

BUILD IT, AND THEY WILL THRIVE:

THE TOWERING IDEALS
OF ARCHITECT
SANDRA VIVANCO

Story by Judi Jordan Photos provided by Scott Lord and Sandra Vivanco

Award-winning San Francisco architect, Fulbright scholar, entrepreneur and professor of architecture and diversity and chairwoman of diversity studies at California College of The Arts, Sandra I. Vivanco is the founding principal of **A+D**, Architecture and Design, in San Francisco. Her subtle, organic approach in creating structures and curriculum is driven by function rather than attention. Based on the premise that inclusiveness and excellence in design can and should coexist, the work of A+D has been recognized globally.



SANDRA VIVANCO'S thoughtful work has resonated in Japan, Portugal, Italy and Brazil, and although she has designed residential projects, her firm is held in high regard for her approach to public spaces in particular. Plaza Adelante, a community service and art center for Latino immigrants garnered recognition of her work. Vivanco's socially committed heart also beats for the New Mission Housing project in association with the architecture firm, Kwan Henmi. As a recognition of her work on this

project, Vivanco was selected Architect of Community as one of 10 architects to watch featured in California Home & Design Magazine in 2010.

Her personal mantra is consistent throughout her 20-plus years in the business: Vivanco said her unwavering goal is to use architecture to serve the public rather than to build a name for herself. Underscoring this, Vivanco serves on the board of two important community organizations in San Francisco: Good Samaritan, the first settlement house on the West Coast, serving immigrant families to overcome the challenges of poverty and displacement, and the Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira, a cultural and arts center that works with at-risk youth. She constantly mentors architecture minority students and professionals.

She concedes that her path has not been easy. With two daughters, the sheer logistics of caring for them as a single mother while pursuing her career were mind-boggling.

"Even something as simple as breastfeeding your child was impossible with the open floor plans that architecture firms have."

At a very young age, Vivanco introduced her daughters to her world of architecture and engineering.

"When they were small, I'd drag them on trips to Peru — the Inca ruins — they'd

sleep on the busses; they enjoyed it. They are fluent in Spanish, and I put them to work when we traveled through Latin America as interpreters," Vivanco said, laughing. "It empowered them."

Even as a mom, Vivanco was a mentor.

Motherhood challenges aside, making her way through the thorny obstacle course encountered by aspiring female architects to her present level of achievement sounds like an early episode of "Mad Men." It makes the traditionally male-driven world of advertising seem positively enlightened. On the "front lines" as a professor, Vivanco sees the beginning semester classrooms evenly populated with females and males, and she witnesses the excitement women have for bringing their vision to the world. She also sees the number of female students shrink as the semesters wear on.

"We have a long way to go — I'm also upset at lack of equal pay for equal work," Vivanco said. "Architecture requires a rare combination of technical and artistic skills; it was always driven by engineering; the National Institute of Engineering; the second-oldest institution, teaches 40 kinds of engineering — the only women in the entire school are in architectural engineering."

Beyond the sheer challenge of learning post graduation, a combination of societal assumptions factored into her discouragement, such as old-school attitudes toward women on construction sites.

With nothing to prove, Vivanco's appearance at her own construction sites is low-key, and she is often mistaken for "a visitor, wife or girlfriend of someone — anyone except the actual architect."

Vivanco laughs and relates being questioned on her own project building sites by clueless construction workers and managers who were "wondering what I was doing there."



Less excusable is being snubbed by a client.

"Sometimes, it's the little stuff," she said. "If I have a male partner, they will shake his hand but won't shake mine, and it's not easy with our people — Latin men are not the exception."

But, of course, this does not happen with the right clients. "You have an immediate connection, a shared understanding; but it's still the same. You have to prove yourself."

The good news? Her design firm A+D, has become San Francisco's go-to for Latino-centric projects, and a long-cherished dream was awarded to her firm as the local architects. And it's not just any old bodega; this particularly exciting new project has been 10 years in development — the future Mexican Museum at Yerba Buena Gardens in joint venture with Pfau Long promises to be another one of Sandra's success stories. Prior successful completions include the Potrero Hill Neighborhood Center, William R. De Avila Elementary School, Harding Park Golf Club-



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California Federal Bank, offices for tech firms Atlassian and Dataway, and the list goes on. A+D recently completed a Pacific Gas and Electric Company-sponsored feasibility study for Bay View Hunter’s Point and Plaza Adelante, a community service and art center for Latino immigrants.

The Hunters Point Power Plant design and study marks the transformation of an old power plant into an uplifting residential complex uniquely created to serve the existing community not shut them out. “Nobody represents people with limited means; I got into this work as a way to represent them. Good architecture should not be a luxury. I believe this is a kind of environmental justice.”

The gentrification of San Francisco is pushing out the life of the city in Vivanco’s estimation. She asserts that crowded cities produce more art per capita. “Density in cities is a big factor in art. The denser, the more alive.

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ing this thinking to others about the special politics of the informal settlements with music and movement is exciting.”

From working with her idol, Portuguese Pritzker prizewinner Alvaro Siza in 1990, Vivanco experienced “His thru line — a high sense of civic engagement, social equity, leaving a lasting mark.

“I am very well positioned as a Latin American cultural expert to be able to synthesize those elements,” she said softly.

Vivanco said the architecture needs to change as the racial demographics change. She was surprised that though many speak Spanish on the streets of San Francisco, there is no representation.

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A public and private partnership had to be vetted, and collaboration is key. It is evident that many building projects are based on a delicate balance of creative and professional respect in addition to an enormous amount of patience and persistence. In the midst of all this, Vivanco never loses sight of her personal ethos.

“I mentor, especially of late, young Latinos in architecture out of school less than 10 years. LIA, Latinos in Architecture, is very successful—they have chapters now started in Houston and San Francisco. It gives me a lot of satisfaction.”

If given the chance, Vivanco knows which city she would rebuild.

“New Orleans — so much food, art, cultures and yet so depressed in so many ways. It would make an incredible challenge.”●