science, food, sustainability, ecology, engineering, etc., and yet the world offers an amazing and endless network of people who spend their lives thinking about these issues. What we can do is to channel and translate our interactions with these realms into design, architecture and urbanism. Our collaborations with people outside of architecture have also been incredibly helpful to refining our thinking within the discipline.

In some way, you are working with ignorance as a mechanism for collaboration. Sharing expertise may separate people into their bubbles of knowledge but sharing ignorance may allow dialogue. Then, a shared ignorance can lead you to work with a network of people to create something new.

AA: I would not call it ignorance. I think it's curiosity.

DW: It's the curiosity about what you don't know. I think architects, so many times, act like neutral observers of how things are, and that doesn't make it possible to rethink how they could be.

AA: I would say also the idea of the 'rules of experts' can be problematic as well, because specialization keeps everybody into their own bubbles. One of the reasons why we did *49 Cities* was in order to be able to think again about urban reinvention. This is a moment when we really need to think about environmental urbanism, ecology, architecture and all those questions of the 60's and the 70's. There is so much more expertise now, but it's completely technocratic, completely driven towards 'problem-solving' and completely lacking imagination. In history, imaginative visions like those of Fourier, Garnier or Howard, took a very holistic approach to reinventing everything, from politics to social interaction, economics to urban and natural model, in a comprehensive way that is simply not present today. Curiosity and conversation open space for imagination, and the ability to say actually that things haven't always been like that.

DW: At the same time, everybody knows that we can't keep going like we currently are in the world, and our present is actually a great opportunity, an amazing challenge to rethink how we can live together on the planet, because the way that things have always been is not going to cut it any more.

Are there other offices that have inspired the spatial layout of WORKac as a workplace? By taking in consideration academic and professional environments, how the place of the architectural office and studio have changed since you started your practice? What are those changes?

AA: We have always been an entirely open office, with very little hierarchy

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Charles Fourier (1772-1837) was a "French social theorist who advocated a reconstruction of society based on communal associations of producers known as phalanges". Source: britannica.com

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Tony Garnier (1869-1948) was a French architect. His farsighted plan for an industrial city, developed during his stay at Villa Medici (1899-1904) and published in 1917, is considered a milestone in the 20th Century history of architecture and urban planning. Sources: britannica.com; museeurbaintonygarnier.com

★
Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), a shorthand reporter in the London Law Courts, is the "founder of the English garden-city movement, which influenced urban planning throughout the world". Source: britannica.com

except for the fact that Dan and I share one long continuous desk, which has usually been closer to a window. In the past we have had a view of the street, and now we have a view of the back courtyard. It was never thought through, except for the fact that we early on forbid headphones. The idea was that if you wanted to listen to a certain kind of music, everyone else was interested in sharing that experience. It was important that whatever conversation happened in one part of the office could be heard in another as a kind of cross fertilization of information across the office. So, you could say that the lack of a sound barrier was an important factor to shaping the space. Today we finally have one conference room which can be closed – but it has glass walls.

★
Wieden+Kennedy is an advertising agency. WORKac's design for the agency's 4,600 m2 office in New York "embraces urban density as its motto: a minimal compression of individual work spaces that opens up room for a gradient of diverse collective spaces". Source: work.ac

DW: Yes, after designing the Wieden+Kennedy offices, we were inspired to give ourselves a bit more options in terms of meeting spaces. We do have the closed conference room, but we also have an open kind of 'work table' near our long desk and this doubling of options for meeting has helped. We were also probably inspired simply to renovate. After 12 years of working in less than ideal conditions we decided three years ago to complete gut-renovate the office and give ourselves a more mature workspace.

Although the workspace is fundamental for architecture, you stated in your recent book that there are not so many theories dedicated to study the work environment in post-industrial landscape. Perhaps, your own office is a field to experiment and to theorize about workspace.

AA: The question about the workspaces we have created is always how you scale up, because it's easy to have a sense of community when you are at a certain scale, and everything is open, and everybody knows each other. But the moment you scale up, that's when the sense of community and creativity drops down. In the case of Wieden+Kennedy Headquarters, the workspace was rightly scaled for groups of 25 people, and that creates a kind of neighbourhood. For the entire agency, however, you have to scale up and create spaces that can connect the entire company. If you look at what Google is doing, it's always that question of scale. It gets a little gimmicky. Creativity for them is being on a swing while working … very much small-scale thinking.

Which roles do the agents who belong that the office play currently? Have they changed if you compare them to the roles that the office members played when you were students or when you started working at OMA? If these changes exist, which are they?

DW: Our working process is one of research, discussion and dialogue and we encourage everyone who works with us to engage in this process and to offer ideas. Ideas start with sketches and then models, and the entire team is engaged in making these sketches and models. Amale and I are usually the ones who give out those ideas and sketches – we argue about them often and

hard – but anyone can also question those ideas and we have worked very consciously to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and inclusivity.

AA: OMA was an incredible school in terms of learning how to collaborate and to design through collaboration, learning to put something out there, to be vulnerable and exposed, to get criticized and critique others' propositions. Through that process, always directed at the time by Rem Koolhaas, something incredible that no one could have imagined *a priori* would happen. This sense of dialogue and critique is what has allowed Dan and I to design together in an ongoing exchange, but it has also been invaluable for us to carry to WORKac in terms of being able to direct others and build teams.

***Chip Lord** refers your office as a place "where work is more fun than fun!". Do you think the architecture office can be fun?*

AA: I think it's more a pleasure.

DW: There is a lot of pleasure, but it's not always fun. Most of the time, actual work is quite frustrating. You have to enjoy the process. There is definitely something fun in the intensity, the late nights, being all together, not always understanding what Amale and I are saying or want, and then working and pulling it all together, making beautiful things and sending projects out the door and into the world. There is something very fun in that, but is not necessarily clear that any little snapshot of that fierce process would look very fun to an outside observer.

AA: There are moments where you are so subsumed in a project, where everything works and nothing else matters, but the project. It's a kind of very special feeling, a clarity, a focus, a drive to create something.

You have stated that your projects look for experimenting new ways of living. The office workplace is a project per se that you have shaped for fifteen years, and through it you have experimented new ways of working. How does the spatial configuration of your office influence the way you work?

AA: The space of the office is very open, very transparent: models are out, drawings are up, materials move from one desk to another. This openness allows for certain ideas to be threaded from one project to another almost unconsciously or through overheard conversation. The openness and proximity of everything has been essential to the building of an office culture, so that even as young interns come and go, they immediately feel part of something when they arrive. The space is quite horizontal: everyone has a voice, everyone can be invited to critique a project when it's stuck, etc. The office actually hasn't changed at all since it started in terms of spatial organization, it's just a little bit upgraded now. Dan and I have a curtain that we can pull around our area

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Chip Lord (1944) is an American media artist trained as an architect. He is co-founder of Ant Farm, a collective that combined performance, media, sculpture, graphic design and architectural design. Source: museoreinasofia.es

to give us the illusion of privacy. Finally, the model shop is very central and combined with the kitchenette. So, it's also the most social space.

Why do you think your studio as a workspace is different from standardized offices?

AA: Different people work differently, and the complete open studio office like ours is quite unique – not unique among most architects –, but you don't find this as much among engineers and other consultants because these are different kind of processes. But that is possible because Dan and I are blurring the boundaries between the personal and the professional, that's what we want and how we designed it. I don't know that larger consulting firms have a clear sense of redesigning what the office space is like. They follow more standardized procedures and more professional 'best practices' in terms of what an office space must look like.

Recently you released We'll Get There When We Cross that Bridge. *Why do you expose, in the same ways* S, M, L, XL *or* Yes is More *did some years ago, aspects that go beyond the architectural project in a monograph – such as family and studio team anecdotes – in order to disseminate the production and the agenda of WORKac? Which connections exist between the agents who integrate the office, the workplaces and the architectural production shown in this book?*

AA: Architecture has a history of being used to conceal, to aestheticize, to smooth over and to divide the front of house from the back – as space, material, program, labour, etc. This certainly has contributed to rendering it as an art and creating its aura. But that aura has today backfired, if not for architecture, then certainly for architects who are seen as capricious, as 'luxury' disconnected from reality, without any real agency or capacity to engage reality in all its messiness. So, part of the idea of the book was to reveal and demystify the architectural process and through that reassert its complexity and the value of that complexity as a mode of practice and knowledge and exploring what architecture can contribute today.

DW: The other simpler idea followed what the book Above the Pavement, the Farm! did, which tells the story of building the installation Public Farm 1 at MoMA PS1. The book has become a must read for all the PS1 winners before they launch into building the project. We love the idea of 'open source' and simply sharing our experience to encourage others to launch as well. Architectural practice is increasingly hard, but it's also such an amazing way to engage the world and each other; and you have to enjoy the process. I always say a good architect has to be like Houdini: you have to enjoy being tied up in order to make the magic happen.

★ *S, M, L, XL* (Monacelli Press, 1995) is a book authored by OMA, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. The volume "gives an insight into the restless, ingenuitive thinking of the office through an era when architecture became a mere bystander to the explosion of the market economy and globalization". Source: oma.eu

★ *Yes is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution* (Taschen, 2009) is a visual book by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG). "The idea is to expose the behind-the-scenes story of how architecture happens, how ideas take form and how shapes evolve". Source: big.dk

★ *Above the Pavement, the Farm! Architecture & Agriculture at PF1* (Inventory, 2010) is a book by Amale Andraos and Dan Wood about the process that allowed the building of the temporary installation Public Farm 1 (MoMA PS1 Queens, 2008). "The participants' oral histories form the bulk of this book's narration, demystifying a fast-paced, complex collaborative process". Source: work.ac

This book is defined as a 'duograph' – in contrast with the traditional architectural monograph – once it's articulated from the constant dialogue between yourselves. Do these dialogues guide your work plan? Which roles do the different agents at the office play in these dialogues?

DW: The conversation is at the heart of our design process. We start every design session by talking through ideas and options and the back-and-forth between Amale and I is critical. It is always important that we are together at the beginning of design particularly. We have a rule never to agree to disagree. If we disagree it's not right, not finished. Even if we have to start over, we need to get to a place where we agree.

AA: We were told no one reads monographs anymore, so we decided to call it a duograph for all the obvious reasons: to undo the still dominant model of the single white male genius sketching alone on paper napkins. To render tangible the possibility of authorship through collaboration and conversation. And to give a sense of the team work and collective creative endeavour that is architecture. Everyone plays a role and, while we certainly are not giving up our drive to make architecture in the world, we – alongside many of our generations and certainly the generation that is emerging now – are doing it in a new way.

In a way, the 'genius creator' is someone who controls everything and renders a discourse about the studio agenda, and this stereotype may illustrate some kind of practice that denies dialogues and collaboration that you want to lead in your practice.

AA: This kind of single genius author who works alone and produces sketches represents exactly how never architecture happens, and yet, it's how we taught. It's important for us to undo that because when we first started, some architects couples and we ended in articles when everyone would always ask us how do we work. The assumption was something like "Dan does the architecture, and I do interiors", or "I pick materials and colours", which is biased for a very gender division, until we showed that this division is completely blurred, that you can't draw that line anywhere.

DW: And it's also about the way we combine life and architecture. It's messy, it's frustrating, but it's also creative and fun.

Do you think your duograph's dialogues expose the messiness of the architectural studio?

AA: Sometimes you have a problem, and you can stay all day on it, and you can't resolve it; but if you go for a run, or if you sleep, at the next day something turns in your head, and you can look at the problem differently. I think what Dan and I do for each other is like each one of us turns what the other one says on its

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head. The result is something that happens in between, we can use each other like a foil to critique and to keep pushing.

DW: Yes, the studio is messy, but every office is messy in their way. I also think the celebration of that mess is about love for architecture. When I was young, I read Kitchen Confidential by Anthony Bourdain. That book was amazing because it was so well written, and it opened up a whole world of restaurants. All these things that you do not want to know that happen in a restaurant, the fights and the tough people that work there; but you also get a sense of how passionate everybody is and how hard they are working. I think all restaurants fear that people see what happens in the kitchen. That if people knew what really went on, they would never eat at the restaurant. But, he showed that this is also a place for production and creativity, and love, passion and it really changed the way that people look at chefs.

AA. So sometimes it's good that the kitchens become exposed.

In architecture, everybody tries to be consistent, but everything makes sense at the end; before that, exposing the studio work could be a chaos.

AA: Yes, because you have to learn to manage the chaos.

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Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly (Bloomsbury, 2000) is a book by American chef Anthony Bourdain, who describes his 25 years' experience behind the kitchen door. Source: bloomsbury.com

Architecture has a history of being used to conceal, to aestheticize, to smooth over and to divide the front of house from the back – as space, material, program, labour, etc. This certainly has contributed to rendering it as an art and creating its aura. But that aura has today backfired, if not for architecture, then certainly for architects who are seen as capricious, as 'luxury' disconnected from reality, without any real agency or capacity to engage reality in all its messiness. So, part of the idea of the book was to reveal and demystify the architectural process and through that reassert its complexity and the value of that complexity as a mode of practice and knowledge and exploring what architecture can contribute today.