

In Conversation with Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk



Interview by Michelangelo Sabatino
Edited by Rafael Longoria

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. In 2023, she received the AIA/ACSA Topaz Medallion.

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. A number of innovations in professional practice, such as the traditional neighborhood design zoning code (TND), were initiated with students in School of Architecture design studios and first implemented through community outreach in South Florida. Recent professional projects include the design of the University President's house and the City of Miami Zoning Code, Miami 21.

Please summarize your educational and professional trajectory by providing two or three important milestones that made you into the person you are today.

Regarding my educational and professional trajectory, I think there are two aspects to it—one as a designer and one as an urbanist. The educational trajectory was one of studying architecture as individual buildings, and the design sensibility that I received came from several different people that I was lucky to be engaged with at Yale—including people like Alan Greenberg, who was making his first forays into understanding the work of Edwin Lutyens and beginning to design buildings in a classical mode, and Vincent Scully who taught the history of American architecture. Working with Robert Venturi also was an important part of that formation.

But before any of that, was my father who immigrated from Poland after World War II. He was an architect in Philadelphia designing early suburban branch banks. In his off time, he designed restorations and renovations of Pennsylvania farmhouses. And those projects had a big effect on me, particularly the beautiful pencil drawings that I saw on his desk, those were lessons in minimalist traditional design. Scully used to talk about the things that were lost in translation, in the diminishment of European elaboration transferred to the United States in the Colonial era. Those rural stone houses were such a great example of minimal traditional design. The power of their simplicity and beautiful proportions has stayed with me ever since.

The introduction to the city as part of our realm of work really didn't happen until after formal schooling. Some may remember the New Wave of European Architecture

that the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies sponsored under Peter Eisenman's leadership—when Rem Koolhaas, Leon and Rob Krier, and Massimo Scolari were introduced to the U.S. what was then known as a rubber chicken tour around the country. We had started the Architectural Club of Miami just then in the late 1970s, and this provided a new perspective on cities, largely presented through drawing. These were a reaction to European cities being rebuilt in the American suburban model after World War II with sad results, seeking another approach to urban design or building in historic cities. I think we must give credit to that European influence on all of us who were beginning to think about cities beyond the one magnificent Brutalist work that really was the focus of the profession at that moment. Many of the Europeans' drawings had a dreamy perspective on how cities could be, and on how one could think of cities in a different way.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the adjective “civic” as relating to a citizen, a city, citizenship, or community affairs. What constitutes, in your opinion, the profile of a civic architect today?

Civic architects are not a separate type—every architect plays the role of a civic actor. That word “civic” describes the shared realm of life, whether it is in government or in the physical environment. And from the architect's perspective, that means that each building should be considered a contributor to the public realm, and hopefully its destruction. Although, regrettably, I feel that we do have many of the latter. One example is that even in the hot, sunny climate of Miami, there is a current fashion to make buildings black. Which seems to run against all practical and functional aspects of sustainability and resilience. I don't really understand how that might be considered a contribution

to the public realm. What does it do to benefit the buildings surrounding it? I know you would probably like me to mention individual examples of better buildings—I can point to many historic buildings in South Florida—but I think that what is important is the understanding that every building plays a role outside of its own program, a role in making a place that is greater than the sum of its parts. A way to accomplish that may be in the design of how a building is entered—an arcade, a welcoming entrance, views into courtyards. Primarily, it is about presenting a face for the pedestrians passing by, embellishing the public realm.

Do you consider yourself a civic architect, and what role does your teaching play in this identity?

The contribution of a building to the public realm and to its surroundings relates to how it enables the character of public space to be safe, comfortable, and interesting. Comfort may be shade or protection from the rain. Safety obviously is having eyes on the street. Interesting is about allowing views in, whether it is to shops or to the lights of an apartment above. But given the prior answer, yes, I would consider myself a civic architect, as I think every architect should be.

At the time when I started teaching (which was long ago) and as a young person trying to be radical in teaching a design studio, I thought I might address suburbia, because that was not considered a proper subject for architects. I decided to consider it in terms of what our European influences were telling us about their cities (and rebuilding their cities) that we could apply to our seemingly very different condition. At that time, J. B. Jackson and others were looking at how the expansive American landscape shaped American urbanism. In a series of studios, we began to address things like housing subdivisions in suburban South Florida. DPZ was working on Seaside at the same time—with

students being among the team that worked on the first designs for Seaside. Some of them later became faculty members at the University of Miami who continued exploring in their teaching and research how cities should grow and how suburbs could be transformed. Florida was at that time a leading proponent of what was then known as wise growth or growth management, terms that preceded what is now called smart growth. There was an integrated connection of thinking and designing and research between the studios and courses at the University of Miami and our work in the firm, that at the time was called Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, because it was very small. It has morphed several times and is now called DPZ CoDesign. In projects like Seaside or Charleston Place—a subdivision of houses radically different from its surroundings enabled by a like-minded developer and the lack of policy elements to preclude it from happening—we were learning that zoning codes had really baked in the prevailing suburban model. There was a very organic back and forth between academia and practice.

Books and publications also played an important role. Pat Pinnell, who was teaching at the University of Maryland, discovered *The American Vitruvius: An Architects' Handbook of Civic Art* (by Werner Hegemann & Elbert Peets) in his university's library, which had not been checked out since it was first published in 1922. And it was an eye-opener for us, as was John Montague Massengale and Robert A. M. Stern's 1981 publication *The Anglo American Suburb* in which we discovered that our own surroundings in Coral Gables which we admired were part of a special generation concerned with place making and city building. In practice alone, we might not have found those books. We might not have engaged things in the manner that we could at the university, and where there was a real back and forth. At the university also, we could apply to the NEA for a grant to make the Seaside code into something more generally useful.

That grant resulted in the Traditional Neighborhood District Code, which later became a policy tool in hundreds of American municipalities. And that directly grew out of the combined work of academia and practice.

Tell us more about the importance of teaching about zoning codes in architecture schools.

It is very difficult with students to cover that ground, but we try in our urban design courses. It is not until you engage in the legal and business aspects of practice that it becomes meaningful. I teach a course on zoning, as part of the academic effort to help students understand that regulations are a powerful force in design. In the practice, we became involved with zoning because we thought it needed to change, and no one else was going to change it the way we knew it needed to be changed. So there was an ulterior motive. It wasn't just about following the rules; it was about making the rules better. Important also is giving students an understanding that we are not the top of the food chain, and that architecture is probably two steps down. Finance first, laws and regulations second—and these two often are competing for the top of the pyramid.

Can you point to examples of great civic projects past or present—buildings, landscape architecture, or urban design—that have inspired you?

I think that, like many in my generation, the educational focus was on individual buildings and individual architects. There are many great examples that have been influential. Too many, I think, to give you a list. But in general, as I said earlier, the American Colonial past was a meaningful connection for me. Maybe it was Vincent Scully, maybe it was the family trips to see places like Williamsburg, but American historical towns and cities like Philadelphia, Savannah, and Charleston continue

to provide invaluable lessons. Some in building types and others in urban plans. Those have been influences, not in terms of form-making (although Charleston influenced our first suburban project called Charleston Place) as much as in understanding what is possible, and that intentional form in cities can have marvelous, transforming, and enchanting results.

And then, of course, there are their European counterparts, which are much older. The historic town in France where I am now speaking to you (Uzes) is beautifully restored, having been architecturally curated in the last forty years by a town architect and a committed mayor. Cities from my family's ancestral country of Poland also come to mind. Warsaw and Krakow made a commitment to restoring buildings destroyed during the Second World War. Newer interventions are harder to think of, but Nimes, where Roman buildings are still in use, has done some beautiful recent work on its public realm. There is also some very interesting postwar work in Eastern Europe. Karl Marx Allee in Berlin and Nowa Huta, a communist new town for steel mill workers outside of Krakow, were bridges for us of how one can think of cities in the twentieth century. These inspired in various ways our first efforts—Charleston Place, Seaside, and Kentlands outside of Washington, DC. Now there is an aggregation of all those influences that we bring to our projects. There has always been the interesting challenge in American placemaking of how to bring a central, shared space (like the plaza that every Italian village has) into the American grid, or into the mass production of a new community. These continue to be an interesting challenge for students in the studio setting.

What differences have you noticed to the understanding of “civic” in different cities and countries?

In an American university studio, you don't have to be abroad anymore to encounter students with a

wide variety of backgrounds and a diversity of perception about cities. I had thought initially, when faced with this question, about the students themselves. What kind of preconceptions or perhaps spatial understanding do they bring to their new study of architecture? It's certainly true that they come with predispositions that they don't even know about. I remember in my early teaching years, my surprise when first-year Miami students would be designing a house and the building would sprout *jalousie* windows, the classic suburban ranch house window. Of course, at that point what else did they know? And it took me a while to understand that some of my Chinese students had little conception of urban space as we know it in the Anglo-Hispanic world. They had never experienced either at home or in the short time they were in the United States, intentionally formed urban space, and that this might be a desirable design goal. I think as teachers we have to understand such different perceptions.

One last question. What are the greatest challenges today in educating civic architects?

The complexity of the profession and of the electronic tools are two challenges. Very few schools have a coherent approach. Most allow a highly individualistic approach in the way faculty present problems and guide solutions. There is a desire for artistry on the part of the students. They decided to study architecture, not business or law or medicine. So they have a desire to be expressive. I have already talked about the opaque business and legal aspects of the profession. And one of the issues that is hardest to confront is the ideological weight attached to the style and language of building. The engagement with a myriad of computing programs—driving focus on technique and diminishing attention to content—just makes it even more perplexing, if not overwhelming. After being in the

profession for some years, you take it for granted that you have learned all those things. Teaching really exposes all the pieces that make up this complex system, as well as the incremental and unpredictable process of receiving and accumulating knowledge and skills.

Note: Questions were shared with Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk prior to the interview, which was held online on July 25, 2025.

Educating Civic Architects



Introductions

- 289 **Publisher's Note**
- 290 EDITORIAL
Educating Civic Architects
**Rafael Longoria and
Michelangelo Sabatino**
- 292 ARCHIVE
A New Look at
Civic Design (1955)
Kevin Lynch
- 295 ARCHIVE
Person-Citizen-Architect (1966)
Ernesto Nathan Rogers

Civic Conversations

- 299 INTERVIEW
In Conversation with
**Johanna Hurme and
Sasa Radulovic**
- 305 INTERVIEW
In Conversation with
Maurice Cox
- 308 INTERVIEW
In Conversation with
Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk
- 312 INTERVIEW
In Conversation with
Harvey Gantt

Civic Discourse

- 316 ESSAY
The Power of the Curve
Marcos Amado Petrolí
- 325 ESSAY
Architecture and Access
Erik Schiller
- 338 NARRATIVE
Designing for the Collective
Qendresa Ajeti
- 346 ESSAY
From Utopia to Make-Up:
Architecture and
Disillusionment
Ignacio Urbistondo Alonso
- 353 NARRATIVE
From Crisis to Continuity
Ali Javid
- 362 ESSAY
After the Right to the City
Kristine Stiphany
- 372 NARRATIVE
Educating the Civic Architect
Edgar Adams
- 377 NARRATIVE
No Studio, No Office,
No Problem
Jhono Bennett

Civic Lessons

- 384 IMAGES
Rendering Redaction
Eilis Finnegan and Robert Sproull
- 387 ESSAY
The Historic City as an Ongoing Educational Workshop
Lorenzo Mingardi
- 399 ESSAY
1946-1963, The Concept of Socio-Civic Bio-Architecture Teaching at Universidad de Chile
David Maulén de los Reyes
- 411 ESSAY
Educating Civic Architects Through Historic Preservation
Paul Kapp
- 418 NARRATIVE
State as Laboratory
Marleen Kay Davis
- 441 ESSAY
Cultivating the Civic Architect
Edibe Begüm Özeren, Bahar Sultan Qurraie, Saba Sultan Qurraie, and Ömer Özeren
- 450 NARRATIVE
In Defense of Writing
Zachariah A. Michielli

Civic Design

- 455 IMAGES
The Silent Civic Landmark
Leonardo Zuccaro Marchi
- 457 ESSAY
Programming Entropy
Alejandro Saldaña Perales
- 470 DESIGN
Small Californian City Halls
Jaehun Woo
- 482 DESIGN
City by Design
Armando Araiza
- 491 DESIGN
Industry as Civic Architecture
Craig Brandt
- 500 DESIGN
Play-Spaces in Contested Sites
Popi Iacovou and Christiana Ioannou
- 516 DESIGN
Reframing Infrastructure as Civic Space
Myoungkeun Kim
- 530 DESIGN
Negotiating the City
Maria Hadjisoteriou and Solon Solomou

Civic Readings

- 554 REVIEWS
New Building in Old Cities
David J. Brown
- 556 REVIEWS
Civic Architecture Across America
David J. Brown