

## *Lizz Plater-Zyberk ... Confronting Climate Change with Resilient Design*

**Editor's Note:** As most of us know, Lizz met her husband Andrés Duany ('71) as fellow students in Princeton's School of Architecture all those years ago. Since the first decade of their life and professional partnership, they have earned international accolades for creative community planning and architectural design addressing the daunting challenges posed by our collective environmental impact on the planet. An article in the 9/14/20 issue of the *Washington Post Magazine* features Lizz and Andrés for their thinking and work in climate-resilient or adaptive architectural design in the latest chapter of their influential careers. The article is titled "A New Gold Standard for Green Architecture," and you can read it [here](#).

In a fascinating hour-long phone conversation about that article, Lizz graciously shared her personal insights into the team's journey over the past ten years toward integrating inescapable climate realities into new strategies and concepts for pragmatic design. I'm delighted to pass along her observations in this special-focus profile.

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It's always fun to lead with felicitous Princeton connections! As it happens, David Walter, Princeton Class of 2011 and author of the *Post* article, initially wanted to write about Lizz and Andrés for the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. When Covid constraints on content forced postponement of the PAW piece, Walter instead wrote the article for the *Post*. Lizz and Andrés hosted him in their office for the initial interview, with follow-up by phone. Their photos in the article were taken in their home in Coral Gables, designed by Marion Sims Wyeth, Class of 1910 and uncle of painter Andrew Wyeth.



To recap very briefly, the article begins with Lizz and Andrés' decision three years ago to step down as principles of their architectural firm to "spend the final act of their careers as an in-house think tank, pondering the biggest architectural questions of the day. Chief among them: Is the world now approaching 'green' design all wrong?" Labeling conventional thinking about "sustainable design" as "naïve" in its focus on climate mitigation, Lizz and Andrés are instead advocating approaches to both town planning and building design that recognize the reality of climatic assaults over the next century. As Andrés is quoted in the article, "Sustainability is about mitigating and reducing emissions. Adaptation and resilience is about being ready for the changes that are being made."

By way of a quick update on Lizz's related professional pursuits, she continues teaching at the University of Miami School of Architecture after stepping down as dean several years ago. She

is also involved with a number of urban design projects, including a project in Mexico that continues through Zoom meetings. And she has been helping the City of Coral Gables rewrite its zoning code.

Entry into the topic of climate changes for Lizz and Andrés actually dates back to 2009, when Lizz served on a civic committee that brought people together for the first time specifically to address issues of climate change. Prompted by her work with the Miami-Dade County Climate Action Task Force, Lizz soon after developed a course called "Adaptation to Climate Change," which she introduced at the university.

Lizz seized that opportunity also to redirect her own efforts – shifting focus from global perspectives on mitigation to the more urgent contingencies of adapting at regional and local levels. Practical applications stem from "dealing with climate change at a conceptual level to understand what can and can't be done," she explains, as well as "keeping up with both the realities and the technology." She continues:

Climate change is the first call to attention that this is truly global. Whatever you think of the science or the causes, the impacts are undeniable. It is one of three large concerns that are shared worldwide.

Climate impacts can be ignored where they are not yet experienced, but there is no part of the globe untouched by the pandemic, the second global experience. The third, the renewed call for racial justice, also has a global dimension.

All three have chronic (long-running and often tolerated) and catastrophic (deadly, event-related) manifestations, requiring response.

### *Lizz's mantra for living with climate change*

Lizz sees four steps to adapting to the realities of climate change – with immediate implications for building design, as well as likely longer-term impacts on lifestyle choices for all of us:

*Defending* – active measures for flood zones, such as walls and dikes, or raising street levels as recently initiated in Miami Beach.

*Accommodating* – "Live with it" design elements that minimize costs while accepting inconvenience, such as raising buildings while allowing streets to flood.

*Retreating* – pulling up stakes and relocating, i.e., climate migration spurred by unwillingness or inability to adapt to changing conditions, and in the U.S., rising insurance costs.

*Cleanup after you leave* – ensuring we don't leave behind underfunded and deteriorating communities if and when we ultimately pull up stakes. Planning ahead to avoid repeating the rust-belt scenarios of our time.

Lizz says further, that an even more pressing concern for planners and designers in many regions is affordable housing. She reports that Andrés has been addressing this in the design of mobile housing. He exhibited a mid-century modern double-wide mobile home, along with a "tiny house" on wheels, at the industry showcase International Building Show in Las Vegas last February. Demonstrating the ability to transform building types considered less desirable in the real estate world has the potential to transform public image by design, and encourage less expensive housing production, she notes. Andrés is now working with a couple of designers on prototypes for these unconventional, but promising concepts.

Lizz considers herself and Andrés to be lucky in working to develop these concepts in tandem with a dynamic cross-section of important players – from developers to cities and other public sector parties – often outside the usual constraints of politics. To the observer, what Lizz calls luck might safely be called a happy by-product of the team's growing influence over many years.

### ***Reflections on origins and end games***

Asked if students and professors at Princeton were asking these hard questions 50 years ago, about concerns and concepts that now propel her work, Lizz points to a focus on resource preservation at the School of Architecture during her studies – ideas that have since morphed over the decades into core concepts of sustainability. Four of the six founders of the Congress for the New Urbanism are Princeton alumni.

Lizz also comments, with a wry measure of philosophy, on our legacy of wisdom to younger generations: "Like all of us at our age, we look back on a lot of experience, we think we know a lot of things. But I'm always reminded as a teacher, how much the young have to figure things out for themselves, no matter how we try to transfer what we think they need to know. And there's always a new perspective, something new coming down the pike. In the end, not unlike our own early experience, that's theirs to explore, discover and make their own."

Similar to why she's interested in climate change, Lizz's new directions, together with Andrés, are all about creatively managing their end game. As we all embrace our own personal "uncertainty principles, Lizz sets her sights simply on plans for next year. And yes, she intends to continue working on these ideas with so much potential impact on our collective futures – and, always, collaborating with others.