A TALK WITH ADÈLE NAUDÉ SANTOS

Adèle Naudé Santos arrived at MIT in January 2004 to begin her tenure as Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning. During a quick visit to Boston and Cambridge in December, we cornered her in her hotel suite to ask her a few questions about her past, her present and our future:

As founding dean of architecture at UC San Diego, you were looking to create a new model for architectural education. What did you learn from that experience that you hope to bring to MIT?

There was a large, complex agenda, but one thing we were able to do, because we were starting from scratch, was to set up our schedule in such a way that the faculty had serious time off to do their own research and work. I wanted my faculty to be as productive as possible and most schedules in universities are completely wasteful of people's time. Particularly visitors who come in—you know, they teach on Monday afternoon and they don't teach again until Wednesday afternoon and what are they doing with this time in the middle that's all chopped up? So we decided to team teach in modules, which meant that when you were on for a week it was a forty-hour week, no nonsense. You were available, you were there. And you taught like this for, say, two weeks. And then the next week you wouldn't have to be there at all.

Sounds great.

Oh yes. And there were other issues too. In most schools, there is a pecking order of who's respected and who isn't. The design faculty, the theory faculty, the history faculty—most places I've been, they were seen as more prestigious than the people who teach structures and construction. I wanted all of that smoothed out, because my feeling is that all of these roles are really important. And in the same way, we didn't want simply to reward the students who were the most graphically talented, the so-called design stars, either. That wasn't the only thing we were looking for.

How will all this apply to MIT?

I don't know because I don't know this place yet. But I do know the issue of faculty productivity is a serious one. I think it's a key issue at the school.
At this school?

Yes, it really is. Especially for young faculty who haven't yet had the chance to build up their careers—to produce buildings, to do their scholarly research and so on. And once they come in to teach... Once you're in there, you're in there. You're teaching three afternoons of the week and you've got these responsibilities and it's very difficult to gather time enough in a sequence that you can do anything coherent. That problem is very high on my agenda.

This school, MIT, will be different from your San Diego experience because there's a planning department, as well, and the media arts and sciences program.

Right. That's wonderful. When I started at San Diego, I knew I was going to miss the other disciplines that had been around me when I was chairman at Penn. I created a series of interdisciplinary studios there. I knew I was going to miss those collaborative ventures. And being at MIT now, having a planning department and having the media arts and sciences, it's very exciting. It's one of the main reasons I'm interested in the school.

That leads nicely into my next question: why did you want this job at MIT?

I got intrigued by the possibility of MIT. Ideologically, it seemed to me a school I could relate to. It's a school that's always had a kind of social sense about it. There's been long history of looking at issues like housing and community, which is part of my background too. So I've always been intrigued. But then the question was Where was the creativity in terms of the job? What could I really contribute? And in the Report to the Provost there was one little section talking about the desire on the part of some faculty for greater dialogue across the disciplines. And I thought, Well. That's something I've been involved with a lot myself. I was president of this International Design Conference in Aspen, and every year we brought people in from architecture and planning and landscape design and graphic design to talk about the issues in our collective world. And it's the sort of thing I enjoy. So I can see myself being somewhat catalytic in the school, bringing strands together and creating communication that may not be going on right now.
That's interesting, because I think one of the great strengths of MIT is that it facilitates that kind of cross-disciplinary stuff. The atmosphere here is one of barely-controlled chaos and it really allows you, even spatially, to foster that kind of interaction.

Yes, I was going to say that what Bill Mitchell did was really important, bringing large numbers of the faculty back to the central campus. Once that happened, you could begin to get the school to coalesce. And then, importantly, the architects, Leers/Weinzapfel, literally took the walls down! All the walls became glass and they could be rolled up! So if the dialogue might have taken place in a certain way before, in the next round I think we'll see the dialogue criss-crossing the boundaries of the departments.

You are the third dean in a row from the Southern Hemisphere. Is this a take-over conspiracy?

It feels like a conspiracy, doesn't it?

You are also the school's first female dean. Do you see that as a particular challenge?

Oh I don't think it makes any difference, to be absolutely honest with you. It's not that these gender issues don't exist, they obviously do. But there are a lot of deans, actually, who are women right now. There were not many of us ten years ago, but women have definitely jumped into leadership roles all over the place. I think there's no prejudicial attitude that we face.

Bill was dean for ten years, which is a pretty long stretch, and he had a dramatic effect on this school. So I imagine he's going to be something of a hard act to follow. Do you have any thoughts about how to follow on?

I think what you do is you go in, you listen, you find out what the situation is, you try to understand what the issues are and what the potentials are. I have to say that I believe not every part of the School of Architecture and Planning is as excellent as it can be, or as visible as it should be, and part of my role is to take it to the heights I think it can reach.
That leads me to my next question. I don't know what you have in mind, but let's assume you're here for ten years. Where would you like to see this school ten years from now? Do you have a vision for it?

If you talk to me in a year's time, or six months, I'll be able to answer these questions. But for now...? The major mission for me is to make this school the school that everybody wants to go to.

And what will make it that?

I think we need a larger design faculty in architecture, we need more international names, we need more prominent people on the faculty, coming and going. I think that MIT, particularly in architecture, can play a unique role in this country. It's not going to be Harvard, it's not going to be Princeton, it's not going to be Yale. It has to be quintessentially MIT: only here at MIT could we do this, only at MIT could we do that. And I don't believe the school as a whole has capitalized on the value that comes from being a part of this institution, from being at the cutting edge of technological innovation. It's about making the linkages from the school to other parts of the campus as strongly as we can. That's what I see as my mission as dean, at least in part. It's not just within the disciplines of the school, to see how I can strengthen those pieces, but also how I can strengthen the linkages to the campus as a whole. I think that's a role I can play. I'm enormously collegial, I throw great dinner parties. People remember them because that's how I introduce people to each other, I'm a kind of a catalyst. I brought people from all over the world to Penn and instigated all sorts of happenings. There'd be a week every year where I'd bring eight designers or six designers from different parts of the world and they'd work with the students for a week and every evening there'd be celebrations and it would culminate in a great day of discussion and debate and then a fabulous party, and friendships were formed during these events. I did it in San Diego too, bringing town and gown together. It was really important. You have to create a setting where people can actually engage spontaneously in meeting each other and enjoying each other.

You are known for collaborative work with artists. Could you describe such a collaboration and what you got from it?

Let's talk about Mary Miss. We chose Mary Miss to work with me on the outdoor spaces at the Center for the Arts at Albright College. I had designed the building but when she arrived I pulled out a blank sheet of paper. I said, If we're going to collaborate in the full sense of the word, then we're going to start again.
You had already designed the building?

I had already designed the building. But I was ready to rethink it because we had to cut the budget, you know. It was at a stage when it was time to reformulate aspects of it. But I behaved as if there was nothing there. I said, You know this is a journey, it's an adventure, Mary. The idea is that if we're really going to collaborate, neither of us knows what the result is going to be in advance. So let's just start the conversation. And we sat there at first, just scribbling. And after those sessions I would try to figure what had come out of it. And once we got the essence of it I was able then to glue the rest of the building, if you will, around what was then turning out to be a central space. I had never used circles in my work, but this was a context where the geometry of the circle made some sense. Because it was a way of making links to a series of different events on the campus that weren't on a grid, they were laid out rather arbitrarily. But Mary had used circles in her work. So I said OK this is interesting, I've never done this before. And what came out of it was, in the end, a fascinating piece that I don't think I would have done, nor would she have done, alone. It was a genuine collaboration. I love doing these things.

Do you plan to continue your practice?

Oh absolutely. This was a completely essential part of the negotiation. It's not an enormous practice. I like to think of it as research-based: you take on clients you really want to take on and you do things that you think are inherently interesting. I do a lot of competitions, for instance. I love doing competitions because you're able to come up with solutions you'd never get to in the normal design process, because you're able to imagine the impossible.

What will you miss most about California? And what do you miss most about South Africa?

Oh. Well let's start with South Africa. I miss the beauty of the land. The landscape is extraordinary. I loved California, certainly the San Diego area, because it reminded me of Capetown, where I was born. It has the same flora, the same wonderful light in the sky and of course it's on the coast. There are many South Africans there precisely because it reminds them of that coast around Capetown. San Francisco is a little different. Obviously it's a cultured city, an old city, but it's quite far away, that's what I began to realize. I was missing the east coast, honestly. I think the epicenter of my profession is really this coast, probably New York. Obviously there's a bit of it in Los Angeles, but if you're in San Francisco you feel that you're out on the edge, you know? But I'd be insane to say I'm not going to miss
the weather. And I'll miss the hinterland of San Francisco, it's utterly beautiful. And I'll miss the fantastic fresh produce. The food can't be beaten, it's marvelous.

Do you know where you'll be living?

Oh yes, I'm very excited. I was looking for an industrial property because one of my little quirks is that I always have to build my own nest, I can't live in anybody else's place. I did this in Philadelphia, then I did it in San Diego, and I just built myself an incredible place in San Francisco. So of course I came here with those kinds of expectations. Not that easy. Very expensive, this city. But I found an industrial ruin on the railroad tracks in Somerville and I'm wildly excited about it. It's like Alice in Wonderland. You go in there, you have no idea what's inside. In fact you can't imagine there's anything reasonable inside. And you enter into this walled compound... A third of this building survived a fire. And it, in itself, was involved with fire because it was a foundry. An artist had been living there for some twenty, twenty-five years, and into the walls of this compound she built an outdoor theater for children which still exists with a big stage and two tiers of seating and then the middle space is a garden with a grape arbor and then there's this foundry and everything basically has to be gutted but it's complete magic. You could be in a ruin in Tuscany.