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Design Responds to Local History and Subtropical Conditions

A Q&A with Touzet Studio on balancing the needs of global brands with site-specific limitations and opportunities in the subtropical climate of Miami.

By: Claudia Marina



For the past three years, Metropolis's director of design innovation, Susan S. Szenasy, has been leading Think Tank, a series of discussions with industry leaders on important issues surrounding human-centered design. Recently, Szenasy led a panel of Miami architects from Touzet and Florida International University's Miami Beach Urban Studios. The discussion focused on the unique conditions faced when balancing the needs of global retail and tech brands with site-specific limitations and opportunities in the subtropical climate of Miami. What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation, prepared by Claudia Marina.

Susan S. Szenasy, director of design innovation, Metropolis (SSS): We're in Miami. Let's start with talking about the unique subtropical conditions that exist here. How do architects design for a place like this?

Jacqueline Gonzalez Touzet, AIA LEED AP, founding principal, Touzet Studio (JGT): Miami is a young city, but it definitely has a beautiful culture and has a wonderful climate that we should embrace and celebrate in our architecture. The studio that Carlos and I run, Touzet, is concerned with the type of architecture that has a connection to time and place with a real attention to craftsmanship and local materials. When people see our buildings, we want them to feel that it's definitely a Miami building. We think we fall short when architecture misses that opportunity.

SSS: This attitude towards materials and materiality is a very important part of this discussion. Let's expand more on that.

Carlos Prio Touzet, AIA LEED AP, founding principal, Touzet Studio (CPT): I do believe the climate and location takes architecture from being just a building to being so much more. The specifics of the culture that you get into add to a building's program in such a way that the building really speaks to you in very different ways. The vegetation and the way the sun comes into buildings are some things to consider that can really flavor a space. Miami basically has one large season, but there are subtleties. I love being able to satisfy the program by bringing things to the building that emphasize the experience of being in the space over time. The longer that we use these buildings, we can really come to be attuned with the time and the place that we build in.

SSS: I imagine when you design these buildings, they're not so tightly programmed that they can't be adapted. There's always an idea of longevity attached to them.



GAP Lincoln Road Flagship Store. © Methanoia

JGT: Miami is in that kind of a space right now where the presence of global architecture and global brands presents a great opportunity for architects. Yes, it's wonderful to have this global architecture, but we should develop and continue to work with what's here. We can learn from other people with climates that are similar to ours, but we have a very specific task ahead of us.

John Stuart, AIA, assoc. dean, cultural & community engagement, director, Miami Beach Urban Studios, FIU (JS):

From my point of view, as an educator and also a member of the Historic Preservation Board for the City of Miami Beach, the effects of climate change in Miami are such that they are challenging some of those presumptions that we have about longevity, particularly in regard to historic architecture. This city has the largest historic district of modern buildings in the United States, which sits very close to sea level. The question really is, what do we do? Since I run an innovation space that looks to the future, we work with researchers in architecture, design, landscape architecture, and environmental science to create a new mindset for architects to think about approaching these problems.

JGT: It's interesting that the younger generation of architects are pioneers in this technological way of solving problems but it's also very inspiring to think about how problems were solved when this type of technology wasn't available. There's always something to learn from history.

SSS: The buildings that were built before the air conditioning show you ideas about how to build here, now.

JGT: They tried and tried again until they got it right, and there's definitely lessons about resiliency and how to survive when you have limited resources.

JS: The first people who moved here were very amphibious, so their buildings were light and moveable. There's no time in history that we're better prepared to build and live like that than today. We're using all the science and data at our disposal to think of shelter in a new way that can be adapted. For the sake of this conversation, I'd like to be provocative because we mentioned local materials. We have ways to think about materials to understand their haptic qualities, but we can also start looking at materials in a virtual and digital context. We have both the abilities to understand and survey buildings and space in a very specific way through technology like texture mapping and augmented and virtual reality. At some point, maybe 150 years in the future, I think we're going to believe that the only way we can really experience what it was like to be on Ocean Drive on Miami Beach is to walk through a virtual recreation.

JGT: The nature problem is becoming harder and harder to solve. We've seen buildings change over time such as columns that were much longer when buildings were first designed, and now the proportions have changed because of conditions such as the high tide. There are all sorts of things that are important to take into consideration such as using the right materials that will withstand the salt, and those are the things that we need to

understand how to do. We can't bury our heads in the sand forever. New buildings have to be thinking about it. The infrastructure has to meet it, and there has to be money to pay for that. But without the partnership of the city, I think the historic community has to partner with us while people still want to live here.



Apple Lincoln Road. ©Matthew Bannister/Dbox.

SSS: We're not preserving just to preserve. We're preserving to be able to live in a place and for us to use these buildings as well as learn from them. It's really important for us to see that because it's a form of empathy to the original builders, and it's really an accomplishment. Whether we're preserving architecture or decorative elements—or even building materials—we can't dismiss how it feels to be in a place.

CPT: I do agree that we should preserve this history. It's something that talks about Miami and how it was before. There are few examples left in the city. One of my favorite bars around downtown, The Corner, used to have a historic building in front of it which was

destroyed. And once they demolished that building, they removed the effect of that building's columns on that side of the sidewalk. There's nothing there now, and for me, they destroyed part of the bar as well. The whole atmosphere of being at The Corner has changed because you don't have that sense of closeness to the history that you had before.

SSS: Let's go over some of the historic neighborhoods here. Driving in from the airport you don't get that sense, but then there are these amazing pockets that are worth our attention. How does that come to the discussion?

JGT: Miami has a collection of different neighborhoods that are all distinct. South Beach is different from Coral Gables which is different than Wynwood. It's a mistake to categorize Miami as the same everywhere. I think when we design and talk about the culture of Miami, it's very difficult for brands to think of other cultures than the one in South Beach. That's why, for us, the cultural aspect is interesting because it varies. As Cubans, we look at Cuban history in Miami and how it reflects on the architecture as they were also culturally trying to ask, "Who are we, and how do we tie into the story?" What about our beautiful use of color? Why should we chuck all that and just adopt this new language of global architecture? You start with what's there by looking at your natural and historical assets then add things in relationship to that. As a city, we don't always have the governmental agency to protect these historical buildings, so we as architects have to approach it thoughtfully and educate our clients about what defines the site.

CPT: As architects, I feel we've done our part, but it has happened on several occasions where we have been approached to take on a project that would involve using our knowledge to alter that which we feel strongly against.



Brown Jordan. © Steven Brooke.

JS: One of the things the new generation of architects is amazing at is building trust with those very boards that are evaluating their work. I've seen some of my students come up to the Historic Preservation Board having developed a way to talk about that sort of fabric—and the new fabric—in a way that people who are not architects can trust them. This issue of trust is at the cornerstone of another question about how preservationists and developers, all of who are looking at the same climate change data, can trust each other to make decisions that are better for the community. I think this is a role that architects can play because we're so used to structuring relationships in all different fields to focus on a single project.

SSS: It's an interesting moment because there is this need for place and authenticity. How is the new generation, with their battle cries of authenticity, connecting to the wonderful old buildings that have been converted? Startups are not moving into glass boxes. They want to settle into historic buildings that have some character. How does that social understanding affect where historic preservation can go?

JGT: This idea of moving into older buildings resonates with them for exactly that reason. They begin to form a connection to a history that is tied to a place. Developers design that part of a neighborhood they will sell to this younger crowd, and with that comes an understanding of the differences between neighborhoods.



Szenasy (left) with panelists. Photo by Jhoana De Feria, Diego Diez de Medina, Rio Namiki.

JS: The physical environment is the only place they can't build a bubble, and it's through this physical environment that this generation will learn. The question for me is how do people who are interested in preservation and restoration preserve something under more stress than ever before? It's going to be their world. If they value it, they'll want to be part of it. I think we should be looking at a way to preserve how we live in the cities that we live in now, for future generations to know. Our abilities to document and to understand space, and even to pre-preserve it, has to be developed. That's another challenge.

SSS: Thank you for a fascinating but really important discussion. I'm glad we were here with you in Miami.

Panelists included:

Touzet Studio:

Jacqueline Gonzalez Touzet, AIA LEED AP, founding principal;

Carlos Prio Touzet, AIA LEED AP, founding principal;

Florida International University:

John Stuart, AIA, associate dean, Cultural & Community Engagement, director, Miami Beach Urban Studios, FIU.

Moderator:

Susan S. Szenasy, director of design innovation, Metropolis magazine.

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