Amale Andraos
WORK Architecture Company

Text: Norman Kietzmann
Fotos: WORKac, Raymond Adams, Iwan Baan, James Ewing, Elizabeth Felicella
Amale Andraos and Dan Wood have a shared mission: they want to rehabilitate modernism in America and they even show the courage to pursue utopian ideas. “A building has to perform something,” explain the founders of the New York firm WORKac. What unites their projects is their relationship to nature: roofs serve as parks, vegetable patches float above courtyards and rays of sunlight are guided into the dark reaches of buildings by light catchers. For them, the act of building means more than just providing sufficient floor area or creating a new landmark. Architecture must provide space for urban experiments.

When you visit WORKac’s website, you are confronted by an ever-changing entity: small and black, their logo emblazons the lower right corner of the window, where it continuously changes its shape in a flowing transformation. It’s a fitting image for a firm that approaches their work with neither ready-made answers nor an obligatory style. With their open and interdisciplinary attitude, Amale Andraos and Dan Wood symbolize the self-image of a new generation of architects in the USA that gives priority to collaborative projects as opposed to the individual ego.

The undertaking got its start in an intellectual crucible on the other side of the Atlantic: Rem Koolhaas’s office in Rotterdam. Dan Wood, who was then a partner at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, and Amale Andraos went to New York in 2002 to establish a branch office there for OMA. Both had already played with the idea of going off to practice on their own. “After moving here, we realized that it could be as exciting for us to just work together,” says Amale Andraos, looking back. Born in
Lebanon, Andraos grew up in Beirut, Paris and Montreal, and received degrees in architecture from McGill University in Montreal and from Harvard University. Dan Wood originally comes from Rhode Island and lived for a long time in Paris before working for Rem Koolhaas in Rotterdam. He received degrees in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania and New York’s Columbia University.

It’s no accident that their firm is named Work. “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,” explains Amale Andraos. After having done many small projects and interior jobs, they made their breakthrough with the Diane von Furstenberg Studio (2004–2007) for the New York fashion designer. The renovation and rooftop extension of the factory building in Manhattan’s Meatpacking District anticipated salient parameters of their later work.

“We definitely are very obsessed with light and the quality of light, and we’re obsessed with bringing the outside inside,” says Amale Andraos. A stairway cuts through the building, creating a diagonal axis that brings sunlight from the rooftop terrace deep inside the building. Mirrors on the ceiling and the walls of this tunnel increase the effect, while a crystal-shaped, faceted glass object set on the roof acts like a light catcher. Amale Andraos and Dan Wood have also continued working with the interplay of inside and outside with their new building for the Kew Gardens Hill Library (2008) in New York City’s borough of Queens, whose green roof was lifted up toward the street to reveal the main reading room at the same level as the sidewalk.
The interpenetration of architecture and nature is also a key part of their design for an arts and cultural center on the eight-hectare island of New Holland in St. Petersburg. Although it is only a few minutes walk from the Hermitage, the island was long reserved for the military and thus closed to the public. For almost 300 million euro, the one-time shipyard, which was built in the Dutch architectural style in 1719, now destined to become a city within the city. Amale Andraos and Dan Wood’s winning design for the international competition from 2011 is more than just a simple renovation. “We certainly cannot think of building without the landscape outside – and within it. They are one entity,” emphasizes Amale Andraos.

Where necessary, they attack the historical substance with a scalpel to carve out space for landscaped atriums. When the long Russian winter inhibits use of the large park in the middle of the island, the activities can be quickly relocated to artificial landscapes inside the buildings. It speaks volumes that Amale Andraos makes no mention of the prominent clients – Russian oligarch Roman Abramovic and his art-loving girlfriend Daria Zhukova. What she does speak about is architecture, space and program.

One project that WORKac is now working on simultaneously to their project in St. Petersburg is the Assembly Hall for the next African Union Summit in Gabon. As part of the governmental plan Green Gabon, the sustainable building is to be completed on a hill in the middle of the capital, Libreville, by the summer of 2014. In addition to an auditorium with 1,000 seats, the circular building has three oval-shaped courtyards that will feature the country’s diverse vegetation. Because the roof shall be sloped toward the valley, the garden courtyards will also be visible from the city.

The project name, L’Assemblée Radieuse, is more than just a reference to the circular shape in plan – it also pays tribute to its own archetypes. “I always say, deep
down inside we have a kind of modernist streak. The modernists worked in tandem with emerging nations that were approaching modernism to protect their independence. And that's the modernism that we were inspired by for the project," explains Amale Andraos. Neither Le Corbusier nor Louis Kahn was able to build one of their comprehensive ensembles in Europe or North America, however; for that they went to the young democracies of India and Bangladesh.

Amale Andraos is an assistant professor at New York's Columbia University, and as of the fall of 2013, Dan Wood holds the Louis Kahn Chair at the Yale School of Architecture. But it's not just because they teach that WORKac devoted their 2009 exhibition and book project 49 Cities to the utopias and large-scale plans of the fifties, sixties and seventies. Their interest also demonstrates the rebellion of a new generation for whom architecture means more than just providing sufficient floor area or creating a new landmark. Architects of this generation venture to challenge the status quo with their own radical proposals.

“As cities have finally proven their superiority over their suburban counterparts — in everything from quality of life to environmental impact — they should again become our much needed laboratories of experimentation,” says Amale Andraos with conviction. And if the politicians are unable to provide urban playing fields, these architects unceremoniously seek solutions on their own. “Locavore Fantasia” is the name of the 2008 vision of a terrace-like, stacked landscape that has fields for different fruits and vegetables, along with a small golf course and housing for migrant farmworkers. Even though it is highly unlikely that this inclined high-rise farm building will ever be built, Amale Andraos and Dan Wood have succeeded in starting an interesting conversation.

**LOCACORE FANTASIA**
WORKac's version of vertical farming, Project commissioned by New York magazine, 2008
In 2008 in the courtyards of the MoMA affiliate PS1 in Queens, they created a temporary installation for the art center’s annual summer parties. Instead of drawing upon the theme of an “urban beach” like their predecessors, they designed an urban farm. WORKac formulated their goal succinctly: “40 years after the Summer of ’68, we felt it was time for a new leisure revolution, one that creates a new symbol of liberation, knowledge, power and fun for today’s cities.” Beneath a wave of cardboard tubes that were planted with 51 different species of fruits, vegetables and herbs, there was a shady meeting place and venue for events. Six chickens and twelve chicks also mingled among the visitors, laying eggs throughout the summer and underlining the project’s playful approach.

That project did not result in trouble with the animal welfare authorities, but in a commission to build New York’s first school garden in the borough of Brooklyn. The “Edible Schoolyard” at P.S. 216 is supposed to give children an understanding about how food is grown, and a chance to cook and eat together in a large kitchen. The project’s unique feature is a mobile greenhouse that covers almost 150 square meters [1,600 sq. ft.] of garden in the winter months and can be slid over the kitchen classroom during the spring and summer. Proof that the idea of urban agriculture is not a passing fad is given by the continuation of the project with another “Edible Schoolyard” at P.S. 7, which WORKac is currently making a reality in Harlem. Even if realization of the grand utopias still needs a little time, Amale Andraos and Dan Wood are by no means content to wait. They design projects that give us more than just facades – they convey utopian ideas in small, manageable bits that are fit for everyday.
Interview

“Time for a New Agenda”

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.
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’s 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 will 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.

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.
BLAFFER ART MUSEUM
New addition and renovation
Houston, USA, 2012
L'ASSEMBLÉE RADIEUSE
International competition to design a new Assembly Hall in Libreville, Gabon for the 2014 Summit of the African Union, 2012-2014

NATURE-CITY
Project based on a 225 acre site in Keizer Station, Oregon, commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, NY for the exhibition “Foreclosed: Re-Housing the American Dream”, 2012
NEW HOLLAND ISLAND
New cultural center for New Holland Island, an 8-hectare island in St. Petersburg, Russia, 2011

URBAN AQUALOOP
Public space created from infrastructure and natural cycles. The prototype was created for the 2009 Shenzhen Biennale.

P.S. 216 – EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD
New York City’s first Edible Schoolyard in Brooklyn, USA, 2009
KEW GARDENS HILL LIBRARY
Expansion and replacement of an existing library in Queens, NYC, 2008

PF 1
Temporary installation for the courtyards of PS1 in Queens, NY for their summer "Warm Up" parties, 2008
LOCATORE FANTASIA
WORKac’s version of vertical farming,
Project commissioned by New York
magazine, 2008

DIANE VON FURSTENBERG
STUDIO HEADQUARTERS
Headquarters building for Diane von
Furstenberg (DVF) Studio, a fashion
design company, Meatpacking
District, NYC, USA 2007

VILLA PUP
The first commission and mascot
project - a doghouse for the urban
dog, 2003