

ASK THE ARCHITECT

Laura Carrara-Cagni of Edward Williams Architects answers *ADF's* questions about the things that drive her, personally and professionally



Laura Carrara-Cagni

WHY DID YOU BECOME AN ARCHITECT?

I love travelling and I wanted to become an interpreter, so I actually studied languages first. I was spending more time helping a friend with her architectural drawings. I realised that architecture was a real world-shaping profession; much more exciting! But with this creativity came responsibility: I needed the tools to actually become an architect. So almost a year later, I switched faculty to the Architecture School in Genova and caught up with my peers. Passion gave me the energy to work very hard at it.

I still wanted to travel, so as soon as I finished my studies I got a COMETT European Community Scholarship and moved to Nancy in France for two years. I then moved to Austin, Texas, until I finally settled in London in 1998.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT IT MOST?

I love engaging with the end-users of a project. I love putting myself in their shoes, experiencing how they use a given space and improving it, then being rewarded with their project buy-in. Design is an iterative process; I use my creative and technical tools to improve people's living and working spaces.

I also love being on building sites. The ideas on paper suddenly and unalterably

become real. This gives me energy. When a project is complete, I can see that the spaces really work and everyone's experience is bettered. That's when all the effort to get there is rewarded.

WHAT IS THE HARDEST PART OF YOUR JOB?

The daily fighting. To be recognised beyond being a woman and a foreigner is particularly difficult in the UK. Then there is convincing client and consultants to do better and push boundaries, often through extra work, more resources, and more research. This doesn't necessarily mean extra cost; on the contrary, often you can compensate for a small budget with extra research and really optimise the client's budget.

In our studio, we are always experimenting with some new material, use of design, and new technology. We like to push ourselves. Pushing others is the struggle, but it is always worth it and it pays off in the end.

DO YOU HAVE A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR WHEN MANAGING MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAMS?

We deliver programmes on time and to budget because we succeed in getting the design team and client all working towards the same goal. It is always possible to achieve this. I have delivered very large, complex projects with initial "impossible conditions" because I was able to align all team members to the common goal, whatever it took. This is a profession founded on teamwork; no large project can be delivered by one individual alone. The difference between working well together or otherwise is what determines the success of the project.

WHAT IS YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENT AND WHY?

Following many years' experience at Hopkins, eight years ago, Edward Williams and I started our own practice. That was an exciting venture. Since then, we have doubled our team size every year and completed some extraordinary projects. We always have multiple projects onsite and have an established team which we mentor. We are growing together and we are winning awards.

WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST CURRENT DESIGN CHALLENGE?

Since 2015, we have been lead designer for The Midland Metropolitan Hospital, just



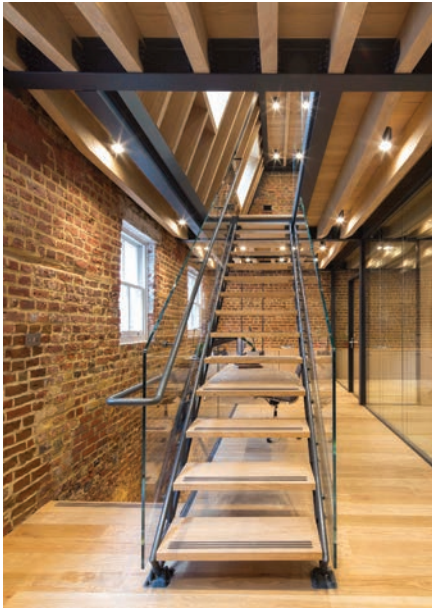
outside Birmingham. Within a complex PFI2 team structure, employed by the main contractor, we managed to win the competition with an alternative scheme that pushed the building to one side of the site – leaving half of the 16 acres available as open space for green, publicly-accessible outdoor space for sport, creative and community activities.

MMH will be the largest A&E in Western Europe, so we decided it would only be fitting to give it the largest hospital winter garden in UK! Our design is all about promoting a sense of wellbeing instead of institutional confinement: the Winter Garden at Level 5 functions as a public space, undercover. Seating and planting, cafes and shops, and a Gallery are designed into the break-out space for patients, staff, visitors, and members of the public. We even made space for a natural habitat for redstarts on the pedestrian-accessible deck outside the winter garden.

The project is two thirds complete and stopped when the main contractor, Carillion, went into liquidation last year. We are working very closely with the trust to get it going again, and this is now in sight.

WHAT SINGLE CHANGE OR INNOVATION WOULD MAKE AN ARCHITECT'S JOB EASIER?

All projects in our studio are carried out in BIM (Building Information Modelling). This means that all projects are designed on a 3D complex model. It is a great tool but still presents important limits, so we often spend a lot of time in order to achieve what we want. Revit, which is the BIM version we use, still struggles to model basic elements like landscaping and curved handrails!



WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT FAVOURITE MATERIAL FOR USE IN DESIGNS?

We carefully select the right materials for each project and detail them meticulously to produce something unique, long-lasting and sustainable. I love materials and spend a lot of time exploring and trying to get the best out of each in a traditional or a new way. Timber has always been one of our favourite materials to work with and we are now pushing it further in order to get fast, dry and quiet construction using it as a structural material too. Our next project onsite is a CLT construction. The last project we completed was a modern timber refurbishment in an old brick mews which we transformed into a beautiful office.

For many years, I have researched colour. I am convinced that colour choices for the built environment cannot be arbitrary or a matter of taste. For the end result to be a balanced and meaningful composition that enhances its context, colours have to be decided by the same rigorous process as other design and material choices. The embedded colour of natural materials needs to be controlled together with the applied colours. So I became kind of an expert in creating balanced colour interior and external spaces.

DO YOU STRUGGLE TO TAKE TIME OFF – HOW DO YOU RELAX?

When you have your own studio, it is always difficult to cut off completely. We tend to take short frequent breaks but we stay connected while we are relaxing! We have recently completed a refurbishment in our



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family home in Genova, my home town in Italy. It was a challenging project in a historic building [see image on previous page] and it has now become our perfect place to retreat and entertain friends and family.

DO YOU SEE GENDER BALANCE IN UK ARCHITECTURE AS AN IMPROVING SITUATION?

I hope so. I am not sure how much the construction industry as a whole is actually changing its attitude but we are certainly doing as much as we can to mentor women in the office so they can grow in the profession and have the skills to get respected by peers in order to enable them to make the most of their capacity. Too often women have to spend too much time and effort to get recognised, and this is a terrible waste of resources. So far, our experience and strength are the only things that can overcome this problem.

HOW BIG AN EMPHASIS DO YOU PUT ON USING TECHNOLOGY WHEN DESIGNING BUILDINGS?

We have been investing in sophisticated software since we started the studio. Our projects being developed in Revit allows us to quickly produce sketch models and images for interactive review with stakeholders – and it supports the design development process. The effect of all of this re-engineering is that we are now two to three times as efficient as a traditional architecture office.

Our most recent innovation is our in-house 3D printing and modelling, which

allows us to produce accurate models in a fraction of the time it used to. We've recently used it to build a large model of part of the Midland Metropolitan Hospital in intricate detail [pictured left], which was recently on show in the RA Summer Exhibition's Architecture room, together with a smaller model of a circular library in Lithuania. Nothing, though, can replace the traditional lead pencil and paper for the thinking process!

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT BREXIT IN TERMS OF ITS EFFECT ON YOU AND YOUR PRACTICE?

Of course! Where do I start?! Whichever side you stand, everyone is worried. The uncertainty makes the client more conservative, either just sitting and waiting or in the best case, taking much less risk. This has a devastating knock-on effect in the construction world. The economic impact when Brexit is actually implemented will be very detrimental across the board.

We will not have access to the European procurement system which will restrict our choice of projects. Hiring people will be much more difficult as there simply are not enough UK students/architects. Needing visas for European staff, too, will increase our costs considerably. Even as architects, we are considering stockpiling! A disaster all-round, and hard times to come.

WHAT ARE YOUR PERSONAL GOALS FOR NEXT YEAR?

I am involved in the ULI (Urban Land Institute) Healthcare and Life Sciences Council in the US, so I travel twice a year for the meetings. The UK ULI is trying to develop a similar council and I hope I can contribute significantly to this goal, bridging US and UK experiences.

I also want to get more involved in higher education, both working with universities and going back to guest lecturing and teaching. Whenever I do so I get a buzz from the students' enthusiasm and curiosity and it stimulates me to do more research. I have one particular research exercise in my back pocket which I hope will result in a very interesting breakthrough in the use of materials.

Personally, I would love also to spend more time following contemporary art, a passion I have had for years. I have been focusing recently on Italian galleries to discover new Italian talents.

Laura Carrara-Cagni is a director of Edward Williams Architects

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ISTANBUL AIRPORT, TURKEY

The world's biggest airport terminal building yet is the product of a three-way architectural collaboration that brings uplift for all passengers

REPUBLIC, DOCKLANDS

The latest phase of a major office scheme is a canny refurb by Studio RHE