



Interview with Giovanna Borasi



Entrevista a Giovanna Borasi

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The fastest way to walk to the *Canadian Centre for Architecture* (CCA) from Montreal's Central Train Station is to take René-Lévesque Boulevard.

Along this street, the city appears Atlantic and proud, with imposing skyscrapers competing with their flashy and somewhat awkward forms. However, these artificial images cannot entirely obscure the lush nature upon which the city was once founded, and so, from time to time, the forested mass of Mount Royal appears in the distance, framed by the perpendicular streets as if seen through a kind of glass and steel gorge.

As we approach the CCA, the city abruptly changes. It is a late autumn day, strangely warm, and the trees still display those intense yellow and red hues that seem to exist only in Canada. For those of us interested in architecture, they are somewhat bothersome, as the reluctant leaves barely allow a glimpse of the tower of Concordia University's *Pavillon des Sœurs-Grises*, and obscure some interesting façades.

Trying to understand this part of the city, it becomes almost inevitable to leave the boulevard and explore the surrounding streets. Suddenly, the space becomes distinctly European, with alleys and *cul-de-sac* where low brick houses or small palaces in indigo and toasty colors huddle together, with mansard roofs and wooden staircases that now seem tremendously stately.

Returning to the boulevard, the CCA finally appears with its mansion surrounded by a discreet U-shaped building dating from the late 1980s. The historic building has a somewhat mysterious appearance, and it is easy to imagine it in a haunted house movie. A distracted person might think that the entrance is through this singular building, whose main façade not only opens onto the grand avenue but also offers two symmetrical accesses. Separated from the traffic by a wide expanse of lawn, the paths created by footsteps and the minimal fence that delineates it invite one to approach one of these two entrances. However, the wooden doors at the end of some gloomy arcades are decidedly unsettling, and a very annoying alarm places the bewildered visitor in a condition of intrusion that makes them understand that they have not understood the building correctly.

And the fact is that the entrance is not through the main façade that opens onto the boulevard, but through the opposite side, where the modern building is here a large continuous volume in which near one of the sides the entrance is marked with a decidedly 1980s pediment. The space accessed from there is distributed with a precise and symmetrical geometry, describing an interior façade that allows one to understand the heights at which the building develops. On the first floor, there are different spaces for temporary exhibitions, access to a concert and conference hall, a tempting bookstore, and, away from the visitor circulations, is Giovanna Borasi's office

Located on one of the sides of the building, through its north-facing windows, a light so timid enters that it leads her to admit that sometimes she misses the Italian sun. And from that place, she kindly attends to us.

Figure 1. Centre Canadien
d'Architecture (CCA) in Montreal
(Canada).

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You first arrived at the CCA in 2005 as a curator of contemporary architecture. How was that experience from your perspective as a European architect? Did you perceive any major changes in the way architectural culture and its role are understood?

This question is interesting for me, but it is also challenging because I have been here for such a long time —I am a Canadian right now— that trying to remember my European mindset at that moment is not so easy...

I had been working with some Italian institutions before coming here, and I guess what impressed me the most about the CCA was the expanded idea of architecture that I found, something that was very different from my previous experiences. Here, architecture was not just about the buildings, but also about the process, the landscapes or about social aspects. It was considered as a whole, and therefore the main actors were not just the architects, but anyone who was involved in the process somehow.

My feelings were that I found a place with a quite complex dimension and with a wide ambition, which was at the same time a research centre, but also a museum, or a publisher. I used to think that it was like a sort of matryoshka in the sense that inside the CCA, there were many other CCAs.

Another aspect that was striking for me was to understand how the CCA was a very structured organization. When you are coming from Europe, especially if you are an architect practicing in the private sector, you are used to working with no time limit: it does not matter if it is a weekend, or if it is late at night. But here, everything must happen in 35 hours per week, which is our limited time for working. And this strict system forces you to be very precise and effective, because there are many things to do, and the program is quite ambitious, but you must adjust to this working discipline.

Where did your particular interest in the CCA come from? Was it perhaps inspired by the figure of Phyllis Lambert?

I had been working with Mirko Zardini on the *Triennale in Milano* during 2002 and 2003, in an exhibition about asphalts. The research needed for that event was mostly conducted here, at the CCA, and therefore we used a lot of material coming from the Centre. That experience allowed me to come into a role of curatorial assistance, and then to begin my relationship with the Centre.

You have been responsible for the direction of the CCA for the last four years, which I imagine must have been a tremendous challenge. Has this position changed your vision of the Centre from what you knew prior to that responsibility?

As I just mentioned, I came initially as an assistant curator. After that project I applied for a position as a contemporary curator, which allowed me to participate in many different programs and exhibitions. At that time there was not a publication department in the Centre, so I could also take care of the organization of that area. Then, in 2014, with this previous experience, I became chief curator, and I assumed other tasks, increasingly complex. So, before assuming the direction, I had the chance to experience the institution intensively for many years and in different roles.

Now, in my position as Director, I believe my background as an architect is fundamental to understand my view. I see the activity of organizing the Centre as an exercise in design. I look at it as a diagram in which I recognize structures which can be redesigned or designed better, or where you can reinforce areas, for instance. I like to think of the institution as a kind of architectural project, more precisely, a long-term project where different phases can be planned, developed or changed.

When I think about all this personal process, I have to confess that perhaps it is in the role of a chief curator where probably you can find more fun, if I may say: you can decide a lot of things about the contents, and you are just focused on that, with fewer of the administrative aspects that you have when you are in my position. But the truth is being the Director of the Centre offers a singular possibility. From this role, you know all the things that are happening, but at the same time you are not part of any specific team. In some sense, it is as if you are a little bit outside of the action. But it is precisely this kind of outsider view what allows you to have the global picture, and to propose some strategic approach for future actions.

In this sense, I have to say that when I became Director, perhaps because of my long experience with the Centre, I knew that I did not want to do things completely differently from how they were before, among other reasons because I liked what we had done before. So, my idea was more to emphasize, or radicalize actions that we had tested when Mirko Zardini was the Director, and make those things more present, more visible. Therefore, about your question, I believe that now I feel the responsibility of bringing a vision for the Centre, and creating enthusiasm in people about that vision, which is necessarily a long-term one.

The conversation for me is no longer about whether we should propose this or that exhibition about Spanish architecture, for example. It is more about thinking about the long-term organization of the Centre. I have the impression that this is what I have changed the most since I became Director: now I am more concerned about long-term situation, and less about what is going on this year. I think more in terms of a ten-year window concerning financial aspects, strategies of organization, or the building itself, and less about some specific content of an exhibition, which was my job when I was solely Chief Curator.

I asked you earlier about your initial vision as a European architect when you arrived at the Centre. Based on the experience of these years, what makes the CCA different from similar institutions located in Europe?

I think there are some European institutions that we could consider similar to CCA in some ways, but not entirely. For example, the NI (*Nieuwe Instituut*) was founded with a similar ambition to the CCA, but there are some differences. They also have a research centre, museum, collection, bookstore and curatorial programs. But perhaps the main difference is the national framework in their case, while CCA always had a strong international vocation. And we could also mention the DAM (*Deutsches Architekturmuseum*), or some others in Europe. But in those cases, I believe the main difference that I may find, is that the CCA is not about promoting architects. In many cases in Europe, we find centres fostered by the Chambers of Architects or similar, and that means that they are mostly understood as a support system for the architects. In our case, the idea of the CCA is to be in dialogue with the practice of architecture, but we do not want to be just a place of documentation or promotion for architects. We aim to be an active space, an engaged entity in discussing how important architecture may be from a social, economic or environmental perspective, understanding that these discussions are not just a matter for architects.

In fact, in your book *The Museum is Not Enough*, you insisted on this idea, that your project with the CCA had to do, among many other things, with understanding the Centre as a place of intensification that would put architecture in contact with politics, economy, or the environment. How have exhibitions and activities become tools to show these relationships and to investigate them?

This is really a key aspect of CCA, and I am very glad that you mentioned it. Our exhibitions are not just to show what documentation or materials we have concerning this architect or that period.

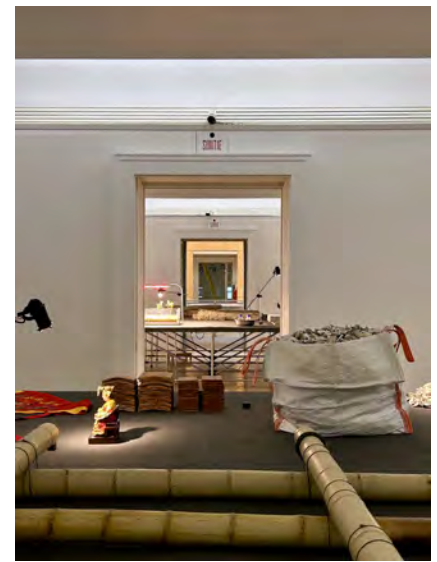


Figure 2. Image of the exhibition "Into the Island" (May 7th to November 17th, 2024).
Curator: Francesco Garutti.
© José Luis Oliver, november 2024.

What we are trying to do is to be a kind of ally, both for professionals and citizens, by showing questions that we believe to be problems, or relevant topics that we are not discussing enough. The activities and exhibitions try to promote spaces of conversation not about the things that are going well, but about what we believe we should be talking about.

For example, we are currently working on a project in which we will be talking about policies and laws, trying to make explicit how the reality of architecture is drastically conditioned by this external factor: someone at a government level decides to implement some regulations which actively change the architectural response to some problems. This is one of our concerns, because we see how the role of the architect is decreasing progressively, and how they have less and less space of decision. Many design aspects from an urban scale to a building scale are decided without architectural thought, and we want to discuss that. So, we begin a research about this matter, and the exhibition is at the same time the engine that moves forward that research, but also the way we have to share that research with the community. In this sense, we believe those are very effective tools to activate debates like the one I am mentioning, because what we want ultimately is to promote the discussion of how we could change the relationship between laws and architects.



Figure 3. *The Museum Is Not Enough / Le musée ne suffit pas.*

This publication was conceived as the first volume of a yearly magazine, with which the CCA explores urgent questions defining its curatorial activity. Co-published in 2019 with Sternberg Press.

© CCA, 2019.

It seems clear that for CCA the research on architecture has a real meaning when it is approached from the perspective of social issues. I am thinking, for example, of the work that you did about the medicalization of architecture and the contemporary problems of certain societies, such as obesity.

Exactly. That social implication has been from the very beginning of CCA a fundamental part. It is deeply linked to its identity, which is the reason why we promote the study of architecture and the way we believe it has a meaning.

In this sense, we have seen how the CCA has hosted research and exhibitions about topics of great importance for society, for example with a special sensitivity towards what we call sustainability. How is the process that you follow in order to include some materials and not others?

It depends on the concept. Last year, for example, the curatorial team carried out a lot of studio visits. The idea was to meet many architects, sometimes via Zoom, trying to listen to what issues they find relevant. With all these conversations, we begin to create a map of concerns, and some research lines begin to emerge: for example, if most of the architects are worried about the impact of some laws in architecture, as I just mentioned, we conclude that this is a topic worth discussing.

This is one way to define some research topics, but another way is the study and direct observation of some realities, as, for instance, happens in the case that you mentioned about obesity. At that time, we started to see how Bloomberg began to address the issue of cities and obesity, the Mayor of New York presented this project called Fit City, or, for example, the Apple Stores made the decision to place the selling areas on the first floor, which is not a decision taken following the commercial logic, but based on some health logic because it makes people climb the staircases. Those observations gave us the clue of the need to observe that issue more intensively, and then to promote exhibitions as a tool for making it explicit.

And finally, the decision to include some materials or others, or the field we want to work in, is the result of conversations with scholars, trying to understand the main research topics they are working on.

So, I may say that, mostly, the way we work is by having very diverse conversations and observations at different levels, and connecting all those approaches.

Another fundamental debate in contemporary society has to do with the gender perspective. Has the CCA supported research, exhibitions, or acquisitions in this regard? Or do you think this is one of the areas of work in which there is still much more room for improvement?

We have not made so far a specific exhibition about women architects or similar topics, but we do have a relevant awareness of the importance of that sensitivity. I mean that, for example, we have the archive of Kenneth Frampton, or the one of Tony Vidler among many other male theoretical architects, and of course those materials are very important for the Centre, but we are fully aware about the importance of some women historians or artists, and we are working to make them more visible and therefore more accessible to researchers.

In the sense that you are asking, we are, for example, prioritizing the digitization of women photographers with this purpose, trying to make more present the work of those women. This way, if someone is working on an exhibition about New York in the thirties, to give you an example, instead of just using the usual male approach, he or she will find available the work of those women photographers. And with the same goal, we are also working with Wikipedia in Canada, trying to make more visible the women's archives that we have at the CCA, but also beyond the CCA archives.

We have definitively a lot of initiatives always trying to make more visible and accessible the work of women. Not as a field itself, but with the strategy of prioritizing those voices, those figures, those women architects and artists.

In different lectures, and even in this conversation, you insisted on the global vocation of CCA.

The CCA has an international identity from the beginning: Phyllis always thought that ideas have no borders. This approach applied to the content of the collections, but also to the idea of opening the research to everyone coming from every culture in the world. But the truth is that the collection was initially formed with materials coming mainly from North America and Europe, so in the last twenty years the Centre has been committed to emphasizing this idea of globalization in all the aspects. From the point of view of the archives, we are working on having archives from other latitudes, like from Argentina, Japan, etc. Also, in the programming and research topics, we are trying to go beyond a Western approach, so we have students and researchers from all over the world.

I believe this process of opening the CCA to the world has been very important to the global network of collaborators that we are promoting. We started doing a program in which we have a supportive curatorial presence in one selected city for a period of a few years, called CCA c/o, in Lisbon, and this edition was followed ones in Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and Dakar, which is under way now. This last example is quite illustrative of our philosophy in this matter of internationalization. If we really want to have some knowledge of architects in Africa, we partner with someone there, and we listen to them. And those people are the ones who lead the research, and the ones to establish what is really important for them to discuss. For us, to be international is more like to be local in another place. We try to avoid the extractive culture that many times has defined the Western definition of internationalization, and to implement a culture of global dialogue as a way of being more inclusive and welcoming to different points of view. We like to be, in a good way, contaminated by others.

It seems clear that the digitization of archives has meant a real revolution in the study of architecture: I only have to remember my archival work when I carried out my doctoral thesis 30 years ago... How much material do you have digitized and what is the criteria to do it?

The collection of the CCA is quite vast. In terms of numbers, we have something like 230 archives, more than 65,000 photos, about 250,000 books, many more photos in the archives... What we have digitalized right now is just a tiny fraction of what we really have. But every year we digitize more materials, at a pace of about 5,000 documents per year. We would like to do more in this matter, but the real issue here is the metadata, because digitizing the images themselves is a quite fast process.

What is clear is the more material we digitize, the more people are accessing it. So, as we have, as I said, a limited capacity, we try to prioritize the material of architects or works less known, understanding that for the better-known architects it is easy to find all kinds of materials. We actively try to make more visible those works.

In this sense, during the pandemic we established some programs of virtual fellowships, with the aim of increasing the accessibility of the CCA collection. We have a new model of archival research, digitization, and dissemination for threatened bodies of work called Find and tell Elsewhere, and we are piloting it in Africa, specifically with the archives of Abdel-Moneim Mustafa, in Sudan, and Michael Olutusen Onafowokan, in Nigeria. With a network of scholars, and with the collaboration of students or practitioners, they decide what materials are important to digitize and the results are uploaded to a public domain through Wikimedia.

The truth is we think a lot about the importance of this matter in the present time; what may be the role of a museum in this moment of a digital world, and how this is affecting the idea of collecting physical objects. I mean that now you can act as a knowledge producer by pointing out things that exist, but you do not have to own them.

Reflecting on this digital world that you mention, I am interested in your multi-year research initiative "Archaeology of the Digital" series on the preservation of born-digital archives, and your research on the development and use of digital design tools.

Archaeology of the Digital was a multi-year but also a multi-channel initiative, because it was an exhibition, acquisition, digital publications and preservation project. It tried to deal with the fact that we collect, preserve and study in a moment in the history of architecture when computers came in, and when they changed the practice of architects. It was a first phase of dealing with this born-digital material reality, and it has generated all kinds of works, and it has allowed us to create the digital lab among other things. So, we can say, this initiative has changed the institution a lot. As a result of this project, many scholars have been able to study those digital materials, and many times they have conducted their research differently because the metadata is suddenly accessible to them, and it has become an interesting aspect for their works.



Figure 4. *Archeology of the Digital*. Co-published by the CCA with Sternberg Press © CCA, 2013.

We are now working on defining what may be the next phase, in close relation with a group of scholars: a publication will come out next year with the title of *The Digital Now*. We try to think deeper to consider this digital condition, and the impact it has on the way architects design or propose concepts, even at an urban level as it happens with the concept of a smart city, for example.

Do you have any planned initiatives about the paradigm shift that the irruption of artificial intelligence is introducing in design processes?

We have been working last year with Princeton on a project involving machine learning, which is very interesting in this sense. When you look at architectural drawings, there are some elements that are not usually described; for example, it happens with the representation of trees in many site plans. As a consequence, if someone would like to conduct research about the trees, he or she will have trouble turning up relevant results in drawings and their descriptions. So, we have been working in training a machine to understand and detect in the drawings the trees.

But it is a complex task, because on the contrary as other elements which are more standardized in the architectural drawings, such as doors or toilets, there are many different ways to represent a tree. And we have been forced to understand how the machine learns, a process that in this case it requires using more than ten thousand architectural drawings of trees.

This was our first attempt to investigate how these kind of programming tools can help in these research tasks, but we want to explore this deeply because we are convinced that in the future the use of AI will be decisive for the activity of research in general. For example, if we digitize all the lectures from architects that we have, an AI could transcribe them and help a researcher to find in all those materials some keywords: how many times the word *landscape* has been used, for instance, may be quite useful to conduct any specific research in that matter.

So ultimately, we are interested in artificial intelligence from the point of view of how it may help to enhance research.

You just mentioned that this interesting research is being conducted in collaboration with some scholars. I was wondering if you have agreements with any specific universities or academic institutions.

We have a Doctoral Research Residency program, and for that reason we have partnerships with many universities. Many of them are in North America, but we have some partners in Europe, Middle East, Africa, Australia, and South America too. As a result of these affiliations, those universities send us one or two applicants each year.

And as we can only take twenty students, we conduct a process to select the chosen ones. In the kind of agreements we have, the academic institution shares part of the costs of bringing the students here.

In addition to this, we also have a program for scholars applying to collaborate with us and as a consequence we end up having an affiliation with their institutions, because those scholars are teaching somewhere. Therefore, in this second case, it is through the individuals that we have the institutional partnerships.

Finally, it has also happened in the past that there was a research topic that a university, department, or research institute found very relevant for them, and this situation has promoted some kind of alliance with the CCA.

My last question is about the future. How do you see the CCA in some years, and how do you see yourself in that picture?



Figure 5. *When is the Digital in Architecture?*
Co-published by the CCA with Sternberg Press
© CCA, 2017.

About myself (she smiles), I honestly can't predict. I have no plans to leave any time soon. I try to take every year as unique. Because the truth is that I have been here for twenty years now, and it has always been different every year.

About the Centre, we have been working very hard on the idea of expanding the CCA, and to make it more accessible to a wider audience. We have produced many movies and documentaries, and for me, that is a strategic action in terms of the future. On one side, it's because I believe that through these media you can reach many more people than with other tools. And on the other side, it's because you can achieve an interesting synchronicity: you could be present at the same time on a film festival in Australia and in Spain, for instance. As a consequence, many more people from different places can participate at the same time in the same material, something that is not possible with an exhibition.

I would like also to mention the topic we have been talking here about the digital, which I believe is crucial for the future in all the meaning that we mentioned.

And finally, I also think that increasing our physical global presence will be a key aspect for the CCA in the coming years. For example, our presence in Tokyo from 2016 to 2019 allowed us to have some conversations that have ultimately resulted in Toyo Ito deciding to donate his archive to the CCA. Being present in places is essential for establishing real connections that last beyond the time that you are there. I really hope this CCA c/o program can have continuity in the future.

These three aspects—the films, the digital future, and the global dimension—will remain in the coming years. And I believe the DNA of the CCA will continue to focus on the relevant questions for architecture and society, and on those very interesting grey areas that need to be revealed.



Figure 6. Toyo Ito during the archival hearing in 2019, as part of the *Meanwhile in Japan* series, Tokyo © CCA.

Figure 7: Giovanna Borasi, CCA Director. © Richmond Lam.

