

Practice as Pedagogy: Mabel Wilson's Memorial Lecture for Sandra Vivanco

by Shih Ting Huang



Sandra Vivanco Memorial Lecture: Mabel Wilson

Tuesday, April 13, 2021

The inaugural Sandra Vivanco Memorial Lecture will be delivered by Mabel Wilson, the Nancy and George Rupp Professor of Architecture, a Professor in African American and African Diasporic Studies, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies (IRAAS) at Columbia University. At GSAPP she co-directs the Global Africa Lab. Co-presented by the Architecture Division and Critical Ethnic Studies Program at CCA.

The inaugural Sandra Vivanco Memorial Lecture was delivered by Mabel Wilson on April 13th, 2021, over Zoom. Wilson is the Nancy and George Rupp Professor of Architecture, a Professor in African American and African Diasporic Studies, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies (IRAAS) at Columbia University in the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. She also co-directs the Global Africa Lab, a design and research lab focusing on how globalization affects Africa's topographies.

Sandra Vivanco was an architect who practiced, taught, and learned for her whole life. Her practices were influenced by her global travel and migration experiences. She was born in New Orleans and then moved to Lima, Peru, with her family. Later on, she came to the Bay Area and attended UC Berkeley. Then, she went to Columbia University to pursue an MA from the School of Architecture and Planning. Mabel and Sandra met at Columbia and maintained a long friendship. Sandra went to Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza's office for a few months, and kept traveling and practicing architecture in different countries, including Portugal, Japan, Mexico, and the United States. She applied her explorations of cultural diversity to her work; Sandra was a teacher at CCA and the founder of A+D—a San Francisco-based architecture firm focused on exploring cultural identity and public space through community building.

When Sandra was at Columbia University, she went on a travel studio to Turkey with classmates, including Mabel. The Turkish travel studio provides a curriculum to help students understand the uses and contexts of material in specific places. Through traveling, Sandra and her classmates saw that architecture in Turkey is culturally relevant to the local community. They saw the traditional stone farm dwellings of local Turkish housing, which interested them, as they were studying the intersection of spatial design and cultural influence. Tourism and globalization's impact on the Turkish economy shaped the country's architecture as new forms of construction materials, like concrete, were brought in by money generated by tourism. Sandra's exploration of the country and these ideas led her to this question: What is architecture's role in this transformation? Overall, Sandra and her classmates appreciated the value of travel and seeing architecture in context, seeing research as a hands-on way to learn about the world. The trips gave Sandra a variety of different cultural experiences within architecture studies as well as long-lasting friendships.

While working under Alvaro Siza, Sandra showed immense talent for understanding the responsiveness in the local environment and how spatial modulation

applied to details in materials. Siza's background in sculpture allowed him to apply sculptural concepts such as light, line, and shadow to his architectural ideas; Siza had a strong influence on how Sandra treated form, space, and light.

Sandra taught design studio and organized many travel studios to Peru, Brazil, and Mexico. These travel studios gave her a platform to bring students to various places and contexts to explore Latin American modernists—something she studied in her own research, practice, and pedagogy. The buildings in Sandra's hometown, Ayacucho city in Peru, showed her directly how Europeans grafted their facilities onto Mesoamerican and Incan language and architecture. In 2018, she shared how architecture served as an entry point to understanding the layers of history. The synthesis of Ayacucho demonstrates a mixture of ideas in crafts, technology, and local material, becoming tropes in Latin Architecture.



Still from Mabel Wilson's Zoom lecture on April 13, 2021.

On the travel studio trips, she would show students a variegated landscape of Lima and Cusco. Students met with artists, performers, and scholars and collaborated with students in other schools to produce handicrafts. Sometimes, students worked onsite for intensive engagements and collaborations to build upon their research and documentation and develop a short design project in partnership with local architecture students from Mexico City. The intent was to learn from Mexico's rich material cultures and speculate on how these practices can inform new ways of designing and making. In 2018, Sandra brought her knowledge of material culture to the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) summer exchange studio. The studio took the domestic objects and raised them to art and architecture. Students from both institutions co-curated ordinary objects, such as corn husks, fabrics, and shopping bags, into an exhibition at UNAM.

That same year, 2018, Sandra received a travel grant from New York's American Institute for Architects (AIA) to research her proposal topic, "The Feminine and the Modern: Six Pioneer Architects in Latin America." During her travels, Vivanco was supposed to explore the significant contributions of women architects working in a Latin American context, and the specific circumstances—culture, gender, and territory—surrounding their design practices. While she was preparing to go to Mexico to do her research, she was diagnosed with cancer. However, cancer did not stop her from going to Mexico City: she went there to do research and also met with other friends and family.

Sandra Vivanco's work is extraordinary. In addition to being remembered fondly by faculty and students alike, she received several awards from the San Francisco American Institute of Architects, the National Diversity Achievement Award by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, and other accolades from communities who respected her practice. Her spirit will always live within colleagues, students, and family, as well as her architectural projects.

Shih Ting Huang is a graduate architecture student who focuses on environmental issues and trying to design a sustainable future.



Do you have questions or opinions about this response? Have you seen an event at CCA you'd like to report on? Please email exhibitions@cca.edu to contribute to our Letters to the Editor series, or to submit to *Review Rewind Respond*.