Amale Andraos and Dan Wood are a strong team. They met at OMA, Rem Koolhaas’s Rotterdam-based architecture firm, and opened a branch office for him in New York in 2002. Less than twelve months later, they took a courageous step: under the name “WORK Architecture Company” they set up their own firm in Manhattan. “We had the opportunity to work on very large-scale projects with OMA. And then we opened WORKac and our first commission was for a doghouse and bathroom (laughs),” recalls Amale Andraos. But the small projects soon became larger ones. They made their breakthrough with the Diane von Furstenberg Studio (2004–2007) for the New York fashion designer. Since then, they have been working on other large-scale projects, like the assembly hall for the African Union in Gabon, a cultural center on New Holland Island in St. Petersburg, and the renovation and expansion of the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston, Texas. We spoke with Amale Andraos about Edible Schoolyards, farsighted suburbs and her birthplace of Beirut.
Ms. Andraos, in business, a name is sometimes half the battle. You christened the New York office that you founded in 2003 with Dan Wood as simply “WORK Architecture Company.” Why such modesty?

Amale Andraos:
Names are often born under very strange circumstances and then you are stuck with them (laughs). In Norway, parents have six months time to think about a name for their children. But we didn’t have much time. The name WORK was kind of obvious.

Why didn’t you name the office “Andraos & Wood” instead?

Amale Andraos:
A more anonymous, generic name allows for the firm to grow and change, without ending with a name listing four or five partners. We were very conscious of not wanting to make it just about the two of us, but rather the understanding that it’s a collective. I think it’s actually an interesting generational shift as well. In the US and in New York, in particular, the name is still very important for the older generation. The newer generation is giving its identity a more flexible and collective understanding.

Is it true that your first project was a doghouse?

Amale Andraos:
Yes (laughs), that was fun, but a little ironic because we didn’t have a dog. But it was the first project that we ever did. It was a doghouse for an auction that was raising money for a program that trains dogs to become companions for blind people. Our idea was to give the urban dog this other, more rural or natural life. There was a treadmill, video screens and an odor machine, and the idea was that the dogs could chase butterflies or run behind cars or race against leopards. Or even be interviewed like a celebrity (laughs). Unfortunately, we were later told that dogs do not see in color. And of course we had all the video screens in color (laughs).

How did it go from there?

Amale Andraos:
There was a series of small interiors, including a job service center, and we did a catering company’s tasting room and showroom. The first real big architectural project was the Diane von Furstenberg Studio. We won the competition in 2004 and we completed the project in 2007. In parallel to that we started to really do larger competitions – urban scale competitions – and we started to get interested in questions of ecology and urbanism.
You’ve ultimately been successful in making the jump in scale. You are building your first large-scale project, an assembly hall for the African Union Summit in Libreville, Gabon, for 2014. What has changed for you as a result?

Amale Andraos:
The project was a big step for us in many respects. And not just because we have doubled the size of our office to now have 40 people. A lot of the ideas that we’ve been turning around – questions of ecology and representation – have found their way into this project. The building is part of the government’s “Gabon Vert” [Green Gabon] project and is supposed to make conservation and preservation of the country’s forests and green resources part of the idea of emergence. Most of the materials are from the region. We use an African stone on the outside, and Gabon produces a lot of wood, so we’re trying to engage that production in the interior of the building – in the auditorium, mainly. The real challenge comes from it being a fast-track project. We won the project in October 2012 and everything needs to be finished by June 2014. The political situation is quite intriguing. Gabon is going through an interesting transformation, where they’re moving from a pure dictatorship toward democracy. There’s a lot of great energy coming out right now, in terms of positioning the country, and in terms of investing in infrastructure, and schools and hospitals, there’s a real sort of energy. And to be part of that transformation is very exciting.
What links your projects is a close relationship between nature and architecture: you transform roofs into parks, put waterfalls in stairways or use light tunnels to direct the sunlight deep inside your buildings. Why aren't you satisfied with concrete, steel and glass?

Amale Andraos:
There are architects who would rather just look at architecture. We look at architecture, but not just architecture, and try to really weave a set of relationships around it. We are only interested in architecture as it relates to other things. So over the past few years we've been interested in architecture and ecology – or architecture and food, or architecture and fashion – and we just like to think about these things together and find synergies. Much can intersect even at the scale of a single architectural move.

Can you give us an example?

Amale Andraos:
For the MoMA PS1 competition, we developed the project “Public Farm 1,” which is about urban farming. We were able to apply a lot of what we learned during Public Farm 1 for the Edible Schoolyard at P.S. 216 in Brooklyn. The half-acre school garden has been in operation for the past two years. There are classes for kids and it’s really tied to the curriculum. And now we’re constructing the kitchen classroom and the greenhouse, where classes will be held and up to thirty kids will learn how to cook and be able to eat together around the table. For us this is a labor of love, and although these are just small projects, I think they in fact can be great. We’re very engaged in kind of precise intervention that can have larger impact. Through our work with the food community after Public Farm 1, we had really interesting conversations with great chefs about how they work in the kitchen: they can cook high-end, highly sophisticated food but also create something good with the simplest local ingredients. We don’t see the two as opposite. I think that’s a very inspiring part, that when you look outside of our small circle, you find that some of the issues that we bang our heads with have already been resolved somewhere else.
You teach at Princeton, Harvard and Columbia University. In 2009, you published the book “49 Cities.” It was accompanied by an exhibition with the same name and was devoted to the visionary urban planning of the 20th century. What have you learned from the ideas of the likes of Kenzo Tange and Superstudio?

Amale Andraos:
That many plans have been interpreted too rigorously in the past. Le Corbusier had once made a sketch of a number of Villa Savoye-like villas for a development in Argentina, and the sheep were grazing under the villa. And Tschumi, in one of his early books, had an image of the Villa Savoye with a big hay bale underneath. The idea that it was always only a pristine, dead green space is not necessarily so. It was merely a reduction of modernism. Even the Radiant City is a kind of city in the wilderness, in the sense of a non-manicured landscape. When we did the book 49 Cities, it was interesting to reread all these visionary plans from that perspective, and move beyond the accepted interpretation of what that green was meant to be.

What about the present: have master plans finally come to an end? Isn’t it time for a new agenda?

Amale Andraos:
It’s definitely time for a new agenda. Above all, the suburbs should again become a focus. There’s nothing bottom-up or unplanned about the suburbs – it’s like the most planned vision ever. With the “Federal Aid Highway Act” [Editor’s note: signed into law by US president Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, the act authorized the construction of 66,000 kilometers (41,000 miles) of highways], not only was the car completely embraced, but consumer society was also supported and the focus was put on owning a single-family home. So let’s engage with a kind of a plan which takes into consideration long-term consequences. You can’t really talk about sustainable buildings without talking about long-term infrastructure. And you cannot have long-term infrastructure without planning. We stopped planning, at least in the US, and then left it all to the developers. I think it’s certainly time to be engaged with the larger positions again.
As architects, you have the right to draw a city in one night.

Who should undertake the planning: the government, the architects or independent commissions?

Amale Andraos:
That's funny, because this question has already come up a lot. I think that, as architects, you have the right to draw a city in one night, if you want (laughs). It probably has no consequences; it's images – but these images can produce audiences, if audiences like those images and embrace the ideas behind them. If you're talking about implementing these visionary plans, of course there's going to be a very complex set of relationships and negotiations between certain communities, between governmental institutions, between developers, between urban planners or landscape designers, etc. You have to embrace a kind of complexity of negotiation – and that's where participation happens.

You were born in Beirut. What relationship do you have to that city?

Amale Andraos:
I lived there for three years, and left with my parents two years after the war started. We lived in the Middle East for the next eight years, and then moved to Paris. Then we moved to Montreal when I was eighteen. From there, I went to Cambridge, to Harvard, and then to Rotterdam, where I worked with Rem Koolhaas. I try to go back to Beirut once a year. And it seems I'll soon have an opportunity to go there more often. I now teach full-time at Columbia, and they have developed this network known as “StudioX,” which also has a site in Amman. I'll be teaching a workshop there this summer before going to Beirut and I'm also teaching a seminar on Arab studies, because I'm very interested in reconnecting with the region through the school, and in bringing some of our other concerns to look at the region again.

You have moved around a lot in your life. Where do you feel at home?

Amale Andraos:
They say “home is where the heart is” (laughs). I currently feel very good about being in New York. It's a fantastic city and a great place to be right now. I'm very glad that we made the move to New York, even though at the time, after September 11, I thought it was crazy that we would do that. But in retrospect it was exactly the right decision.

Thank you very much.

Projects

Interview: Norman Kietzmann
Norman Kietzmann studied industrial design in Berlin and Paris, and writes as a freelance journalist about architecture and design for BauNetz, Designlines, Pure, Deutsch, amongst others. He lives and works in Milan.

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