AD–WO in Conversation

Conversation with AD–WO, a globally renowned New York art and architecture practice, about their work and the forces shaping our streetscapes and public spaces, held in the Film/Video Theater on February 12, 2025.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use. Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.

Transcript

Emily Haidet (00:00:10):

Hi, everybody. Hello and welcome to the Wexner Center for the Arts. I'm Emily Haidet, curator of public programs here at the Wex. Thank you all for being here today for a collaboration with OSU's Department of Design and Knowlton for this presentation of AD—WO with Emanuel Admassu and Jen Wood.

(00:00:31):

Before we begin, I want to quickly invite our students to take out... well, maybe we have it, take out their phones and scan the QR code on the screen. We may not have it up, but we're soliciting some feedback from students. If you have any feedback for us about what you'd like more of, what we can do better, we are all ears. So if you got your ticket, you'll receive a survey via email after this program. You can leave us some feedback there. If you want more free programs, you want more pizza parties, you want more dance parties, whatever it is, please let us know.

(00:01:06):

So this lecture is made possible by generous support from Ohio State's Office of Academic Affairs. Learning & Public Practice programs are made possible by CoverMyMeds and Huntington. Special thanks to our teams at the Wex who made this event possible and to the group that pulled together this program and also the visit of AD—WO, including Dorothée Imbert—Sorry, Dorothée—professor in the Knowlton School of Architecture and Fabienne Münch, chair of the Department of Design. Following the presentation from Jen and Emanuel, they'll be joined on stage by artist, designer, and educator Sasha de Koninck and assistant professor in the Knowlton School Mohamad Nahleh. An audience Q&A will also be available. So please be ready to ask your questions. We'll also come to you with a mic or you may text your question to the Wex hotline. So I'm going to give you the Wex hotline now, if you'd like to put it in your phone, it's (614) 813-3416. Oh, there it is, (614) 813-3416. I'll turn it over to Dorothée Imbert. Thank you.

Dorothée Imbert (00:02:26):

Thank you, Emily. Good evening. My name is Dorothée Imbert and I'm a professor at the Knowlton School. Before I introduce Emanuel Admassu and Jen Wood of AD—WO, I would like

to thank the Wex for hosting this event and Lisa Florman, vice provost for the arts for supporting the initiative.

(00:02:43):

When Fabienne Münch, there, chair of the Department of Design, and I proposed to invite AD—WO, we saw it as a way of testing across-campus collaboration and paved the way for future teaching and research. Such tests take coordination, and I would like to thank Tameka Baba and Jake Boswell and Sasha de Koninck and Mohamad Nahleh for the coordination, but also resources. And that's where Lisa's visiting artist program was really important.

(00:03:18):

Jen Wood and Emanuel Admassu, who founded AD—WO in 2015, challenge borders and classifications. From buildings to objects to exhibitions, designs, the New York–based practice has completed projects in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Germany, Italy, and the US. Their work has been exhibited at prestigious venues, including the Venice Biennale of Architettura and MoMA, and is in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and the High Museum in Atlanta.

(00:03:48):

The work of AD—WO lends itself beautifully to a workshop at the intersection of architecture, landscape, planning, design, and art. Their practice considers the role of representation in architecture, questions of race and identity and space through curation, photomontage, drawings, and tapestries. It is about experimentation and dialogue through soft materials, locally sourced materials, iterative exchanges with textile artists, and in situ research on contested land across politics and economics.

(00:04:22):

Our intention in bringing them to Knowlton, Hayes Hall, and the Wex was to expand the student and faculty's understanding of site and design. The attention they bring to making, observing, and weaving is particularly relevant in times overly reliant on imaging. I also see the dialogue between design and tapestry as fitting and current, given the critique of artistic convention that has taken place over the last years. Recent exhibitions such as *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction* at National Gallery or *Olga de Amaral* at the Cartier Foundation have repositioned knitting, knotting, felting, and weaving from applied art and domestic craft to an engagement with material and technique. Fabric and fibers are everywhere.

(00:05:10):

We are delighted that Emanuel and Jen made it, and they are expanding the scope of design for Ohio State students, and, in turn, placing Ohio State within a vibrant artistic current. Please join me in welcoming Emanuel and Jen.

Emanuel Admassu (00:05:37):

Thank you all for having us. We were concerned that we might not make it. Our flight was supposed to leave New York at 8 AM. It left at 2:30 PM. But it's really, really nice to be here, and it's an honor to be in conversation with all of you. But also, very much thank-you to Dorothée and Fabienne, but also Sasha and Tameka for running the workshop in our absence this afternoon. And thank you to all the students and faculty of OSU and folks at the Wex, including Emily, for organizing everything.

(00:06:20):

So today we're going to talk about a series of projects that are really thinking through edges, edges of property, legibility, and architecture. We have grouped these projects into themes, the first being low contrast. Two recent projects, *Groundwork* and *Immeasurability* deal with this concept of low contrast by considering the vitality of everyday space in Atlanta, the metaphorical power of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and the legacies of Indigenous land stewardship in North America.

(00:07:06):

Both *Groundwork* and *Immeasurability* explore notions of animism or nonhuman aliveness. And both of these projects are thinking about edges as ways to represent sectional and horizontal movement.

(00:07:24):

Immeasurability was an installation for a group show titled *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*, curated by Mabel Wilson and Sean Anderson at MoMA. And our installation considers Blackness in the ordinary space of Atlanta and the ocean floor of the Atlantic.

(00:07:48):

We keep thinking about this still from Mati Diop's film *Atlantics* illustrating the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean and the suggestion of the horizon. For us, this image offers space to think about opacity and movement.

(00:08:10):

Two disks, each six feet in diameter, one horizontal and one vertical, link two geographies. The vertical disk is a tapestry of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, while the horizontal disk is a landscape of 150 bricks modeling fragmented scenes of ordinary Black life in Atlanta.

Jen Wood (00:08:33):

During our early research, we discovered this incredible painting of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. We feel that one is unable to see this image without thinking about the Middle Passage. In the 1950s, Marie Tharp mapped the Atlantic Ocean floor using sonar, revealing this planetary scar. Her discovery of the ridge caused a major paradigm shift in earth science, eventually leading to the acceptance of plate tectonics and the continental drift theories.

(00:09:02):

Along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, there are these thermal vents that create these towers of minerals. Some include gold and silver, but also this black compound called magnetite. And this discovery gave our project at MoMA its material logic.

(00:09:16):

With the glass department at RISD, we tested magnetite sand in combination with cobalt, potash, soda ash, and frit in the kiln to think about limits of cohesion, disintegration, density, and color.

(00:09:47):

As I mentioned, sonar mapping is used to image the bathymetry of the ridge, and we took this as a provocation to image the planet through its movement of tectonic plates, water, wind, and people.

(00:10:02):

With the previous digital image, we created this tapestry with weavers in Belgium. The tapestry draws upon a variety of tools of measurement and surveillance, including notations from 19th-century wind maps, Hashira relief patterns, and recent pop-culture references.

(00:10:23):

From a distance, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge in the installation is the most visible part, but it atomizes as you move closer due to the inbuilt resolution of the tapestry.

(00:10:36):

Another image we keep coming back to is this etching by Peter Gordon of Savannah, Georgia, from 1734. And it perfectly captures the moment when Indigenous communities are dispossessed, the forest is cleared, and the earth is converted into property.

(00:10:54):

Our image and model studies were conceptualized as counterpoints to the distinct unitization of land depicted in Peter Gordon's etching.

Emanuel Admassu (00:11:06):

And the horizontal disk titled *ATL Bricks* offers fragmented scenes from these predominantly Black neighborhoods in South Atlanta. And the bricks are finished with a layer of magnetite sand.

(00:11:22):

The bricks on the horizontal disk initially appear as a gray haze and gain resolution with proximity.

(00:11:37):

The production of the two disks was also preceded by a series of image studies that explore the rituals associated with ordinary spaces like Waffle House and the woods in Atlanta and how those spaces are perceived from the highway.

(00:12:02):

Groundwork is an outdoor sculpture that was commissioned by Art Omi in Ghent, New York. And when we visited the site, we were intrigued by this circular patch of purple alfalfa flowers. You guys can kind of see it on the hill.

Jen Wood (00:12:23):

On the left.

Emanuel Admassu (00:12:24):

On the left, yeah. And so we also encountered stacked stone walls that had been there for centuries when we did the site visit.

(00:12:33):

And one thing we learned is that when the area that is now Art Omi and the broader Northeast of US was colonized, newly settled farmers cleared the land of trees which changed the constitution of the ground. The frost line within the ground changed, meaning that each spring, stones, and boulders that were previously below the frost line were now pushed to the surface, forcing farmers to repeatedly collect and stack the stones higher into these walls. And the same stone was also used by the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans, the Indigenous stewards of this land, to shape cairns and walls into local ceremonial markers and waypoints.

(00:13:22):

So this is one of the walls that we found on site. This is about 400 years old. And a cairn in the region.

Jen Wood (00:13:36):

So for *Groundwork*, we proposed a slightly irregular square composed of tightly packed local stone, and this was partially embedded into the existing purple alfalfa patch on the hill.

(00:13:50):

We sourced the stones and boulders from the site as well as local quarries. And we used them to thicken the surface of the ground.

(00:14:09):

So the installation is intended to move in response to the cycles of the ground's geothermal forces. So here it is right after installation, so it's looking very neat, sort of appearing as if it's slipping down the hill. And just a few months later it's starting to already be overgrown, taken over by the local flowers and grasses.

(00:14:37):

So we've been thinking about alternative ways of exhibiting cultural assets and archives that don't rely on linear conceptions of time.

(00:14:47):

Sightlines and *Dear Mazie* are exhibition-design projects that deal two very different types of archives. One is focused on the archive of Amaza Lee Meredith, while the other is a show composed of a collection of metal works from sub-Saharan Africa. In both projects, color is used as a type of code. For *Dear Mazie*, the colors in her canonical project, *Azurest South*, are used to frame her personal archive, while in *Sightlines*, color allows us to address specific sites of extraction on the African continent.

Emanuel Admassu (00:15:30):

In May 2022, we initiated a two-year collaboration with Amber Esseiva, who's a curator at ICA VCU, to design an exhibition that offers open-ended explorations of Amaza Lee Meredith's world and legacy. Amaza Lee Meredith is widely considered to be the first known queer Black woman architect in the United States.

(00:15:55):

So Amber invited us to frame fluid engagements between the archival materials and the commissioned artworks that are part of the show. And this work was developed through two material registers, Amaza's iconic home, *Azurest South*, [clicks slide] sorry, and the scrapbooks where she documented her life through photos, annotations, newspaper clippings, and hand lettering. And these scrapbooks offered critical references throughout the design process.

(00:16:37):

Amaza's sensibility is also apparent in the way she documented her home, *Azurest South*. We were specifically drawn to her photographs with these handwritten captions. And the scrapbooks demonstrate Amaza's love for color as well, both through the written descriptions on black-and-white images and these small color blocks painted around her drawings for various design projects.

(00:17:13):

So our first move as exhibition designers was to find ways to think about her relationship to both color and language. And we identified Pantone approximations of the colors described in her notes combined with some of the forms in her scrapbooks as ways to allude to the unknowable aspects of Black queer life in the early 20th century. So we combined these color blocks with handwritten notes and selected fragments from her scrapbook.

(00:18:01):

And the exhibition design puts contemporary artworks in relation with specific architectural elements from *Azurest South*, including the carport canopy, the building's envelope, glass-block glazing, and the fireplace. And these were all replicated at one-to-one scale. And in turn, creating a sequence of stage sets throughout the exhibition.

(00:18:29):

The curtain also registers some of the idiosyncrasies in Amaza's drawing style, for example, the way she drew the curves of the home and the drawing set, which obviously break the convention of architectural representation. And the shark's-tooth scrim partition establishes a soft separation between the archival timeline on one side and the commissioned artworks on the other.

(00:19:00):

The shark's tooth was also conceptualized as a woven approximation of the plastered exterior of *Azurest South*. So we were searching for textile that evokes the bumps, textures, and weathering patterns of the plastered exterior. And these were some mock-ups we made in our studio to calibrate the level of resolution and opacity between the two layers. And the gap between the two curtains was determined by the actual thickness of the walls in *Azurest South*.

(00:19:43):

So here you can see the archive wall on the left and the scrim is to the right. And a present-day view from *Azurest South* living room is applied to the gallery window, illuminated from behind and partially screened by this curving, glass-block wall. And a one-to-one scale recreation of the carport canopy frames the entry into the gallery.

Jen Wood (00:20:20):

So *Sightlines* is an exhibition featuring 139 metal works from sub-Saharan Africa, and it was on at the Bard Graduate Center in New York City, curated by Drew Thompson.

(00:20:34):

This was an initial assemblage we made of all the works just to help us get our head around the scalar and formal variety of the collection.

(00:20:46):

There was limited scholarship on these metal works, so we felt that we had to take a more expansive approach to material research. And so we considered the geological constitution of the ground of where these works came from and how metals were introduced to the Earth's crust by meteorites when the earth was a protoplanet.

(00:21:08):

Our formal material and color experiments were informed by current sites of extraction on the continent, shaping and reshaping the earth and the communities that live in and around them.

(00:21:22):

So metal is often conceptualized as a medium that bridges between the material and spiritual world. And this is attributed to its physical transformation from below ground as ore into a prized material above ground via smelting practices.

(00:21:40):

The Bard Graduate Center occupies a formal townhome on West 86th Street and has galleries spanning across four floors. Responding to the residential scale and narrow proportion of the townhome, we designed a long wall that bisects the building sectionally across three of the floors, uniting the galleries and transitional spaces. And this is an early concept plan on the second floor. And this is the as-built. So the wall provides continuity between seven curatorial zones. The landing on the galleries on either side of the wall feature artworks by 13 contemporary artists.

(00:22:26):

And here is an elevation of all the casework across three floors. So the staggered platforms allow for smaller islands of grouped objects, some of them are tiny, just like an inch in diameter. As well as perhaps conveying a sense of geological stratification. The long wall is further articulated by six-inch fins that protrude out. So from the oblique, the fins render the wall opaque and while viewed head-on, they frame a particular sight line. This is an iso' of the ground floor, the second, and the third.

Emanuel Admassu (00:23:11):

And each gallery is allocated its own color and theme. So this gallery is "Extraction," here looking through the wall of metal works to a tapestry by Otobong Nkanga. There are moments where you can look longitudinally down each wall. And this is a break in the wall framing a contemporary artwork by Amanda Williams.

(00:23:45):

So our aim throughout this process was to encourage multiple visual associations with surrounding artworks. And during our research we visited this artwork by Julia Phillips called

Observer II, which ended up being included in *Sightlines* in the exhibition. And for us it became a really powerful way to think about the unsettling dynamic between observation, the body, and the tools that mediate them.

Jen Wood (00:24:27):

So *Ghebbi* and *Light Industry* are two different projects that offer different ways to approach this idea of attenuation. The ghebbis of Addis Ababa attenuate the noise and intensity of the city, whereas Light Industry, which is a venue for film, attenuates sound and color to focus viewers' attention on the moving image.

(00:25:04):

So Light Industry is located in Brooklyn, New York, and its immediate neighborhood is still relatively industrial, so much of the street looks like this. We were given a program divided into two parts, a cinema space, and then a more social space for an office bar and a foyer. The entrance is marked just by a plane of light, and the typeface of the studio number references Peter Tscherkassky's film *Outer Space*, which was the first film to be shown in this new location.

(00:25:41):

Here is an existing plan of the space. And the fit out is composed pretty much entirely of three walls… so three thick walls, and three curtains. The walls contain the entrance, storage, a bar, and workspace. And the final plan.

Emanuel Admassu (00:26:06):

So we were thinking about ideas of transmission and reception in relation to the eye, media, and architecture throughout this process. And this familiar graphic is the SMPTE color bars. I'm sure most of you are familiar with these. And these signals are typically recorded at the head of a videotape, and it's used to determine if the video signal has been altered during recording or transmission and indicates how it can be recalibrated.

(00:26:43):

And this particular scheme is called the Blue Only Mode, and it's a step in the process of calibration. So this offered us the color palette for the more social side of *Light Industry*.

(00:27:04):

The cinema is rendered entirely in neutral tones of gray to avoid impacting the perception of color in the projected image. And materials for the curtains, walls, and seats were selected primarily based on their sound-transmission class.

Jen Wood (00:27:32):

So this is looking through the bar from the office back into the foyer area. And how the venue registers from the street.

(00:27:48):

So the Amharic word *ghebbi* connotes a territory surrounded by a fence. We've been making images that consider the value of rituals associated with these disappearing spaces in Addis Ababa. This image was made soon after we accepted the invitation to participate in the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale, curated by Lesley Lokko.

(00:28:10):

And so the city of Addis has functioned as a continuous construction site for the past two decades. And this image of the blue tarp tethered to eucalyptus scaffolding is the most ubiquitous envelope found throughout the city.

(00:28:31):

Eucalyptus was imported from Australia to Ethiopia in the late 19th century. It's a relatively fast-growing species and it was introduced to fulfill the construction and firewood needs of this new capital. Since then, the species has had drastic ecological impacts such as depleting water supplies and causing erosion.

(00:28:55):

So a variety of materials are used to fence in ghebbis, which include eucalyptus trunks, corrugated sheets, metal grills, stone, and masonry. Ghebbis can contain houses, schools, gardens, spaces of worship, and commerce. And slight shifts in the enunciation of the word ghebbi produce different meanings. So ranging from a fenced-in property to an invitation, to even a threatening infiltration.

(00:29:29):

For our installation, we suspended two corrugated panels from the rafters between two zones of the Arsenale. So an immersive space akin to the lush interiors of the ghebbi is recreated by two large tapestries, which are suspended either side of the existing arched opening.

(00:29:50):

We happened to be in Addis when we started working on the project, so we began documenting ghebbi conditions throughout the city. This is a picture taken at dusk of the Selassie Church compound, and you can see figures slipping in and out of the forested area surrounding the church building. So people tend to worship from within this foliage, within this buffer zone rather than inside the church itself. You can see a figure perhaps on the right side of the image there in the background.

Emanuel Admassu (00:30:23):

And we collaborated with a photographer based in Addis Ababa, Tsion Haileselassie, to document these ordinary conditions within and outside the ghebbi. And we produced two large tapestries for the exhibition. Each was 20 feet by 10 feet. But prior to production we made these images using photographs, hand, and digital drawings. And this is the image for *Ghebbi II*, and this is *Ghebbi I*.

(00:31:07):

So we worked with TextielLab, who are based in Tilburg, the Netherlands, to produce the tapestries. And they have a large computerized loom that translates digital images into weaving patterns.

(00:31:24):

So at first we worked remotely to produce a series of samples that were mailed back and forth between us and Tilburg, followed by an intensive, kind of in-person workshop in their studio. And there were thousands of yarn types from all over the world to choose from, each with their

own tensile properties and other behaviors that had to be calibrated. And these are some of the test weaves from the workshop. And some details of *Ghebbi II*. I know the students produced tapestries that are slightly better than this today. And this is a detail of *Ghebbi I*.

(00:32:14):

So within the hall of the Arsenale in Venice, the blue tarp and scaffolding operated the scale of the building itself, while the two tapestries frame a more intimate yet transitional space for people moving through the exhibition. The tapestries were hung behind these corrugated panels—you see one of them here—and they were initially shielded from view.

(00:32:42):

And this series shows the construction sequence of the actual blue-tarp wall. So we added some additional horizontals. And then the blue tarp with the windows cut out at eye level for the photographs. And the external cross bracing and the corrugated wall in the foreground. And the tapestry behind those corrugated panels.

Jen Wood (00:33:15):

We had 10 images of ghebbis within the scaffolding, thinking of them as portals to Addis through the tarp. And these are the photos produced by Tsion Haileselassie.

Emanuel Admassu (00:33:29):

And that's Jen installing.

Jen Wood (00:33:31):

For scale. This is your first encounter of the installation as you move through the Arsenale. And these two photos showed the transitional moment in the archway framed by the two tapestries.

(00:33:58):

So this tapestry called *Ghebbi I* combines an image of the blue tarp with a canonical painting by Belachew Yimer depicting the Battle of Adwa. And we're also thinking about the work of Ethiopian painter Skunder Boghossian, who mythologized the prayer beads used by monks in the highlands of Ethiopia as a way to think about spirituality and exile.

(00:34:28):

The second tapestry describes the moment of simultaneously being within and outside of the ghebbi—so the ghebbi not as a retreat from the world, but a site where a world, or worlds, are cultivated.

Emanuel Admassu (00:34:51):

In 2023, we produced an installation called *100 Links* in collaboration with the Buell Center for the Chicago Architecture Biennial, which was curated by the Floating Museum. And *100 Links* builds on the research that the Buell Center has been organizing around land and the research that we've been developing around concepts of measurement. And one of the earliest projects that we did as a practice, which is called *Two Markets*, was also an investigation of similar questions of property in East Africa. And both projects considered cartographic imaginaries and also transformations introduced by inhabitants.

(00:35:38):

And our approach to representation and image making has definitely shifted since *Two Markets*, but it's helpful to look back and identify commonalities in the ways that we approach the question of property in a post-colonial context in Africa and also in the US.

(00:35:59):

An imposed order in the form of a grid was laid out by the colonial regimes in both Dar es Salaam and Addis Ababa. But we are specifically interested in examining how these master plans were only partially complete, because they were eventually transformed by their inhabitants.

(00:36:31):

And this research culminated in an exhibition that we put together in Providence, which was made up of 18 large-scale drawings printed on metal with this corrugated backing. And we also produced a newspaper to narrate some of the fragmented and erased histories of the two marketplaces.

Jen Wood (00:37:00):

100 Links, our installation for the Chicago Architecture Biennial, focuses on the tools used to measure and divide land. Gunter's chains and corner mounds are devices that measured and marked vast territories during the colonization of North America. The mounds were dug out from four pits to show where the grid intersected, demarcating parcels of land that were for sale. And during the westward expansion of the property regime, this tool called Gunter's chain was used to measure the plots. So the chain is 66 feet long and it's tagged and divided into 100 links, and it's a combination of decimal and English systems, so that 18th-century surveys could lay out fields, farms, towns, and eventually the Jeffersonian grid.

(00:37:51):

Together these tools enabled the conversion of earth into property. Alternative ways of being with the world by Indigenous communities, who considered themselves as belonging to the land, or by enslaved people who invented new modes of life despite being declared property, were considered to be obstacles to this brutal dynamic. So our installation melds the Gunter's chain and the corner mound together. We suspended the mound so that visitors could walk around, under, and through it. And the entire installation is made of just two different types of elements, a steel rod and a steel ring. And the center line from ring to ring is eight inches.

Emanuel Admassu (00:38:37):

And this is a diagrammatic plan of the installation. So the chain strands make a voided pyramidal mount and an elevation suspended from the ceiling. This shows how these systems of measurement appear in their idealized form, and how they begin to deform, and when they move from the realm of abstraction to materialization.

(00:39:04):

So we worked through digital and physical models to analyze how strategies of tensioning at the corners impact the overall form of the mount. But eventually we realized that these paper-clip models ended up being the most accurate simulations of the installation's structural dynamics.

(00:39:28):

So *100 Links* was installed at the Chicago Cultural Center. On the right of this image is Millennium Park. And to the left is the courtyard of the building. So we had four pits on the floor containing the books that were also published by the Buell Center that furthered this research on land. And thousands of steel links and steel rings were handmade by a blacksmith in Chicago called Paul Russell. And these individual elements were preassembled into hundreds of strands to expedite the installation.

(00:40:10):

We're also interested in these anthropomorphic tags of the Gunter's chain, which denote every 10 links or eight feet. And these are also made of steel, but with a blackened finish. So for our installation, the tags were divorced from the chain and arrayed along the gallery walls. And this is a partial interior elevation of Chicago Room 2, laying out the locations of the tags. And the array of the tags on the wall superimposes several different curves from the sagging chain aligned to the same data, which creates some misalignments with the eight-inch unit of the chain structure.

Jen Wood (00:41:16):

So I'll just go back to that. So the veil of the chain around the perimeter is not tethered to the ground, so everything else is intentioned except for that curtain. So as people move through, it sways. Also, the blacksmith that worked on this project happens to be a really incredible classical violinist. So he came in after installation and played and all the chains were vibrating and shimmering, which was quite beautiful.

Emanuel Admassu (00:41:57):

Thank you.

Jen Wood (00:41:58):

Thank you.

Emanuel Admassu (00:42:07):

Do we sit?

Mohamad Nahleh (00:42:20):

Right. Well, hello. And thank you all for joining. Thank you, Jen, thank you, Emanuel, for this very meaningful but also very urgent talk, I would say now more than ever. It's obviously a pleasure to have you here at OSU, and it's a pleasure to spend, I think we have 10, 15 minutes just thinking through your work together. I'm also delighted to be joined by Sasha, an expert weaver herself.

Sasha de Koninck (00:42:49):

Thank you.

Mohamad Nahleh (00:42:51):

So this isn't the first time I've had the chance to hear you speak about your work, but this may be the first lecture that coincides with 10 years since the, let's say, informal launch of AD–WO. I know that marking a decade risks flattening what have likely been very different and very shifting years, both in your own collaboration, but also in relation to the world. But still, I'm curious to know how you see this moment, and maybe how this moment helps you think ahead about where AD–WO is going, also in relation to where the world is going. I know in a previous talk you spoke about this idea of an impossible destination, one whose impossibility and maybe elusiveness gives clarity to the work you're doing today. One could say much like the framing of the weaving workshop actually. So yeah, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that?

Emanuel Admassu (00:44:01):

Hold on. So two sides to the question, right? One is what do you think about the 10 years?

Mohamad Nahleh (00:44:06):

Yeah.

Emanuel Admassu (00:44:06):

And then the second one is about the world?

Mohamad Nahleh (00:44:11):

Moving ahead, yeah. Small question. (sarcastic)

Emanuel Admassu (00:44:15):

Yeah, yeah. I'll just say… I mean, we talked about something similar recently, and also speaking with Sasha, we started the practice in 2015, which is when I started teaching at RISD. But the official launch is 2018 when we moved to Providence. So I would say maybe the three years that we spent living in Providence were probably the most important years because, for the first time, it put us in conversation with artists—practicing artists—and it completely shifted the way we approached architecture. Because I think before that we were a relatively traditional architectural practice. We were trying to just do residential projects in Ethiopia. But I think those encounters and conversations about representation and the limits of representation that were happening within the context of an art school shifted the way we approached the work.

(00:45:23):

And I think there was a moment where we were really frustrated with the discipline of architecture as well, and we were starting to fashion ourselves as artists. And I think now we're somewhere in between, where we really are trying to think of the practice as both an art and architecture practice. But more so we are entering into a space where we are really framing the space for art. So almost all of the projects in our practice right now are art related, but we're designing the space around the art. I would say that's where we are. The question about the world, I don't even want to... Yeah, Jen?

Jen Wood (00:46:10):

Yeah, I might dodge the world question too. I think, yeah, just reflecting upon where we were 10 years ago or seven years ago when I joined AD–WO full-time properly, I feel like we felt very

insecure in our messiness, but now it's not like we're not messy anymore, we're just feeling a little bit more confident in being messy. And I think that works for us because I feel like there is continuity in the work that we do and the research that we do, and it just manifests in unexpected ways. But yeah, I think we'rxe at a point definitely where we want to pursue more tapestry work, and we're designing a series of smaller-scale tests that we want to pursue. Yeah.

Mohamad Nahleh (00:47:01):

Awesome. Thank you.

Sasha de Koninck (00:47:02):

Well, that's good because that segues into my question.

Jen Wood (00:47:05):

Great.

Sasha de Koninck (00:47:06):

So I'll give a little context of what we did at the workshop today, and we'll be doing at workshops all day tomorrow. So students were working in groups, and they were assigned a location in Columbus to go visit. And they were given a satellite image of the location as well, and they had to collect materials and then create a tapestry weaving to convey the space that they went to. And I wanted to know how your experience of a place has been impacted by these textile projects that you've taken on? And do you see the landscape differently? Do you look at space in textile forms now?

Jen Wood (00:47:48):

I think a little bit, yeah. We just happened to speak about Igshaan Adams, who I think is doing... I'm not sure if that's secret. Okay. Anyway, we're talking about Igshaan Adams, who's an incredible textile artist weaver, and he does these very large-scale weavings that map a story of movement across a specific territory in Johannesburg. And so I think seeing those works, I think, three or four years ago now, I think that was a transformative moment where we saw how the constraints of tapestry... a super-productive way to think about architecture and how to represent architecture. So yeah, I think a little bit, to answer your question.

Mohamad Nahleh (00:48:41):

I guess I have a follow-up on that, which just came to mind. But I'm also curious, where does the system fail in this case? Where does ambiguity and elusiveness begin to work against you and also against, say, the histories you're engaging with? Or does weaving in this case never fail to represent, and the whole point is that the lower resolution is more successful in conjuring or summoning a particular image?

Emanuel Admassu (00:49:18):

That's a tough one. I mean, I would say a lot of our experiments in representation came from a response to the limits of architectural representation. So we say this a lot, but basically around the time we graduated graduate school, there was a certain popularity of architectural drawings

that were about demonstrations of labor. There were just these immaculate line drawings that, when you read them, you basically registered how many hours it required to produce them. Versus the artists that we were interested in being in conversation with, obviously we're putting the same amount of time and thinking into the work, but it was never a demonstration or it was never registering the labor. It seemed effortless.

(00:50:15):

So I feel like, to a certain extent, that's the ambition, for us to be able to edit the work in a way where it's somewhat open, and it gives us the next chapter that we're going to be developing in the practice. But it also allows us to critique the certainty of architecture, this obsession with precision and legibility that the discipline has been built on. And we're more interested in those edges of the discipline where things begin to be somewhat blurry.

(00:50:55):

And I think I can read—just because I know Mohamad—I can read the critique in your question, which I think is a fair critique. And to a certain extent, we do tend to be somewhat elusive in the language that we use and the notations that we use to develop the work. But I hope at least the politics is very clear and the ambitions are clear. And there are moments where it needs to be explicit. And I think we are approaching some of those moments.

Sasha de Koninck (00:51:33):

I have one more building off of that. In thinking about the grid that came up a lot of times in your presentation—grid of maps, grid in architecture, and in weaving. We're always talking about ways to break away from the grid. So this is maybe more of the thought is still forming in my head, but I'm just wondering, maybe talking about the blurry edges that you're just saying and the borders and boundaries that come up a lot, what are ways that you're trying to break the grid?

Jen Wood (00:52:08):

I think I'm going to approach sideways to that question. I think one of the many things that we're drawn to with tapestry and weaving is that it's somewhere between 2D and 3D. So it's partly image and partly a structure. And so for us, that's a way of breaking out of that grid as well. Thinking a lot about Jenny C. Jones's work, who often produces sculptures that are between 3D and 2D as well. Did you want to follow up from there?

Emanuel Admassu (00:52:53):

I mean, for example, some of the space that we're trying to draw, whether it's the marketplace or even the ghebbi, for the inhabitants, the property line or the edge or the grid is not what registers. It's actually the fact that they're incredibly porous spaces. So we always start with an acknowledgement of the grid and the limits of the property line, but we're always trying to dissolve it. And even in the thinking around these ordinary spaces in Atlanta, we were starting from these really brutal limits established in a suburban cul-de-sac kind of neighborhood. But even within those spaces, we identified zones of overlap. And a lot of the drawing is trying to push architectural representation to acknowledge these temporal forms of inhabitation that actually break through the grid. It's of course, very, very difficult to represent that, but that is

the ambition. It's always acknowledging the grid while also acknowledging the fact that people every day are breaking the grid.

Jen Wood (00:54:09):

But also, yeah, the grid fails all the time. I think you brought it up in the lecture, you're talking about how these imposed master plans on Kariakoo Market in Dar es Salaam and in Addis, and they're imposed, they're drawn there, but they never actually are like that in reality. I mean, they're always compromised. They're always subverted. Yeah.

Mohamad Nahleh (00:54:32):

I guess just linking back to what you were saying, Emanuel, about politics in general, and one way to read AD—WO is to say it's a practice dedicated to forging a language, a language of visualizing, articulating certain politics and histories. And it's very much a language that is critiquing colonialism, extraction, systems of racialization, the lack of imagination in architecture today. But also it's a practice that doesn't just want to critique, it wants to transcend being just oppositional all the time.

(00:55:11):

And I guess my question here is, I know very well who benefits from this language. I'm someone who benefits from this language. I wonder who you think your audience is for that language? And also more importantly, I guess, do you think it speaks on behalf of other people? And who would they be? And I think my sub-question in that, and that's a question I've always wanted to ask, is, do you see your work as epistemic objects, as artifacts speaking on behalf of certain communities or trying to visualize the ways that certain communities make sense of the world? Or do you see it more as a form of abstraction? So is it realism in the way certain people see the planet? Or is it abstraction in opposition, contrast to how we practice architecture today?

Jen Wood (00:56:06):

I don't think it would ever claim to speak on behalf of anyone or for these objects to represent… all these artifacts to represent a community. I mean, we do a lot of research work in places like Addis and Dar es Salaam, and there's always going to be asymmetries in that sort of dynamic, but we try really hard to work with experts on the ground there. So we try to think of our work as "writing with," to borrow a term from Anooradha Siddiqi. So I think the kind of artifacts of a conversation in some ways, at that particular moment in time—it's not meant to be an encapsulating neat boundary, like, this is a thing that does; this is a fragment of a larger network of ideas.

Emanuel Admassu (00:57:01):

Yeah, yeah. I mean, we're definitely in conversation with architects and designers in the cities that we're drawing. So we make sure that whatever we're making about Addis is presented in Addis. Whatever we're making about Dar es Salaam is presented in Dar es Salaam. So we are held accountable. But we're definitely not interested in this politics of giving voice. That's not what we're doing. We're very much architects and we have certain lived experiences and certain politics, and we're bringing that to bear on the discipline. So it's always a critique of the discipline and it's trying to hopefully stretch the discipline to address other forms of life. So

yeah, I think it's very tricky to be a practice based in New York and to say we're speaking for people in Addis Ababa. That would be quite ridiculous. But I think we also believe that Africa is here, Africa is not just in Addis, which means we need to find language—a vocabulary, both visual and textual—that addresses that complexity of the fact that people are moving and their sensibilities are also moving with them.

Mohamad Nahleh (00:58:26):

Beautiful. Thank you both so much. I think we can open the floor for questions from the audience.

Jess Xiao Long (00:58:35):

All right. So just raise your hand up high and I'll come with you—I'll come to you with the mic. Sorry.

Audience 1 (00:58:47):

Thank you. It was such a wonderful conversation. And picking up on your last point about language, you spoke of how you come from a traditional architectural practice and then you've veered into the art, and now you're navigating that space between. And I'm curious about how you navigate that, particularly with the use of language and the audiences that you are speaking with? There's been lots of debate about art and architecture and art versus architecture, and so how do you navigate that in-between space? How does language factor in? And does code switching factor into that?

Jen Wood (00:59:31):

Yeah, great question.

Emanuel Admassu (00:59:32):

I didn't expect the last part, but go ahead.

Jen Wood (00:59:35):

I feel like the only people, in some ways, that have called us artists is us. Everyone's just been like, "Whatever, you're architects." Which is fine. I feel like these ideas of language, I think around bridging between art and architectural worlds is a real asset when it comes to the majority of our work, which is exhibition design. And so we love working with curators, with artists, with institutions, and with the fabricators and speaking all of those languages to execute a project together. And we always work really closely with the curators and a part of the research process. And then also in conversation oftentimes, which we love, with the artists as well. So yeah, I feel like that's where the language is an asset and work in progress.

Emanuel Admassu (01:00:34):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, just to add to that, I think what we realized about work in general for us is who do we want to be in conversation with for two years? Most of our projects take about two years. So depending on who you are working with, those are the people you'll be in conversation with for two years. And so far we've been lucky enough to do a series of projects

where those conversations are primarily conceptual conversations with either artists or curators. And like any architectural practice, of course, we want to do a building at some point, but we also know what that means. That might mean spending three to five years being in conversation with consultants and with folks who don't necessarily want to engage with the ideas that we're presenting. So we're trying to figure out where to situate ourselves.

(01:01:35):

This is a tangent, but mostly for the students. I'll just say, I went to London with my students last spring, and we met with an architect, I won't name him, but he said for 20 years he'd been working to get a museum commission. And finally 20 years later, he landed a major museum commission. And he's miserable because he's spending eight hours a day every single day negotiating the budget and talking to consultants. He is not having the types of conversations he imagined a museum design project being. So I think we have to be somewhat real about what it means to practice architecture day to day. And for us, it's been about figuring out a group of people that we think are presenting really exciting ideas in the world and finding ways to collaborate with them. And it hasn't necessarily been profitable as a business model, but it's been exciting.

Jess Xiao Long (01:02:39):

Other questions? You can also text to the hotline. It's on the screen. Yeah, 614-813-3416. Otherwise, just raise your hand. I'm coming to you in the front.

Audience 2 (01:03:09):

I thought it was really interesting how when you were presenting the *100 Links* project, you were saying that the installation would sway and vibrate based on the movement of the people in the area or from the music. And I was just wondering how you think about how the project takes a life of its own once you remove yourself away from it and present it, and how designing installations compares to creating permanent architecture as they take a life of their own?

Jen Wood (01:03:44):

I think what was interesting, and maybe also ties back to an early question from Mohamad as well, is when people walked into that installation and didn't know the context of it, they didn't know it was about how North America was divided up and sold, people thought it was magical, it was whimsical in a way. And then when they read the little text on the wall, if you watch them, their face would kind of drop in horror. So I guess it's sort of interesting to observe how people engage with work within and without the context from which it's built. And no reaction is a wrong reaction, obviously, but just what people bring to it, I think. Yeah, it's interesting how it plays out.

Emanuel Admassu (01:04:29):

Yeah, and we're really interested in this notion of animism. We mentioned in the talk an idea of non-human aliveness. So we're always thinking about the animism of materials, whether it's the stone that we used for Art Omi or the chain. So sometimes we are also, not to sound cheesy, but we're starting a conversation with a material. And those conversations continue after we leave. And I think that to a certain extent, that is what happened with *100 Links*. And it's also what

happened with Art Omi. And even the magnetite for *Immeasurability* was very much about a conversation with the sand that we had for about a year. And it has its own animism and it's activated by magnets a very different way than we expected it to be. So I think sometimes you move with intuition, but there's a point where the material takes over and it starts to do its own thing.

Jess Xiao Long (01:05:33):

All right. We've got time for one more question… All right, thank you. Someone texted in the hotline. Is your architectural practice, with its clear politics, in continuity or opposition with the tradition of utopian imagination in architecture?

Emanuel Admassu (01:06:18):

Do you have an answer?

Jen Wood (01:06:21):

I kind of associate utopian imaginations of architecture with modernism. So I feel like we're not… because of that association I have with the idea of utopia. Does that tie into what you were going to say?

Emanuel Admassu (01:06:37):

Yeah, I mean, we're definitely not scholars of that work in any way, but maybe we're just more interested in the struggle, the ongoing struggle than some sort of idealized destination. And the utopian projects that I can think of are relatively apolitical, and we're not necessarily interested in that either. So there's kind of an unresolved aspect to the work and that we want to maintain, which is really not the day after, it's today.

Jen Wood (01:07:17):

But I mean, not to contradict what you just said as well, but we are thinking about-

Emanuel Admassu (01:07:21):

Which happens a lot.

Jen Wood (01:07:22):

Which happens a lot. Maybe if we rethought the idea of utopias to be a sort of futuring project, not a destination, but some sort of futuring agenda. And we talk about that a lot and we're working on this. It's a project that we don't want to call a memorial because that feels like you are kind of fixing something in the past and you're sticking a plaque on it. But thinking about how do we think about histories, how do we think about histories that are incomplete in their narrative, but also position them within the current context for them to keep evolving? Because they are, no matter what we do. We're just acknowledging that and framing a space to allow for those conversations. So yeah, I guess if we think about utopia as a futuring project, then yes.

Emily Haidet (01:08:11):

All right. I think that's all the time we have. So thank you everyone so much for being here. I know many of you were in workshops all day, so time for some dinner and back at it tomorrow. Thanks so much. Maybe you'll stick around for just a few minutes in case others have questions.

Jen Wood (01:08:30):

Come join us.

Emily Haidet (01:08:30):

Thank you.