

[International Muse]

“The universe knows that you are in the right place, even if you question why you are there.”



Gail Cavanagh in front of the Sphinx.

Gail M. Cavanagh

An American Architect in Africa

The last few years have been unusually tough for architects as it is a profession plagued by boom and bust cycles. After several years of job searching and a short stint with an architectural partnership of her own, Gail Cavanagh, CWA member and former Muse editor, took a leap into the unknown and joined an Egyptian architectural firm in Cairo, Egypt. She was only in Cairo for two months when the country erupted in protests, and Gail got a front-row seat in the dramatic theater of the push for democracy. During a recent brief return to Chicago, Gail and I had the opportunity to sit down and talk about the events of the last few months and talk about how she ended up in Egypt.

Gail started by saying that she'd always entertained the idea of working overseas, especially just after graduation, but had no contacts or compelling reason to take her abroad. Three years after graduating with her Barch from Boston Architectural Center, she could already see the economic slide beginning and moved to Chicago to find work near family. Unfortunately, after several years at Solomon Cordwell Buenz, the economic slide followed her to Chicago and she was soon looking for work again. She established contact with her current Egyptian boss in a rather convoluted way and after some long distance negotiations she found herself boarding a plane headed for Cairo.

In looking back over the first three months abroad, Gail says that the time has passed “in the blink of an eye”. This is partly due to the extreme schedule and quantity of work thrown at her from the beginning, and partly due to the difficulty in transitioning to the Egyptian calendar where Friday begins the weekend (is considered Sunday) and Sunday is the first day of the work week. It has also been difficult to adjust because due to her long hours she doesn't leave work until after dark, which makes exploring the territory a bit daunting. Despite the fact that Gail didn't speak a word of Arabic when she arrived, she has found the Egyptian people to be extremely caring and friendly, even gregarious. In fact, her Egyptian coworkers are very social, which sometimes makes it difficult to get things done! But as a woman, she has not had any difficulty getting her staff to follow her directions. In addition, the owner of the firm has made it clear that he wants the firm brought up to date with international documentation standards. He has tasked Gail and her fellow expat managers with this directive.

Aside from the not unexpected lag in technology at her new firm, MZECH, Gail explained that one of her chief challenges is in motivating her staff. She has worked hard to instill a sense of urgency in the people who are drawing for her, given the overwhelming stack of projects that are facing them, but it has been difficult to get them to adopt a sense of ownership about their work. Unlike in the US, they work a strictly 9 to 5 schedule and weekends are off limits, regardless of the deadlines looming. Combine this with a largely unorganized office with no central files, outdated computer programs, and the challenge of communicating with workers whose first language is Arabic and second language is British English, and you get a sense of the gargantuan task that has been laid in her lap.

Add to this mix a country in upheaval and you begin to see the absurdity of the situation. Thankfully, Gail has managed to maintain her sanity and her sense of humor about her position, in part due to the fact that her coworkers do care about her and are legitimately trying to satisfy her requests. One of the perks of the job is that she is sometimes required to make business trips abroad, such as to Italy and Syria. Also, the firm regularly collaborates with some top shelf architectural firms such as Michael Graves,

RTKL, Machado and Silvetti, and HOK. In many cases, MZECH works with these firms as the Architect of Record, providing construction documents because they can finish up a set much more cheaply than having it drawn in the US. This is a clear example of how globalization is affecting the world of architecture.

Working abroad also adds the unknown element of political uncertainty. After ruling Egypt for 30 years, Mubarak was ousted in a fairly quick and unexpected revolution. On a personal level, Gail has gotten to observe this revolution, including random gunfire and buildings blazing not far from where she was staying. But throughout the upheaval, she says that she has not felt in danger and, as an American, has not felt like a target. Rather, her Egyptian friends have been protective of her. In fact, Gail says that the news reports from the US Media have been largely overblown and inaccurate. Other than a three week disruption of the Internet, which was shut down throughout the country and occasionally absent employees who were off protesting, the revolution has had little impact on her day to day existence. The largest impact may ultimately be whether the funds from their clients continue to flow.

When I asked if, given the choice, she would do it all over again, Gail replied with an unequivocal yes. She said, “The first world is developed- the population is aging and declining. So the third world is the only place anything is being built”. Beside this sense of emerging opportunity, Gail believes that she is in the right place. As she has learned in Yoga, “the universe knows that you are in the right place, even if you question why you are there.” So, after accepting an offer of employment for the next three years, she will continue to be “An American Architect in Africa”.

If you'd like to follow her blog, please go to www.axiszarch.wordpress.com. Be sure to receive automatic future updates by signing onto the list at the right.



Gail Cavanagh (second from left) chats co-workers outside a mosque.

[Calendar of Events]

Confirm dates, times, and locations with the sponsoring organization. RSVP to all events by emailing RSVP@cwarch.org

July 2011

[5] a.DOT committee meeting, Muller+Muller Architects, 700 N Sangamon Street, 6:00pm, parking available Meeting open to anyone interested in volunteering or helping with exhibit planning/preparation. The exhibit is scheduled to open October 6, 2011 with a reception from 5:30-9pm.

[12] CWA Planning Meeting for 2011-2012 @ bulthaup: 165 West Chicago Avenue. Networking 5:30-6:00pm, Meeting 6:00-7:00pm.

August 2011

[09] CWA Monthly Meeting @ bulthaup: 165 West Chicago Avenue. Networking 5:30-6:00pm, Meeting 6:00-7:00pm.

September 2011

[13] CWA Monthly Meeting @ bulthaup: 165 West Chicago Avenue. Networking 5:30-6:00pm, Meeting 6:00-7:00pm.

October 2011

[6] Architects Doing Other Things, a.DOT 2011 Gallery Opening Reception, 5:30 - 9pm with a presentation at 7pm. Location - The Pit, ross barney architects, 10 W Hubbard Street, Chicago, IL. The CWA will be participating in Chicago Artists Month and showcasing Chicago-based architect artists.

[International Architect in America] Veni Friga

by Kim Haig

In the world of global architecture, Veni Friga's experience has in some ways been totally unlike that of Gail Cavanagh. She started her architectural odyssey in Rome and Milan after receiving her BArch in Italy at the University of Rome "La Sapienza". Her husband's job took them in quick succession to Greece, Australia, Singapore, and back to Australia, followed by stints in Italy and Turkey and finally returning to Italy. Along the way she assessed the local architectural surroundings, adapted, and worked on a diversity of projects. While in Australia, she picked up a Masters in Building Science and a post graduate Diploma in Computers in Architecture, at the University of Sydney. With this experience she landed a job in Building Modeling and computer simulations of pedestrian movement through a complex entertainment structure during design development. This helped to identify possible bottlenecks in pedestrian traffic. Her newly established career was interrupted when the family moved again. Now back in Italy, she helped study materials, build prototypes of products designed by designers like Phillippe Stark and then commercialize them. (Incidentally, the company's products can be purchased at the Hastings showroom in the Merchandise Mart.) At that time she picked up an MBA at Bocconi, in Milan and then worked for DEGW in strategic planning and facilities management for larger corporations.

Veni's fluency in Italian, French, English and Greek helped her to make connections along the way, but she insists that her globe-trotting past has not been an asset to her career. On a social level she learned to adapt by "building bridges" to those around her, choosing to listen more often than speak. Despite the globalization of the economy, including the field of architecture, she feels that architects are much more successful if they can stay put to develop a network of clients and connections, taking trips abroad to enrich their experience. She described the significant challenges in building a career in a new country. To start with, there is an initial learning curve on how to deliver a project locally: beyond the mental translation from metric to imperial measurements, there is the task of learning what to specify in that geographical area, what documentation is needed, the proper authorities to contact for information, all the basic organizational functions that vary from firm to firm, but change much more dramatically when adjusting to a new country.

Despite her awareness of these challenges, Veni made a very deliberate choice to move to America, partly as a way to make a better life for herself and her daughter. After her divorce in Italy, she found life became much more difficult because of the cultural stigma against divorcees. Her brother had sponsored them, and she was quickly on her way to Illinois. Chicago was a choice driven by the availability of quality schools for her daughter as well as a large job market for her. At that point the economy was still booming and she had no trouble finding work at a small company first, and then at BLDD, followed by Environ, focusing primarily on schools. Finally, she found work with a commercial space developer with increased responsibilities. But then the economy went south, she was laid off and she found herself having to adapt to a new reality, along with many other architects.

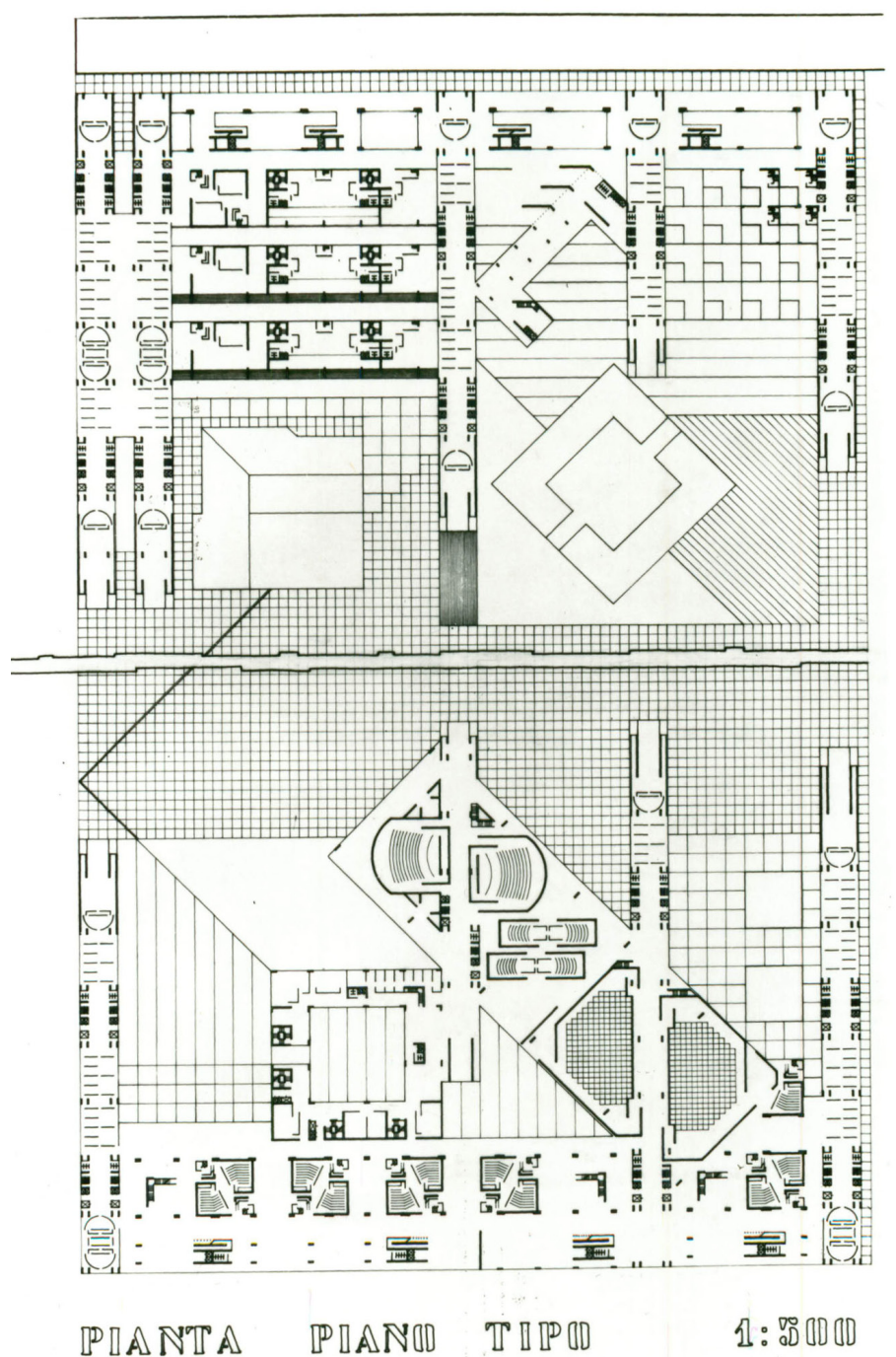


Vasiliki Friga.

"Veni's fluency in Italian, French, English and Greek helped her to make connections along the way, but she insists that her globe-trotting past has not been an asset to her career."

After spending some time searching for a new position, Veni has concluded that many out of work architects will not be able to go back to their jobs, when the economy turns around, due to the seismic changes in the world of architecture and construction industry in general. In our digital world of increasing automation, the field of architecture and construction will not be immune. The availability of software, like REVIT, and the use of Building Information Modeling, while eliminating inefficiencies, reducing cost and increasing quality in the building industry, will also eliminate a lot of positions in architecture firms. The Schools of Architecture have already redefined the curriculum for the "new" architect and their "new" role in the Integrated Project Delivery context.

But, despite these challenges she faces, Veni seems hopeful and has a wealth of experience and skills to draw from. Initially she moved to the US partly to provide her daughter with better opportunities and partly to make a new life for herself. Now that her daughter is grown she can again focus on making her way in the wide world of architecture. And who knows where that will lead?



Multi-purpose structure at Castro Pretorio (part of the remains of the Roman fortification) in Rome.

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