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ROBERT ROYSTON

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviews Conducted

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PRELUDE

My name is Robert Royston, and I'm a landscape architect. And I'm very happy to be here today to talk to you. It's a time when…actually, I'm in my ninetieth year. I think that is an achievement. And it's because I worked and designed in landscape architecture [from] 1946 to this date—I'm in private practice. And just as a note of humor, but [something] real, I've just been hired back by my firm to work with J.C. Miller, one of the authors of my book.[i] And the juices are beginning to flow again. It's really wonderful to do, and if that particular garden gets built,[ii] it's going to be one of the best in the world [LAUGHTER]. You know, for me, [it's] not the best in the world, but it's going to be an exciting space. We're doing a lot of work with tile, and it's a case of marrying two lots. Each one has a house by a very famous architect: Welton Becket is on one and [A.] Quincy Jones,[iii] I think, [is] on the other. And we have to make it look like one park and yet be able to sell one side—one lot—if we have to. And so far, it's just been…I don't want the swimming pools to look like swimming pools, and that introduces a very interesting idea of using these eight-foot diameter, nine-foot diameter, tables that can overhang in the pool. Anyway, it's lots of fun.

BIOGRAPHY

CHILDHOOD

A California Walnut Orchard

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We moved down there [to the Santa Clara Valley], and I was…I think I was about seven years old. My father was an electrical and mechanical engineer and had a little business, a little building in San Francisco. And I still swear that I experienced the pleasure of sliding down some of the sand hills of San Francisco. And it's really…that's a long time ago. We remained in [the Town of] Fairfax [in Marin County] for about six years, bought a house up there apparently, my parents did. And then I saw him [my father] talking to my grandfather a great deal. Grandfather had a space right next to my father, and they were talking about selling [the] Fairfax [property] and buying a ranch. All of a sudden, they were deeply involved with what they should do, and they wanted to start a walnut orchard from scratch. And so they bought a wonderful old house on eighteen acres in the Santa Clara Valley, about three miles south of Morgan Hill, which is... And they took out all the prune trees—it was a prune orchard—and in went walnuts. And then all the magazines around had to do with farming and began to show up in the house. And that's where I started to farm.

Interesting thing about my father: He decided that we should have a tennis court. And there was a four-car garage, my brother and I (he was two years older) had this little apartment out in the garage…spaces…and then there's a tractor and a couple of cars or whatever in the thing. But it was very interesting because I had to learn everything as I grew older. By the time I was eighteen, I could drive the tractor and knew how to do the pruning and irrigation on the ground. And that was the rationalization for the tennis court—[that] we could dry the walnuts on it. And there's a picture around somewhere; it shows my grandfather. They dried in trays. [And] how do you get the meat out of the walnut? We used to crack them with a hammer,

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open them up and just keep the meat. And then my father would drive to San Francisco and sell this to one of these stores [LAUGHTER], a food store that we can create friends and do it.

Building a Model Town

We took a trip in the old Oldsmobile, my mother and father and my sister and I, and I don't know where my older brother was, but anyway, [we went] to Santa Barbara, and I had never been there before. But there was a little town called Girard, which I could understand. It was a small town; I don't know whether it even exists, though I think it does. And I was just amused (I mean delighted) that I could understand it in other words. It had a center over there, and it had a mountain over there. So when we got home (it was a good time during the farm time, so I could have some time of my own, and the irrigation was finished), I asked my father if I could have this space, about 20 by 40 [feet] because I wanted to try building a new town. I was ten or eleven [years old] maybe, and we, through the years, had got all kinds of little toys—the lead toys—and I just started in [on the work].

I made a road around the edge. It [the town] had what I found out later was a CBD [Central Business District] where the stores are, or something like that, and I think I even had some boats. But they were just sort-of on an edge, and those boats I made of kind of a clay mud, very heavy mud. And then I let them dry, and that's what we had, a symbol of a boat. I thought it was terrific. And we had all the cars and [a] gas station, and the roads were… as I recall, I tried kind of a loop system. I don't remember doing a cul-de-sac. And the thing was, that before playing in the space, I used a sifter to get a nice smooth road. I'd go around it, and then wet it a

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little bit, and then build a whole series of stop signs. I was impressed with stops, so I had every street with a stop sign—they were about that big. Anyway, that was the first experience.

From Swimming Holes to High School

I used to like to drive the tractor, and we had a stream behind us—a dry, intermittent stream, just water flowing in the wintertime. We would always head for the stream, and that was always a pleasurable experience. In fact, we used to swim in various swim holes along the [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. And then with my first bicycle, of course, we could ride for miles on the farm roads in the back and so on. I was there for the full eight [years], or whatever, to the eighth grade and then went to high school in Morgan Hill. We used to drive to Morgan Hill. My brother was older, so he had a license, but between us we took all of our summer earnings and bought a Model-A Ford. It was beautiful. It had V8 wheels—marvelous! [LAUGHTER]. And I got very interested in theater. In fact, that was one of the things…I had an English teacher. She was a woman. She called me up one day and she says, “Robert, I think you'd make a good lawyer or an actor” [LAUGHTER]. And I knew I'll never forget that one day because I did like theater, and that's when I got involved with stage practice, and I carried that through all my life.

EDUCATION

From High School to the University of California, Berkeley

We moved to San Jose in my senior year [of high school], and that's where I really got into theater. But the thing that interested me most were the art classes, and the same thing happened when I went to the University of California [Berkeley].

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Leland Vaughan[iv] was the person who was the landscape architect head. He was also a good friend of Tommy Church's. They'd gone to school, I think, in the East somewhere. But I started the art classes, [and] I had three good teachers. It was John Haley[v] and Erle Loran,[vi] and there was a third one, a woman, Margaret Peterson,[vii] I think her name was. As a freshman, I'd take my designs, you know, for a landscape, over to the art department just to kind of get an idea of what they thought about it. Well, by that time I was working spatially, and I'd get remarks. Erle Loran encouraged me, [as did] John Haley. Margaret Peterson…I remember one day she said (when I showed her the plan) "that's awfully (what was the word she used?) … flamboyant" [LAUGHTER]. I still liked her.

INTERVIEWER: So who were the artists you were studying then? Whose work?

Not any specifically. Not any. I liked John Haley's work, Erle Loran's, and Margaret Peterson's. They were the three people that I enjoyed working with. And, of course, at the same time we were doing all the usual…the civil engineering, and the architecture, and plant materials, and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: So you were using the classic textbooks like Hubbard and Kimball? [viii]

Yeah.

Looking at Art in San Francisco as a Student

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INTERVIEWER: And finally the art classes that you mentioned earlier, because I know that in your work you've referenced Mondrian and Kandinsky and Klee, did you look at their work as a student? And if so, can you tell me about what that was like?

I really can't. I just knew I liked it, and I went to all the art shows, the Museum of Modern Art in downtown San Francisco before they moved. Every time there was a new show, we were there. We were members, so [we] stayed sort-of abreast of the work that was being done. I feel the same way today as I did then. I mean, I was very pleased to see the new de Young Museum. And why? Because the architects seemed to care about how you feel in space. No two walls…I mean, in the entry (you've seen it? yeah). And so we go in and go right up to the top, and there's no building in San Francisco that gives you that kind of visual excitement like that one. They cared about it. Initially, when we saw it, they didn't have that little shelf beyond the glass, but I guess people will be getting to…(You've seen it? yeah). And then to come down, I mean, I haven't had the time to go through a complete show. I'm so interested in the space of the building.

The Inspirational Professor Vaughan

H. L[eland] Vaughan was very inspirational in a very peculiar way. He would come and give his crit. He'd grunt [LAUGHTER]. Well, he'd say, "keep going." And at that time I was still at home for vacation. And I just, I would do drawings at home. I remember one was the roof of a tall building. I made a perspective looking down, and the roof garden, and I took this back to the university after the summer vacation. He said (he was very encouraging), "That's great. Stay

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with it." And the person who was the head of the department, Professor Gregg,[ix] never really taught us beyond the first year. That was to keep repeating these old estates from the Renaissance in Paris or wherever, so nobody could really give me a crit, a good crit, on a modern garden. But he [Professor Vaughan] would always encourage me to keep going.

INTERVIEWER: Was there tension between people wanting to do Beaux-Arts drawings and people such as yourself looking at other modern forms of influence?

No.

Early Impressions of Tommy Church and Garrett Eckbo

INTERVIEWER: What else were you looking at then? Were you aware of the Pencil Points *articles?* [x]

Always, yes. As a matter of fact, that kind of triggered [something] because I was about five [or] ten…[no], five years behind Garrett [Eckbo]. And Garrett went to Harvard [Graduate School of Design], and I was going to go to Harvard [for graduate school], except I got a chance to work with Tommy Church, who was then, to many of us, the leading landscape architect in the country, [the leading] modern landscape architect. And I had this offer of a job [with Church], so I went to work. The first meeting [with Church] was [when] he gave one of the only presentations of his work at our department of landscape architecture. That's when I really met him, and that's when I was a sophomore student.

You know, [seeing Church's work], it just, it was very, very effective. And that's the same time that [the] *Pencil Points* articles came out. And of course I knew Garrett [Eckbo] before,

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vaguely. They lived, well…[LAUGHTER] so much happened in that period. I don't know when he got married, but he was married when I first met him. Garrett came west. His house was on Russian Hill,[xi] and so was our apartment, and we saw each other. I knew Garrett and liked the *Pencil Points* articles. I stopped him on Montgomery Street one day. He had a hat on. I said, "Garrett Eckbo." And he said, "yeah." I said, "I liked your article and I work for Tommy Church," which was the prize.

He [Eckbo] was working with the Farm Security Administration, which is [today the] F[armers] H[ome] A[dministration], remember, which was doing good work. But he was the landscape architect on these little farm communities around California. I think he even got into Oregon, but I'm not sure. And we became very good friends. He was trying to get into private practice, actually, for himself. So I was working for Church, and we'd meet sometimes because our houses…our wives began to… we'd go dancing at the local Palace Hotel, I think it was…things like that…together.

Becoming a Landscape Architect

INTERVIEWER: Well, before we move on from this period, I realize the one thing that we did skip over, which we've asked everyone when we've done this sort of interview is, how did you decided to become a landscape architect?

It's very simple: I realized that I had to. I was graduating from high school, and I sent for a University of California catalogue. And it came. I was going to see if there was anything I'd like to do. I got to a page, and it said, "landscape design," and that was a period in my life where I could drive—I was independent and so on. But my father still had his connection to San

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Francisco and to the little shop or working space. And so, he said he was going up to San Francisco. I said, “Dad, can I go with you?” because I could take the ferry, and then I want to go to the university and find out what this is about because it sounded…you know…it was trees and plants that was described in the catalogue. And so, I took the Alcatraz ferry. I Had no idea of distance, but I walked from the ferry because I felt…you know…I had to go around this way and that way. I was a country boy. I walked all the way to the University of California. I think it was about a five-mile walk [LAUGHTER].

When I got there, I inquired around [about] where the agriculture [department] was and just walked right in and inquired of the secretary and said I'd like to talk to Professor Gregg, [the one] that was listed there. And he took me into his room there, and just after lunch, I think it was, he said, “So you want to be a landscape architect.” I said, “I don't know, sir.” He said, “Well, do you like theater?” I said, “yeah.” “Do you like plant materials?” “Yeah.” “Do you like working with the soil?” “Yeah.” “Do you like any kind of planning?” I said, “yeah.” And he said (we talked about an hour) “You should be a landscape architect” [LAUGHTER]. There it was, and that did it. And he pulled whatever strings were necessary to help me get into the university.

Discovering Tommy Church

[Another conversation intervenes]

And then I had to work my way through college, so every summer I would work for somebody in landscape. And that’s how I met Tommy Church because my then-professor [Leland] Vaughn was a friend of Church, and so I worked on summers on Church’s projects for a couple years, and after graduation I went to work for Tommy. And all he did was gardens.

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It was an interesting period because I had no idea of the breadth of the potential of landscape architecture. I just thought it was gardens [and] that Tommy Church, he was a great success. [He was] considered number one in the country, and I had a choice of going to Harvard if he was going to be the head of the department (I think he was offered that). [But] he said no, so I figured, well, I'll go to work for Tommy Church—that'll be the best place in the world, if he wants me, and he did. So, for two years I worked on gardens with Tommy Church, until they began to build housing projects. Tommy didn't want to get involved [with the housing projects], so he turned [them] pretty much over to me—one of them being Metropolitan [Parkmerced] something like that.

EARLY PRACTICE

Working for Tommy Church

INTERVIEWER: Let's finish with Tommy Church first, right. Because you're still, you start as a student.

Yeah… Tommy Church's office… [there] I had a full-time job with Tommy Church and loved it.[xii] There was one secretary—a landscape architect named Harbeck—Marie Harbeck.[xiii] And that's just the two of us; that was the whole thing. Just before the war, Tommy began getting these jobs of putting houses on the land—in other words, housing projects—and *he* wanted to do gardens, so he sort-of gave all those [housing projects] to me. So that's when I got into land planning to some extent.

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INTERVIEWER: But what about some of the forms. You know, we haven't talked at all about. You know, I think about the biomorphic forms and you see all of that in those places, and I'm wondering what was that like when you started to use those forms?

Well, I came at it because all of a sudden, I began to see spaces as a total element and as a direct result of the painting. Tommy never got into that. He had a big arch [Royston gestures] and a lawn…his residences…but he did a lot of things that were interesting. One was that he had his own crew, which was outlawed by Farm… [UNINTELLIGIBLE], I think. They didn't approve of that. But he had that separate group of people, so he didn't have to do very much on the drawings. Because that crew…George Martin was the head of that crew—he was a landscape architect [and] he knew what Tommy meant by a curve or something, and then Tommy would go to the nursery. We'd all be there after the basic form was put in. And trucks began to arrive with plant materials when it wasn't even a planting plan in some of the cases, and we'd plant the whole garden in one day, two days maybe.

The Eagle Pencil

INTERVIEWER: So in terms of the drawings that you were producing, when you think about what the office does today in terms of construction documents, I mean, on any of these projects, did Tommy [Church] do a fat pencil sketch?

He'd do a [dull?] pencil sketch, yeah, [with an] Eagle [314 drafting] pencil. He always used the Eagle. When I first went to work for him, he came over and said, "you're doing those working drawings with a nail." I was using a 4-H [pencil]. Tommy didn't know anything beyond

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that soft Eagle pencil. Anyways, it was fun. They made fun of me and my exact[ness], but I'd been taught how to do working drawings very carefully and so on.

Tommy Church, the Dancer

I think I always liked him, and at Christmas time I remember he pulled out a $50 bill and gave it to me as a present. I said, "OK, I'll be gone," and I went and bought a camera, [and I] came back and I said I don't have the money anymore [LAUGHTER]. That sort-of started my photographing. But Tommy had a side that maybe some people don't know about. And one side was that as soon as he was free of the office, he'd meet me for dinner, me and Evelyn (who was my wife) [at that time], and we'd go to nightclubs and maybe wind up dancing. I wasn't that good a dancer, but he liked to dance [LAUGHTER]. They'd go swinging around this great dance hall in North Beach—not too often, but it did happen a couple of times. So, he liked to play.

Living with Tommy Church

Tommy and his wife used to have a Chinese cook who had a little apartment under their house. It was really one room, a little bathroom, and that's where the cook was. And they decided they could do their own cooking, and he [Church] invited me to stay there, so I lived there, [had] parked my car before the project. And then my mother and father lived on Leavenworth Street, so I didn't bother anybody about food. I would always go to my mother's house, and that was before I was married. And that was kind of wonderful because I don't think I paid very much rent, if any. I was working for Tommy. Occasionally they would have guests

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from England or some other country and put them up there.

Tommy Church and Pruning

INTERVIEWER: I've heard stories that Tommy would walk around with pruning shears [OVERLAPPING VOICES] and that literally shrubs would shake, and clients would not know he was in the shrubs.

Yeah, the famous words in the office when I was the only real draftsman, and I'd hear Marie Harbeck saying on the telephone, “Yes, Mr. Church is in the country this morning, or this afternoon.” And he would just visit his jobs, you know, with a pair of pruning shears. And he would prune—he'd just decide something needed pruning. He had…he must have been paid for those reviews, but I never knew, because I think it came under the heading of maybe supervision, something like that, after the garden was in, though. It was fun working for him in that sense, very much.

WORLD WAR II

Enlisting for Service

We were at Garrett [Eckbo]'s house one night, and we had a Japanese-American friend. He told this story and they were going to be moved into an [internment] camp. And after he left that evening, Garrett looked and me, and he says “we've got to stop this—let's join the Army” or whatever…the Navy. Or maybe I chose the Navy, but anyway, the next day we went down to enlist. I mean, we were just so upset [that] we couldn't even think about our families…nothing.

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We went down to enlist, and they took one look at Garrett, you know, and then no way. He had a broken leg [LAUGHTER]. He was just what they did not want. But when they looked at me, a farm boy and muscles, they nodded, yeah, he's for us. But I had been studying camouflage, you know, working with oh, you know, the person who did the pool; [it] was that Donnell pool.[xiv] What's her name?

INTERVIEWER: Adaline Kent?

Adaline Kent, yeah, was his wife.[xv] It must have been a Kent [boy], but there were about six of us who would meet once a week and work on camouflage.

INTERVIEWER: Were you reading the books about camouflage planting, I think by Ralph Rodney Root?[xvi]

We had several books, so I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: I mean, I think it's hard for people to understand today what that even means. Tell us, what is camouflage planting.

It's just to make it look natural and a good spread to it from the air. It was all in fear of being seen. Our job was to hide airplanes, hide tanks, and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: So were there certain plants that were particularly effective?

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No. There may have been, but it passed over my head. Eucalyptus was big because it was so vast. It just wanted trees to hide the people on the task force.

Building Models in the Navy

The model-making that I personally did [and] was involved with was really abstraction. The things that, the essence of anything in comparative analysis, just like a saying. When I was in the Navy during those [years], after I had my two stripes, and I had a new ship, and they put me as first lieutenant, I had my own cabin. And that's when I really cut loose, because I'm [in] charge of all the carpenters. So, if I called up and said, "I want to do…I want a piece of plastic a quarter-inch in diameter," they'd just [LAUGHTER] send it to me. And I made jewelry using that, hours [of] making jewelry. And then it began to advance, and I began to dream about what a house should be and how it should relate to the garden. And finally [I] made a model. I used to make models. The captain never knew that, I don't think. I never told anybody. But people were very innocent. I could work for hours with the lights on. Instead of being a darkened ship you'd just close the porthole and work, so it was, I guess, one way (of) staying sane.

POSTWAR PRACTICE AND TEACHING

The Formation of Eckbo, Royston & Williams

So, Garrett [Eckbo] was saying [that] we'll start a new firm if you come and join us. He had his brother-in-law [Ed Williams] and me: Eckbo, Royston, Williams. And the more I thought about it, and knowing we had a great friendship, I said yes. But the thing I think that clinched it was that almost the minute or the short time after we had formed the firm, I got an offer from

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the University of California [at Berkeley] to teach, with tenure, because I was an experienced person after two years in Tommy Church's office, and they remembered me, [that is] the professors at U.C. [Berkeley]. So, I accepted, and that set my salary, [which] supplemented the northern office. Garrett had long gone down to Los Angeles, [and] we opened an office there. So that's what it was. My salary went into the northern office, and Garrett, maybe a year or two later, also got a job teaching at the U[niversity of] S[outhern] C[alifornia]. We would exchange notes, [and] we would meet halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco to discuss how different things are going. But we actually had two separate offices, but we had the brains of one, and we could exchange. And they were always very friendly, and sometimes the wives would go along, and [San] Luis Obispo was our destination. We stayed there a couple of days, and then [would] resume our regular work.

The Decision to Leave Tommy Church

In 1940, that's when I graduated and went to work full time for Tommy [Church], and it was during the war. Garrett [Eckbo] would write me letters. We were very good friends. His house was just up the hill from our house in Russian Hill, and we would meet occasionally and discuss what we were doing. He was working as a Farm [Security] Administration (what was it?), and I was working for Tommy, and we'd compare projects and so on. Anyway, during the war, Tommy had put my name on his door, expecting me to come back to work full time for him. And it was a difficult—a very difficult—decision to make, but I decided to go it alone with Garrett.

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He had an idea of…so in 1946 (I think it was) we formed our partnership, and Garrett wanted to start a Southern [California] office because he knew people down there. So, he was off to Los Angeles and left me with a nice project called Ladera,[xvii] which was... Actually, it set the pace because the form determinant was the land itself, but the trouble is they couldn't get it—I think 400 people connected with the university at Stanford, and other groups, and room for 400 houses. I'm pausing at this point to…but they couldn't get the loan, and it was very unfortunate because it was a great project. And that was the start of some of the more balanced projects that we did. Shortly after that, and to sustain the firm, I was offered a teacher's job at the university [of California, Berkeley]—a professorship—and I took it. I had a full-time job. I had guaranteed (what is it called…not longevity, but…)

INTERVIEWER: Tenure.

Teaching at Berkeley

I did have a full salary for and…Oh, I know, I was thinking of the word was tenure. Tenure was the thing that you looked for and people worked for, but tenure means that you're full-fledged. And I enjoyed that very much. It was an extremely profitable year in terms of ideas. I had the beginning students and the senior students, and then Professor [Vaughan], who was also a friend. Vaughan came to me one day and said, "I've got a problem with the architects," he said. I'd like to have a program on the study of larger arrangements of automobiles…of cars…and [LAUGHTER] I guess you'd call it, today, land planning. And at that time, I said, "Sure," because I'd been thinking about it constantly, and had the Ladera experience, and it was a wonderful time to tackle the job of teaching in that way. I had three architects and one landscape architect on each team and each of my classes had twelve people. And we took the

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work of [Lewis] Mumford,[xviii] I think, as much as anything, and his talk about green fingers, and so on, but we began to divide actual sites, [UNINTELLIGIBLE] for example in Alameda was exactly what we needed. There wasn't a house on it, and you could approach the job of putting 5,000 people on that space. And that led to lots of things because one of the things early on I felt was so important was that the land itself become the form determinant. Not the roads as they are now. Not the, and the nature of the place, but the way the land is connected is the form determinant for those neighborhoods. And it was lots of fun. We did Diamond Heights in San Francisco, Bay Farm [Island twice?] in the four years that I was teaching with them.

Hiring Students from the University

INTERVIEWER: While you were teaching, a number of your students, Asa Hanamoto, I believe David [Mayes], eventually came to work for you.

That's right. They were in the early office. Asa was one of my better students and I asked him if he'd come and work for us. That was in 1950 [or] 1951. And so, he's been, which is the kind of interesting sidelight that I would like to mention because it means so much to any office. No man can do everything. In all the time I knew what was going on. I directed design. We had different branches. We had people doing studies, state studies, river studies as we developed, but the partners that I had were just great people, and they stayed for, we were together for over 30 years. Asa Hanamoto and Patricia Carlisle…there were Harold Kobayashi and Lou Alley, especially. He was our architect, and also one of the powerful office administrators. And then [there was] Kas Abey. I think I got them all [LAUGHTER]. But I thought the world of them, and

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they were so good friends. They're all retired except Harold Kobayashi, who's down to 30 hours a week [LAUGHTER], last I heard.

New Towns and Teaching

I was having so much…I had a tremendous interest in the new towns and subdivisions and the neighborhood. Really that was the other thing that kept that part of the story interesting for me, is that I could have real sites. I had a 500-acre site in Alameda we could use, which was flat and open, [but] now it's all built up. And then the Diamond Heights in San Francisco, that was all bare hills, and that was a new town, or whatever we wanted to call it. It was a neighborhood, and that was great. The students were also, they were mostly architects. For every three, or every two architects [I taught] one landscape architect; that was the ratio, and they learned from each other, and that was just great. It would be nice to have that kind of a course because that kind of exploration really wasn't done at that time. And it still hasn't been done.

The Loyalty Oath and Going East to Teach

It was during that illegal business that the government had put in,[xix] [and] people were answering questions and stuff. And I had two partners, Garrett Eckbo and Ed Williams, and from that standpoint, from my office standpoint, they said, "I wouldn't sign that damn thing." And the other guy says, [that is] Ed Williams said, "I wouldn't sign that." And then I was a member of the University [of California, Berkeley] and the National University Professors, and

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they had meetings at the University of California in the afternoon about the loyalty oath, and they said not to sign it. I had to kind of weigh what happens.

We all thought [of] ourselves as being leftwing. Felt not at practicing anything, but that was about it. They [the university officials] really were angry with me because I was even asked if I'd be head of the department. But I had had the experience of teaching these neighborhoods and I really loved it. So, I said OK, and my wife said, "Oh don't sign it if you don't feel you shouldn't," and I didn't [sign the oath].

Right away I got a call from Stanford, [asking] if I'd come and teach there for a quarter, which I did. That's where (what did I call it—the little staging in) the Model Box [was developed], I guess only it was round. I fitted that in, [and] that worked fine. And then I began to get calls from all over the United States. And one especially was North Carolina State [University]. The head of department came out to see me (I mean the head of the planning department, plus the landscape architect) and wanted to know if I'd come and teach for a month. I discussed it with Ed [Williams]. I don't think…I'm not sure that he ever approved, but I said, "sure."

And then other universities would hear that I was over there, so could I stop by on the way, and I had some interesting flights. Those were propeller days: They didn't have the jet. And so it was [that] a lot of the flights were [in] heavy weather, and I tried different routes to get to North Carolina, or to go east, because once I was there, I just stayed there. Bucky Fuller was teaching in architecture,[xx] and I was teaching in landscape at the same time. It was a wonderful time to experiment.

DESIGN

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The Model Box and Tension

INTERVIEWER: When I think about your own work and all the [berms?] and going up nine and ten feet, I mean, Tom was saying yesterday as a photographer, what a joy it was to be able to get up and look down. Is that something maybe you'd like to talk a little bit about, the concept, viewer superior and getting up.

Well, that opens up a whole... You know, everything to me was trying to understand, and with my students, later I taught for four years at the University of California, [which] was a wonderful experience. There I was shifted to doing a course for architects. And we'd do these plans, working plans. And I began to understand that these spaces had feelings. We really do. There's a spatial response whether you like it or not. And when you understand it, as I mentioned, I got so interested in that aspect.

After the 'loyalty oath' business, I quit the university [of California, Berkeley,] and went to Stanford. They wanted me right away, and that's where I began these [particular] studies.

…When we got started at Stanford, I taught at Stanford for one quarter and then moved to various places in the country, one of them being North Carolina State[University], and [at] both Stanford and North Carolina State, I had designed this model box, which was a translucent top and a revolving bottom. But the students couldn't see, except through a little pinhole about five-eighths of an inch from the base. The purpose of that was to confine the thought of the impact of space on people. The feeling that would be developed by this method, comparative analysis. There were seven in the class in North Carolina and about seven architects in the class at Stanford, and they really appreciated that. That's when I told you that an advance student

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came into the room where we were, and he said, “Gee, that looks like a wonderful thing.” He said, “I made model. Can I take a look at it that way?” So, he put the model [in the box]. It was a very nice model visually. And he took a look in there and he [was] quiet for a minute, and he says, “Oh, God, [LAUGHTER]”, reached in, and ran away with it because the truth was revealed by that confined space. And we carried [the Model Box] through the University of California, used it for quite a while, and it slowly deteriorated [LAUGHTER]. But it's a wonderful way to understand space.

It even worked in terms of color. We look in terms of movement, of roofs, because you go into Notre Dame, and there's tremendous power of that high roof, and I was fascinated because in plan, the architect has an image, you know. He was going to do something with it. And then to kind of illustrate the point, in Sweden (I think, Sweden or Denmark) the train station was actually a rectangle, but the roof is going in one direction, and I found it very disturbing. But the landscape architect has to know what's going on, you know, Color makes a difference.

Tension, which is [as] people say, “well, there's no tension or whatever.” I wanted to know what tension was, and I wanted those kids—there were six architects—[to know] what tension was. And so we just had this little slab (you may have seen them). My demonstration with a little wall and a figure and then a vertical, use all abstraction. And tension is what builds up between the wall and the tree. Out here it's not much tension. As it comes closer, we could actually begin to draw the relationships of space and things, and we studied interiors, just shapes to see how they feel and what they do. It was wonderful. Later on, after I'd been studying that, I was in New York, and just after the United Nations building was completed. And

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I walked over there and looked up, and I just…the shock—the tension was there. I couldn't wait to get away from that façade. It was just a [stick?] wall right up. I hadn't seen anything quite like that before. There was always some tension.

Telesis

Telesis: My partner came up with that name, not Garrett [Eckbo] but Ed Williams. Telesis was a group of designers that would have guest speakers, and a group of designers who were interested in the social aspects of society. The meetings were well attended. Actually I was a youngster because it had been going a couple of years before I heard about it. But then I became a partner of Ed and Garrett after the war, and Telesis was very popular. As a matter of fact, it was a magazine it seemed to me, as it was [issued] four times a year or something, [about] different ways of doing things, but always really [with] a kind of social overtone.

INTERVIEWER: Would you refer to the magazine or their ideas in your teaching during that time?

No, I didn't.

Listening to and Learning from People

I met this couple when we were down at…what's the park near the railroad station?

INTERVIEWER: Bowden Park.

Bowden Park, we were down there [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE]. They said, "We walk around the park, and we go to Mitchell Park and walk around that park next week." And they just love

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them. But anyway, that knowledge and kind of observation that you put in your mind, I get that much. You do see these couples, and you accommodate them. They love a path where they don't have to retreat on. And actually we all do. I don't think [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE]. For example, because I remember walking into these long alleys and getting down to that end, you turn around and [UNINTELLIGIBLE]. It was different. You're learning all the time from people.

The Human Being As the Module of Activity

Well, I don't want to exaggerate at all, but I've always felt that the human being was the module for activity. The human being, the small one or the big one, just like you were talking about the heights of fences and so on. Even the so-called garden spaces had to be recognizable. I mean it should be able to do something, but it should also feel like a garden space. The abstraction was something that people seemed to enjoy. I just automatically worked in those terms, and to say otherwise would be wrong.

The Design of Golden Gate Park

INTERVIEWER: Well, because you mentioned abstraction, and let's maybe take this one step further. J.C. has shared with me that Golden Gate Park is a park you're very fond of as a public park experience. And you can't help but see the aerial photograph in your office, with Golden Gate figuring so prominently in that view. Would you say that a place like Mitchell Park is a lot like Golden Gate? Or what would make it different?

Obviously, size, and also its figures of a whole subject, but you can understand how it developed. Because when it was designed by [John] McLaren, or whatever it was as I recall, it

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was horse and buggy. They became a park [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE], the slow movement and so on, and I think the fact that they have a drive right down the middle of Golden Gate Park, I think, is a great shame because they have down the sides of this great space, you have a road on each side of it. You don't need to have Golden Gate Park used as a means of access to the beach. People tend to go faster, you know, that kind of thing. But there are parts of Golden Gate Park that have just been lovely right from the beginning. My grandfather took me to concerts in that same place. When I was a little guy, six years old or something, we'd go to the concert on Sunday.

Designing Street Furniture

Very often in design, if something is good, you'll use it especially if it's your own. It might interest people [to know that] the City of Santa Clara took one of my designs, and that became the city bench everywhere for a while. I'm not sure if they would last, but you have to be conscious of the nature of some people that tends to destroy things, by cutting their initials in the bench or something. I suppose that kind of problem exists everywhere, and there's nothing you can do about it that I know of. But you mentioned the wood. Just every seat that I ever designed that was really wood. If you've ever sat on concrete, you realize we'll have this problem in Palm Springs. That seating surface of concrete, concrete block, we may have to put some kind of a top on it to make it work.

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Understanding Space

I don't know that I've emphasized enough the fact that space has feeling, and the size of space—the size of the walls—all tend to be areas that we should be conscious of. You know, you look at a place like this, and it has a green edge. It's manmade. There are some penetrations of redwood, and it really feels good, and yet it's not designed, I mean in that sense. You don't have angles and whatever. I think you put yourself in the space a lot. That's a wonderful…you know, that may be a cliché, but I really mean that in the design process. And the fact that, I mean more so than architecture, architecture should have the same design objectives.

But you can go into Notre Dame, and it's "boom!" (in Paris), it's a wonderful, magnificent space. You can go underneath the Eiffel Tower, and it's a lovely space. But the same feeling is generated in Muir Woods, right behind here, you know, the great trees along there. You've all been to Muir Woods. Isn't it a wonderful feeling in there, you know, that height! So I go over there once or twice, mainly twice a year, just to walk around, just to sense those spaces. It's hard to get over the idea—and certainly with the architects—that when they build, it stays there. I mean it's got parallel walls, it's got a roof, and it's something like that [LAUGHTER]. I have fun thinking about it all the time. All of my walls are growing. All this definition of space, or definition an area. Just imagine living in a house where the side walls grow a foot a year, or even six inches. Just imagine how that would change the atmosphere or the thing structurally is possible. And then the year after that, another six inches, and all of a sudden [it] pushes in or goes out.

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Elements of the Landscape That Should Be Preserved

What I'm saying is that architects—the landscape architects—should be knowledgeable about growth. It's just wonderful to think, see they're static and we're active with our work. Everything is moving, everything is changing—winter, summer—and it's a part of the delightful complex. The other thing I'd like to mention is that I think in a more educated or more sensitive population, that number one, in defining space should be the landscape architect. If you have the knowledge and the need for these things. Remember [Ian] McHarg[xxi]—McHarg had a fine…we talked about elements of the landscape that should be preserved, that was his attack, and I agreed with it; we all do. But what I'm talking about is the reserves in space that allow future building.

The City of Mill Valley has two active canyons. All year long the water is running in that river, and they join. There is absolutely no consideration of that as the structure for this community. All he had to do was have the landscape architecture or planner…whatever…would come out and say we can't touch that stream. It should be 100 feet white and a continuous park. The only example, I guess, that I'm really aware of now, incidentally, the same thing happens at San Rafael. They have this wonderful stream, and they never did anything with it. Beautiful…it's just a linear park, [and] it would be wonderful. And, of course, in designing Sun River, I felt we should have those connections all the way through. The main structure in Sun River is the only example that I can think of, but just imagine a society… I mean, who's our great father of the landscape architecture?

INTERVIEWER: Olmsted.

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Olmsted. When he connected the downtown with the [Arnold] Arboretum along the Charles River, that's what I mean—it was great. All that area becomes a linear park, and we need more of that kind of thinking in the initial stages of building. The individual builder is never going to see that. They don't. If you're sitting on the City Council or [are] a city planner, the guy comes in, and he's loaded with money, and he says, "I own that land. This is what I want to do with it." And they're not thinking about the life of the city, of the safety of the kids, or any of that stuff. I'm just… enough on that subject. All this wasted space. We don't have a way of doing it.

The Long View

INTERVIEWER: What's your philosophy about the long view in California, when you have a setting like this?

Oh, it's everything. I mean, the arms of that mountain ridge wrap, they wrap their arms around us. We're right here, and that is a mountain range, Mount Tamalpais of course, and then it goes across all the way to the bay on the other side, so it's kind of like the hub is the wheel as far as we're concerned. It was *The New Yorker*, [and] on the cover the guy is saying, "and it's all mine, except the ocean." Except the ocean [LAUGHTER]…so it's a wonderful little place in here.

Learning from People and Connecting to Age Groups

Things happen when you're designing and you're young and you're really interested in what's going on. But you learn from the people who are there. I remember I just had to intuitively [decided] that you should have a walkway around the park. And all of our parks have

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that around it. I met an old couple out [one day], and they said that they loved Bowden Park. She said we walk around here once a week, and then we go to all the other parks in Palo Alto. Each day they would walk around. You don't think about the elderly in those terms, but that was a great moment because from then on, any park that we had, we always connected with the different age groups.

Plan View Versus Aerial View

And then at about that time, or just after we had finished [Santa Clara Central Park], I flew [over] that area. I flew [over] the whole Bay Area looking at our work, and there's some pictures around like that. But what had been proposed on paper was now actually there to see, and that was after about the tenth year, when it was just wonderful to see all these redwood trees starting to grow and the form of [Santa Clara Central Park] park taking place. And then that's how you learn, I guess. I felt I had to know what these various projects looked like from the air because that's the way [LAUGHTER] they were designed, thinking from, you know…spatially you think plan, but it's actually the movement through the space that's so important. And the design intent, when it's carried all the way, you'll know it. But the design intent involves not only the function, but it's these growing walls. It's knowing every year where it's going to be. You know, the architect has it easy: He just designs the house. That's the way it'll be built. It has walls and a roof, but constantly our world as landscape architects is constantly changing, and the feelings change.

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The Expanding Landscape

More than anything, you can never talk too much about the expanding landscape. It's absolutely amazing—Mitchell Park today. It's wonderful to walk through Mitchell Park because I remember the aesculus carnea, the pink-flowering chestnuts, the [UNINTELLIGIBLE], the pine trees, the aesculus carnea (yeah, that was it), and they're all there, now that they're 50 years old, and their spaces are much…I mean…we wouldn't anticipate [that] to happen 50 years ago. So, you can almost say, "Which Mitchell Park did you like?" because it changes so much.

Everything is in place, but the reaction is fun. It's a lot of fun for me. I took a walk around the other day in Mitchell Park, just after they'd [SKIP IN SOUND], I couldn't get to that 50th anniversary, but I went down about [SKIP IN SOUND] months ago with my son and family, and [I] placed him in one of the gopher holes, you know. I have a picture of him when he was about this big, and he was standing in the gopher hole. Now he's six feet tall [LAUGHTER], and he's standing in the same gopher hole

Design Intent and the Element of Time

The thing that impresses me so much is the fact that [a park] is everything you envision. It's what, as a young student or professional doing a job like that, you think in terms of 50 years. But you know you have to hold your audience—you have to do something that makes it a park right away. They're expecting that. And then through the years, it gets better and better and better. You have to have, on any project, it seems to me, a design intent and you must know what that design intent is and just keep working with it. And if you were a teacher, I think the first thing you'd say to an architect or anybody else [is], "What is your design intent?" You want

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to put people together? You want to tear them apart? What do you want? What's your design intent? “Oh, I just want to make it pretty [LAUGHTER],” they say. The architect says, I mean or whatever, and then shrub it up, make it look nice [LAUGHTER]. But that's not the way it is with a landscape architect. It's a tremendous responsibility, and I think the future in cities is going to be the landscape as a form-determinant, a primary, connected form-determinant.

You've heard me [say] before, [that] when Olmsted connected the tangled garden or the tree and downtown Boston, along the Charles River, it was very impressive to me (the result). We don't do that. My city of Mill Valley has two streams from the canyons, and they join, and they go into the bay. There's a little park in one place, but everything else is just sold. They just sold the lots along there, and it should have been connected all the way to the bay. The same thing [is true] in San Rafael. They've got some wonderful streams all year ‘round [LAUGHTER], and they just ignored them, and what a wonderful connection it would be. Maybe someday they'll rediscover them.

Landscape As the Primary Determinant

So I see landscape architecture as being a determining factor in designing, and I realize that most design is done by money. It's done by engineers in cahoots with, or working for, developers. A developer never sees the whole picture. That's your job. And how we change that, I don't know, but I guess [UNINTELLIGIBLE]… [Lewis] Mumford used to say the same thing. He said these green fingers should reach out from the town center. Olmsted did it: Central Park in New York City is a wonderful thing, and [so is] Golden Gate Park for the city of San Francisco. But they don't, and they certainly determine form, but they don't have that total city.

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INTERVIEWER: You sometimes call that total of the green matrix.

Yes, I called it a matrix. I guess it was my term for designing the projects at the University of California I was starting, because [in] all of those projects that we did, [in] all those neighborhoods, the landscape was the primary determinant. It is all connected; connected to the school, [to] shopping, and so on. And some of the wonderful ideas that we've had in the years have died on the paper, but they're there. I think it's a great subject…landscape architecture [LAUGHTER].

A Total Composition

I think I told you before that I liked my art classes, this Erle Loran, John Haley, [and] Margaret Peterson in the art department. I spent a lot of time in the art department, even to the point where I would make a drawing in the landscape department [and] then I'd take it over to the art department for a crit. They didn't know what I was doing at all, but to me it made sense. And they were very considerate, I guess—"Who's this guy bringing landscape problems over to the art department where they teach sculpture?" I said, "Well, I'm beginning to see gardens as sculpture and painting." So… Erle Loran [and others in the art department], they were quite interested, but I couldn't get any interest in the landscape department. But it was fun doing it.

And I always saw the project as an entity, and also, it was more than just solving the use, it was [that] I wanted to make it as a total composition. And that's how I worked in gardens. I thought in sculptural terms, using the trees as a definition of space, but it had to have form to it even though they're interrelated. And I suppose Margaret Peterson once said, when I showed

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them this drawing of garden that I was doing in San Francisco, "That's very flamboyant." And I never did know what flamboyant meant. She was an art teacher.

Parks and the Human Response to Smaller Spaces

I never made the bridge to parks at that point [as an undergraduate student]. The parks were the dullest things in class. Parks were a bunch of trees and a baseball diamond, [and that was an] absolutely unbelievable opportunity [that] was being missed. Nobody had ever presented the idea that how did people use the park? I had to come back to that professionally with Mitchell Park because I realized, with the background of gardens (which I urge everybody to do) came the human response to smaller spaces and uses. And why not in a park?

There are certain things, like the baseball diamond, and the soccer fields, and tennis courts, you can't do very much with, except get them out of the way, or have them in such a way that they don't disturb the total quality of the park. And so you can mound the earth. It was fun. And going back to Mitchell Park for a minute, because that was [where] I was using plants, trees to set form, but also the earth itself—digging down [and] building up, and that was when I mentioned that the chief engineer, the one who was building Mitchell Park, he called up. He said, "Bob, we're doing a big project in the south Palo Alto and I've got lots of dirt (I mean earth)" he said. "Can you use any?" I said, "I'll take all you've got." And because Palo Alto was flat, kids didn't have mounds or anything, or fountains. It's a flat place: the park was absolutely flat. You raised wheat in it probably. And so that was really the first use of the mound as structure in that park.

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The Garden Starts in the House

The approach that I took on gardens was like painting a sculpture. I had moved through these spaces mentally and physically to follow, but it was a period where I also did a lot of painting, so it connected. But there were no rules really. I just was working with the family. You'd have a client, but they pretty well didn't dictate anything. They may say something like, "We like grass, and we'd like a nice entrance to the house," but it was a pretty open subject really. There was no formula. And I began early to realize that the house itself is an integral part of the garden. And so I would always start at the entry, and then I would want to know what's inside the house, how you looked out of every room. And that's something Tommy Church never did. He just made a big black line, which was the outline of the house, and then we did a garden—a big circle. I always wondered at that because, to me, the garden really starts from in the house. You're there, and the lines are moving parallel or skewed, or whatever, but the statement is from inside out. And that's how I always did it.

PROJECTS

PARKMERCED

Parkmerced came along about that time [in 1940], and we did the first sketches—you know the pie-shaped lot and the central garages [LAUGHTER]? And then everybody had a little studio or terrace on the back. I can still remember [that] we had to hire a couple of people from the university [of California, Berkeley] over the summer to actually work on those courts. Every grade, everything was done according to the best practice, but it was not easy. It took time.

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And Professor [Leland] Vaughan came to work for Tommy [Church], so I was working alongside my teacher, my one-time teacher. I visited Parkmerced quite recently, and it's lost that original pie-shape idea—concentrate the cars and the interior plazas. It was good. And the architect, what was his name—the architect who did Stuyvesant Town?[xxii]

INTERVIEWER: Right. Because this was all for [the client] Metropolitan Life, wasn't it?

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I mean, the scale, I mean, here you were how old?

Yeah, I was about 22 by that time.

POTRERO HILL

The fun of [the project was] (I mean), I was in charge. I had a team of fifteen men, and I ran about nine trucks, you know, bringing in the stuff. So I was the foreman and also the designer of Potrero Hill, which is solid granite. And so we had to build, we had to dig down (I think I had about eight or nine people) we had to dig down in the granite, check it for drainage and then topsoil, and put a tree in it. I guess some of that's there. I'd like to go see [LAUGHTER]. But anyway, that was Potrero Hill. That's number one, I think.

VALENCIA GARDENS AND NORTH BEACH

Valencia Housing and North Beach Housing, that [latter] was Ernest Born. And all of a sudden, I was working with these various architects. Bill [William] Wurster, I think, was the

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architect on Valencia [Gardens][xxiii], and Ernest Born was on North Beach. Those were meant to be United Stated Housing Authority, USHA, if you remember that, and they were nice. They were well done. I think North Beach Housing has been taken away now, and I haven't seen Valencia for a long time. But I began to sense the freedom that one has in landscape. In the case of Valencia Housing, Tommy [Church] told me (and I thought it was brilliant), he said all we'll do is make these raised beds so the kids can't ruin everything and put a brick wall about eighteen inches high, and mount it slightly, and fill it full of soil, and make it into grass. And we'll get these huge trees from Los Angeles—he had some source. And so within a year it looked great. I don't know whether the trees are [there], and there was a sculpture involved…Gosh…What's the name? It used to be around North Beach [and was] well known, [but] I can't think of it, can't remember.[xxiv]

VALLEJO HOUSING

INTERVIEWER: Would you say that you learned how to run an office or not to run an office in terms of then going on and doing your own practice after that [working with Tommy Church]? Were there things that you took away from that experience in terms of project management?

Well, yeah, we had a good relationship. I was working for Tommy, and he assigned me, I mean, everything was fast. It was prewar, and the City of Vallejo or the Housing Authority of the United States—I don't know which one—hired Bill [William] Wurster to do a plan for the Vallejo Housing. He took a grid, [and] he was all excited. We'll make a grid just like San Francisco. And it had to happen fast because that was one way to get the job done without, well, we didn't do it. We had to follow his direct…I had to follow that. And I remember

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whenever Tommy was ill or just got a sore throat, he'd stay home and go to bed. He didn't believe in spreading the germs at all. He just took advantage of that. I had this project to do. I said to Tommy, "You know, we've got about twenty sheets of drawings to do that Vallejo Housing we're going to have to do." And then he got sick and went home. And then I called him up the next day and I said, "Tommy, I think I can do the whole job with 100 scale," and I'll just use (we call these little pens…what were they called?) Speed Ball.

INTERVIEWER: Mechanical pens?

No, not mechanical. They're a regular pen, but you'd dip it in the ink. You had many different sizes.

INTERVIEWER: Like the Rapidographs?

Yeah, yeah, something like [that]. So I did that whole thing in 100 scale [over] a couple of days. And the person who got the job hired me from Tommy to make sure that it happened that way. So here I was running around with 100 scale—what did I mean by this [LAUGHTER]? And of course, we'd dry up the nurseries because it was pre-War [and] there was a big demand. I think that was the one time I did a planting plan at 100 scale, and it worked [LAUGHTER]. It was fun. Tommy was delighted, and, of course, the contractor didn't have to hire a foreman. He just had the designer, and so he didn't have to make decisions at all or anything. It worked. I was a loner. The same thing happened at Potrero Hill, and the same thing, but I think it was Vallejo [that] was the main one.

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THE HART GARDEN

The Hart Garden—I still remember it very well because it was a little house, but they had bought a lot next door, and had a little front door. It's a big cottage in Marin County. And I said, "Can I come inside the house?" I looked around, and I got into the architecture. I said, "I'd like to see this section of the room opened up, and we'll build a deck there…from the living room, we'll turn it looking back into the garden." And that's what we did. That was, well, a 50-foot arbor coming out from the house, and it was shaped like that, like a triangle, and that was because I had to turn people around to look at the side garden. And by the use of the living room, it was oriented to the garden on the side. But that was a wonderful experience. That was the time.

The detailing was really fun. I loved the cantilever, and that was where I designed this one-legged table. I mean it looked structural. I wasn't a structural engineer, but I could put in an eight-foot table and one leg at one end, and [it] had a cantilever, and then… I put a screen next to this table, and then back here, hiding in the bushes, I projected two-by-twelves out over the whole thing. There was no legs at all: it was all just cantilevered, and it worked fine spatially. But that was one of the most dramatic gardens I ever did; turning the house to it. You can do all those things though with a garden, and the exciting thing about it is the small scale. I mean, this would be a large garden, but it wouldn't be like this. I would probably have broken up the space, [put the] barbecue one place and grass in another, and it would look great.

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THE CHINN GARDEN

I don't think there are ever two gardens that are alike. Just mainly they were structural and they're kind of extensions of the house. I did the one—people like to refer to it as the Mondrian Garden in San Francisco, which, incidentally, was one of my favorites. And the people who called me were a Chinese couple, and they said they had a garden to do—that back garden—and they were going to live on the fourth floor, and they owned the building. So I thought what could I do to make that usable but also beautiful from above. So the arbor, it was a system of working with rectilinear spaces and colored concrete, and the penetration with green. And the arbor, kind of like a transparency, like a wash over the painting, and then hedges around, so it was really quite private. It was always one of my favorite gardens, and I think they enjoyed it. And we have some colored shots somewhere of that, I think.

That was a very different kind of garden, but when we got into park work, I could always remember the scale of gardens and the activities in gardens in developing the park work. But out of the gardens came the parks, and out of the parks came the neighborhood design, and the studies, like the Creek study in 1960. I think it was when the federal government were backing the idea of park development. I'm just wondering what it was. They had to have environmental studies before any action or something. We got into that kind of work for a while. But the design work, I had been pretty much in charge of through the years. I enjoyed it very much. Very lucky you know. I just am very grateful that on my 90th year I can still think a little bit. I forget though. I can't trigger the ideas, but I feel great.

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THE ROYSTON RESIDENCE

Panels by Florence Swift

That's a screen that I designed for the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, for one of their shows, and I could do it because I had already intended them building that here. But the panels were designed by Florence Swift.[xxv] She's no longer with us. That, at one time, was covered with Hedera canariensis—[covered] solid—and I said we've lost our screen, so we cut it down. That is a simple little vine, and that's how big it was. I think it's just such a beautiful element that I thought we would keep it, and now we're trying to figure out what color to paint it. We're thinking maybe silver. And these, of course, are all plants.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us a little bit more about the Swift pieces.

They're all individual paintings then that she did, flat with concrete, and Florence [Swift] was a client of mine. I said, "I will do your garden design completely if you'll make me three panels." That's how we got them. A lot of trading goes on in those days, and I had seen one of them in Tommy Church's garden, and I'd said [that] someday I want some. So that became one of the beginning features. These are copper, copper panels, and [my wife] Hannelore decided she would paint over the copper because it's hard to keep it polished.

Screens

INTERVIEWER: Tell us also about the transparency. We've seen a lot of your screens over the last few days. What is the theory of how transparent a screen should be? What's the intent here?

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That's a very interesting question because here it was designed originally to be very open, and the vines stick over, enclosing it, and it was no longer as pleasant as it was when it was open. I think the penetration visually of the rose garden adds to it. I could easily have closed the whole thing. And then the other element was the copper. The red panels are just part of the overall painting like this. And somehow, I don't want to, when it got heavy with the Hedera canariensis, we lost something. You could argue that it was to screen my workshop, which is where the roses are now, and that's the foundation where those tubs are—those are all on wheels, and they can change around. Do you want to walk around?

INTERVIEWER: Great.

Let's go.

Movable Planters

INTERVIEWER: I find myself thinking about the rose garden that Tommy Church planted for the Donnells.[xxvi] *There's the wooden edge, and they weren't movable like these. Where did that idea come from?*

Oh, I've wanted it…I don't know. Hannelore is one of my favorite gardeners, and we wanted to have wheels on those on the deck, and [on] this one, so we decided that for a real rose garden we might as well have wheels on everything, and so these are all movable. And the roses are quite beautiful.

INTERVIEWER: How long has this garden been here for?

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Maybe two years. Since I took the… you could see the old post, she wants to tile this now. Hannelore wants here to be… we'll see. And this is the one plant that I don't know anything about, but it's wonderful. Every year it comes up—it's that blue…look at that blue, beautiful, blue beads. Somebody will tell me some day. This is fun because it's the lettuce, carrots, nasturtiums, potatoes, and the next project will be to build one of these all the way along on this side because it's so successful. Roses in tubs occasionally, and then notice how you go through these spaces: It's really…and it wouldn't be the same without that cutting through, and all those just penetrate, they go across level because it's a part of the house, really. I'll show you. Oh, there's one of our, the red, I've forgotten what it was actually.

Pavement and Angles

INTERVIEWER: Bob, let's talk a little bit about the pavement here and the angles, and sort of another signature.

That's right. The entire house is based on the 32-inch module or results therefrom. If you take a look over here, here are these lines…they're working with the lines of the house. So, this is the living room dominating, [and] all the lines go right through straight parallel to these. And you notice the house concrete wall is there, it's at this angle, and that's why it just wouldn't be the same if we hadn't taken into effect the house. What my theory is, and always has been, is that the garden starts inside the house. It's very interesting because when I was working for Tommy Church, he never put the plan of the house; it was just a big black line, that's the house. And I would say, "Well, you're inside, [and] it relates to what's outside, and size is everything." But he never cared.

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INTERVIEWER: What about this 45-degree angle, is that something that came out of Tommy's shop?

No. That is the way it is as an extension of the lines in the living room. This is the living room; in other words, these are at right angles to that wall, and those little oak strips really echo this. When you're inside, you feel it more. I think I kept it going all the way around here, you see. So, whereas it looks arbitrary, it is not; it is really related to the house.

A Love of Japanese Maples

INTERVIEWER: We see a lot of Japanese maples in your garden.

I'm a nut for Japanese maples.

INTERVIEWER: When did that romance begin?

Maybe 30 years ago.

INTERVIEWER: What is it about the Japanese maple?

Structure and leaf… the fall color, and it's not a heavy tree at all. See here: [Royston gestures to the trees] those are Japanese maples, and they become very colorful. And there's another one of our lost structures. They're memorials, really, of a nice tree that used to be there. And then this is color, of course, all the way along there.

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INTERVIEWER: Talk a little bit about purple. And we saw this in some of your parks also, and unfortunately, they're not replacing some of those plum trees, which brought so much color.

Oh, really.

INTERVIEWER: Hopefully they will, but you can see that there are not as many as there were originally, and we were sitting in the other room earlier and you could see that punctuation of purple, and I'm just curious about that.

I think it's an element of unity, just like the candle lights—it means it's all a part of the same thing. And a curve is more friendly: you move around it more easily than the square corner. You can see this is an obstruction, but on the other hand, this would have been better as a circle, but there is an intruding mistake, but it's not bad. Because you could argue that it belongs to this. And this is, it's supposed to be something like that, it's a sculpture from the beach. That's a viburnum, and the peonies here, white and red. They're remarkable when they're pulled, just fabulous. And, of course, the tomatoes are doing well, the callas, and these lemons just go all year around, just great. Same here. We get buckets of lemons, so that's our fruit-growing is citrus.

There is a beautiful tree right outside the door there that I'd like you to see. I'm not sure whether you got a chance. See this coming [gestures to the lemons], you can see the lemons all over the place. This is a very primitive lock system, and that's what a lock looks like after 50 years. It's the hook-and-eye, so we just have this. So this, I'll just hook it back (we have to keep the deer out). About 60 years old, maybe older. That's a Mugo pine, and this was a piece of sculpture done by Claire Falkenstein,[xxvii] called *The Guard*. It's hard for me to see it; anyway,

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that's what it was called, *The Guard*. [INTERRUPTION] People think of them as being a very low groundcover conifer; this is what happens after 80 years or something.

INTERVIEWER: You've been working on this garden for almost 60 years. Has it been your laboratory?

No. It used to be a little playhouse for the kids right there, and this soaked off more. Curt had dug himself a hole over there about fourteen-foot square and six feet deep; [it] had a telephone in it, lights, and it was his idea of a retreat. So, one was above, the other was below. There was an oak tree here, you can't see any remnants of it now. But there was a huge swing for the kids. I've often thought about that because everything you can see here, I planted. The redwoods, the hedge material, all that. I think that tree base may have been there, but…

INTERVIEWER: You tell wonderful stories, you were planning a change to the garden and you were going to take out some turf and replace it with paving, and I think it's the kind of story that shows how your garden work informs your park work. And you were talking about your daughter and some grass, do you want to tell that story?

Yeah. Remember [that] I mentioned a little while ago about how you learn from people? Well, I was about to pave that whole section there, and it had lawn there. And I said, "We're going to pave this [Mikey?]," and she was about seven or six [years old], and she says, "Daddy, don't pave it. Little children like the feeling of grass on their feet when they're barefooted." I took that under advisement, and for a long time we kept the grass for them.

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Origins of the Royston Residence

And so the way this happened (it's sort of fun to remember) is that Joe Stein,[xxviii] the architect on the house, used to work for [Richard] Neutra,[xxix] so it has some touches. But I was walking, [and] he [Stein] was in our office, and I walked by. He was working away in the office, and I said, "What're you doing, Joe?" He said, "I'm doing a house." He was making a house for his wife—that house [Royston gestures to the house built next to his own home]. And I said, "Tell you what, Joe" (of course I'd already seen this property), "I'll buy half your property and design your garden if I can use the same plan reversed, the identical plan." And I said, "I'll give you a thousand dollars for it." At that time, I had to borrow the money. But the thing [is] (I don't know whether I told you) but when I gave it to Joe, I came back to the office on Jackson Street. I said, "OK, Joe, here," and I gave him a thousand-dollar bill—they found one for me in the bank, and his hands were trembling as he reached out for it. And that's how it began. We never had a set of drawings like this. The carpenters would hold them up to the sun so that they could read the design. And that's a concrete roof.

The Royston-Stein Garden

INTERVIEWER: Is the adjacent property open, can we walk in there?

I'm sure they wouldn't mind. A beautiful shot. And these trees, 50 years ago, were on my property, but when the grading process took place, I told Joe he could have all the oaks. They were little, and those were all planted. This is a pistachio angulatum, and a big one. So that's what happened, and I'm very fond of this garden. It's very different from our garden, but it's the same concept, actually. These trees are wonderful.

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INTERVIEWER: Tell us about this wall, this wall is fascinating.

That's been there for years. That wall has an edge, and it goes around the house that way, and they've got a rose garden on the other side also. But the painting on it is Norma;[xxx] I think she did that. Our place is right there. You can imagine, but this is just my kind of garden. The idea…do you see that raised area there? You were supposed to come out and look at the mountain, but the trees have gotten so big. Things change. But they had that magnificent view—imagine that. Then there's a space at the end of the vista, and the noise must have been coming from down there [referring to the constant sound of leaf blowers].

INTERVIEWER: Tell us about the transition here from this soft granular material, moving from the hard to the soft.

That was ground cover, and I guess Norma and Bill just put it in. It has no particular function except to complete the…

INTERVIEWER: So were many of these trees here? Were these all planted?

They were all planted, and they were about this high on my property. It was really a wonderful thing that I side-boxed a bigger one, maybe one of these. And that was moved by a Caterpillar tractor…just brought up. But essentially, they were all in about two-foot boxes, and I couldn't use them. See, in my garden it doesn't work, except for one or two near the garage.

[Another conversation intervenes: See DESIGN: The Long View]

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Should we go around that way?

NORMA: Yeah, I'll tell you what, hold on just a second. Dad's favorite shot.

Oh, that is right. Can you actually take a picture looking through the glass? It's nice.

NORMA: Peaceful, as we say.

Yeah, and her rose garden is over here. I'm glad you're getting this because even if I do say so myself, it's a beautiful garden. Can we go over there, Norma?

NORMA: Of course. And this is what the ladies from the garden place liked, the fact that you could flow from this garden to the other garden. And every room, did you explain there's a garden off every room?

No, but it's true.

NORMA: There is. And if you're ever not feeling well the best thing is to lie in bed and just have all this wonderfulness out here.

And here's the lovely rose garden and lawn.

NORMA: Which needs to be watered.

Norma, what is that tree? Is that a maple?

NORMA: No, hawthorn.

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Hawthorn. Interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Planting it is interesting, so concrete planters.

NORMA: Robert, tell them about the sinks.

INTERVIEWER: I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like that.

NORMA: Well come take a look, there's a little down here.

INTERVIEWER: Watch your step here.

We did a lot of scavenging in those days.

NORMA: One of them is broken and my husband said he would fix it before the ladies come in the spring. Now tell me, where did you get these Robert?

There was a gentleman over here who used casting for us, but we didn't do it. These are old sinks leftover from World War II. The shallow ones are sinks, and the others are same purpose, but they washed clothes and everything else I think, and I think we got them for about 50 cents apiece.

NORMA: You told me a buck, a whole buck.

I never took advantage. Whatever it was, it was. This was an experimental roof. Certainly is looking wonderful.

STANDARD OIL ROD AND GUN CLUB

Standard Oil owns all that peninsula over there, and they had a club that's owned by the employees, called the Rod and Gun Club, and they asked if I'd take a look at their situation.

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They had a pool, and they're wondering if there's something we could do. Ed Williams said, "I don't want to do anything…I don't know what to do over there." I said, "I'll do it." So I, representing the firm and myself, went to Point Richmond and looked at the situation [and] made a plan. It called for a very high slide—the highest in the Bay Area—and places where the individual families could be. Then we did some original swings so that the parent could swing with the little child; they [the swings] were circular. And we did all the drawings in the office in San Francisco, and they put it all in—the employees did—and we never heard of cost or anything. The other thing was [that] it was just painted with all bright colors, and it was just beautiful, with the high slide and the trees, and little fences and so on.

The arbors, the picnic areas, and so on, were a direct result of our garden experience, and I wanted this to be a total park, but I wanted a place for individuals and families to have a sense of place. And that began the series and arrangement of the curved screens and the sandboxes, and we had a chance because they were backed by Standard Oil as being, I think, supplied some of the money. But we designed a lot of equipment. I wanted the tallest slide in the Bay Area. We got that for quite some time [LAUGHTER]. And then we designed a set of swings. I thought to the toddler it's nice if the parent is sitting beside him or her. And we did the circular swings. They just back and forth, but they're very popular and actually have a very nice I don't know whether they're still there or not.

PIXIE PLACE

We were doing gardens almost exclusively, and somebody called me about a playground for the Marin County Park. What do they call it—Pixie Place, I think they called it. And that was a

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great success. I used the bank for the slide and kids have various things like a playhouse and a sprinkler pad, things like that.

[When] we began, for example, we were doing gardens. Tommy Church did gardens, and we [at Eckbo, Royston & Williams] were doing gardens. There was a friend that I had met because we had, I think, even have worked in their garden too, but she said they had a 'Pixie Place,' a place in Marin County, and they want a place where they can come with their kids—in other words, a playground—but she didn't know what it was, and asked me if I'd come and look at it, which I did. They had a little house with a bathroom, and that was kind of the headquarters. Then I began to…I said, "Well, we should have a playhouse for the kids, and we should have a slide." Slides are very important. And the [earthen] bank was like this, coming down from above, where this playground was supposed to be. The kids loved it. We put in a slide and [little lakes and] stuff, and it became very successful, and it's still going, but it's lost its form and the water effects and so on. We had a sprinkler pad, but the reason I'm saying this is because from that I knew the Park and Recreation director for the City of Alameda, and he called me and said, "Bob we've got a problem over here about a quarter of an acre…[we] want to do some kind of a playground for the kindergartens and less, and younger. I said, "Fine."

KRUSI PARK

It was from that [project, Pixie Place], that we got a project in Alameda, which was called Krusi Park. It was just a little park, about the size of this space. And again, I just approached it like I was ten years old, and what would I like, you know, or five years old. And we had a sculpture involved. Wheel toys. And I built the mountain myself. I'd show up with the concrete

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and [LAUGHTER] because you couldn't draw it, so I had to do it on site. But that was a great success.

MITCHELL PARK

Getting the Job

So we [at Eckbo, Royston & Williams] weren't experts in parks and recreation, but I'd had that experience [at the Standard Oil Rod and Gun Club], and one day the city manager (not the park and recreation director) for the City of Palo Alto, and the chief engineer for the City of Palo Alto called. They [asked] would I like to be considered on the thing. Well, we said yes. And [they said] we'd like to see some of your work. So what we did, I took the two of them, the engineer and [the city manager], to see Pixie Place, and then from Pixie Place to see [the] Rod and Gun Club. And then [from there] over to (what is it called—the little park in Alameda?),[xxxi] and we go the job. [We were] assigned to do an eighteen-acre site in the neighborhood of Palo Alto, the one…you went there yesterday.

And I think it's worth repeating because it was so dramatic. The city council was kind of split, and the city manager at that time (Jerry Keithley, I think) had told them about the park that he wanted to do in that area of Palo Alto, and that's when… one of the councilmen said, "Why worry, just get some seeds and a couple of trees and let the Boy Scouts do it." And that was apparently true, but the same night that he said that, Jerry Keithley called me aside. He said, "Bob we got a problem. We have a very tough situation coming up, so we'll just put you on [to make your presentation] first."

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Presenting to City Council

In the meantime, I had prepared the perspectives—the whole thing that you saw in a more cohesive way, but it was…we presented slides. He [City Manager Jerry Keithley] put me on first to get me out of it, so I could go home and do it. The place was packed with people with frowns on their faces like this. And I didn't know, and I thought gee, how did they hear about Mitchell Park? And they hadn't. They were there to fight an interchange development—they did not want, so I just gave a presentation describing why we had done everything, and the slides were going on and so on. But it was such a wonderful thing that happened: There was dead silence, and then all of a sudden, they started to clap, and those people made such a roar about something they hadn't even come to see that the council, who was sitting up there on the stage (seven of them, I think), they passed it like that, no questions. And they couldn't really turn it down or anything. So that's how Mitchell Park got started, and how perhaps it had a lot to do with, nationally, a different kind of park.

Designing the Park

The Mounds

INTERVIEWER: So now being that we're talking about Mitchell Park let's talk about the design now and your concept and how space is allocated so on and so forth.

It was just like …everything had to fit in place. I was looking at each age group, and I'd put myself always *in* the thing. And there were different kinds of activity that can be by themselves, like tennis courts and the swimming pool. Well, we had a swimming pool at a neighboring

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school, and they also had a soccer field, so the pressure points—the usual business is baseball and soccer—were taken care of by others, and the eighteen acres were in there. And it's funny how things happen, because the chief engineer called me after we had got the job. He says, "Bob, we're doing a big excavation job in southern Palo Alto." He said, "We've got a lot of soil. Do you need any?" I said, "I'll take all you've got." And that's how the mounds came in[to the project]. Palo Alto, being flat, all of a sudden, the kids had something to roll down. It was very interesting. I'll tell you a story about that later—about Santa Clara. But anyway, that's how it got started.

Elements by Age Group

INTERVIEWER: Well, let's talk about zoning by age, for example. You started to talk about that a little bit.

[For children] up to six years old, my concern was, because I'd already experimented, that they have some good rolling stock, a little overpass, and roads around that they could peddle [and] use the peddle cars. That was a great success, except that the local fire department, I think, was taking care of the rolling stock. After twenty years, things were pretty difficult. So, they gave that up. But then [for] the next age group, I wanted them to experience height safely, so I came up with a design for an apartment house. These would overlap the floors, so they couldn't possibly fall more than twelve inches. But [they could] escape, which was [in the form of] a slide coming down. That was very successful. I think it maybe lasted ten years or something like that.

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The Multiuse Lab

INTERVIEWER: Now where did the concept of the multiuse lab come from?

That's a very good question. I think it was also that [it] was connected to Mitchell Park. That was a place, [although] people aren't aware of it, but we had badminton. You could put badminton apparatus down there, with a net and so on. There was a little stage at the end with a generator, [UNINTELLIGIBLE] with a back wall and a green room and so on, an open-to-the-air kind of thing. Then the audience was really in the multipurpose [uses]. So, we had two things going: We had badminton going, [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE]. The other was roller-skating, and the other was graduations. So that was the reasoning behind it. And it has remained useful. I noticed they recently put in a ramp—we never had that to it.

The Plant Materials

INTERVIEWER: Now when we're talking about the multiuse lab, it makes me want to talk to you about your choice of plant materials. The ring of sycamores around that. Can you tell us a little bit about your planting philosophy in Mitchell Park?

That was directly influenced by the spatial concept. In other words, if I wanted tall trees in a little forest, I would either use redwood or pine for tall—vertical. And group picnic areas were that way. The sycamore was completely arbitrary, but it's such a great tree for that purpose. I wanted to visually separate these different areas. The albizzia julibrissin (I think it is) has a light root. It was supposed to overhang, it's sort of there. There was to be a fountain at the end before we [got there?]. So, the background of the fountain would be conifers. The walkthrough

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would be a gentle cover all the way down. Later on, with maintenance on the fountain, they cut it down. It became [NOISE OBSCURES], but it's still there.

That's about all I can say. If I wanted color, I'd go to the prunus, or purple-leafed plants. I saw them as tools, not as individual things. Unless it was a specimen, then we'd pick it out at a university or get them in Southern California—pick it out of the catalog. They have many catalogs since then. Now you could get a tree the size you want, and how much it will cost, and so on. But I don't think you saw many individual trees at Mitchell Park. They were all structure, as far as the mounds that I could build. So we had the definition of space by size, the definition of space by trees, and the size of trees. And the definition of space by the mounding, three-dimensional. Then that, plus all the architectural elements, like the benches. We had a place just for senior citizens, not that anybody else couldn't use it. But gravitationally it was in the middle, and then the next age group, then the younger group. So it went [from] tiny tot to school age, to family, and picnicking on one side. The same thing happened on the other. You're not even aware of the tennis courts really [being] there. In [Santa Clara] Central Park, you weren't really aware of the big swimming pool complex.

The Architectural Elements

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the architectural elements. Let's talk a little bit more about the pergola, or the arbor.

Well, I just decided that [it] should be there, and I designed it. Because when we took the job, it was just a field—flat, no trees, nothing to work with. I felt that it needed some kind of space definition immediately. It couldn't wait. So that arbor was to join the little house. We had

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one building there meant for juniors, and then a sandbox for juniors—or "muscle"—I called it muscle building because I'd been to various beaches, and at that time they had these areas where they were doing all kinds of muscle-building courses. But anyway, I thought it would be good for Palo Alto, and it was well received. But then going from that age group, we needed separation to get to the older people, which was more flexible. We had a checkerboard in the paving, and you may have seen some of the old drawings. Then what evolved with a dog run on the other side of our hill. That's been very successful too.

INTERVIEWER: What about, for example, your selection? How do you choose, the redwood? When you see the simple black metal posts? The wood for the benches in the sun, which you've talked about feeling the warmth of the heat? Let's talk a little bit about those things at Mitchell [Park]. I mean how do you decide what's the right height for leaning, or containing? Those sorts of things that I know are important to you.

The retreat to that question is, I felt it, and I knew the material. I think I mentioned, we had ten years or more doing gardens, and in the garden, you work with redwood. We did—redwood walls, redwood arbors, redwood benches, redwood tables. It was a natural material, and of course it tends to last longer as a material. So that's the thing, it has its root in the common garden. But also, it depends on what day you go down [to the park]; different things are happening. There are certain days (I think we were there one day when it was like that recently) where they do that Chinese…

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INTERVIEWER: Tai Chi?

Yeah, in a long line, and then they form a circle. It was very colorful. I hadn't figured that happening.

INTERVIEWER: But what does it feel like when you go back to a place like Mitchell Park 50 years later and to see it functioning and alive? What does that mean to you as a landscape architect?

It's wonderful. It's very nice, and my eyes immediately saw where there'd been changes because I'd seen it maybe a couple years before. But I felt that the structure was there better than ever before. But I missed the apartment house, and the gopher hole was still there. And the sense of that being more of an enclosure. Right now it kind of goes out a little bit.

The Gopher Holes

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of gopher holes, where did the idea of that come from?

I don't know, I just felt it. They used to have these pipes, you know, around the playground. You're supposed to go through the pipe. They were used as a [UNINTELLIGIBLE] material, but I thought it would be nice to have these intersecting tunnels, and the kids loved them. But now, according to code, we'd have to make those three or four feet in diameter, and it would lose all of its age-group connection, it seems to me.

Biomorphic Forms, Painting, and the Influence of Artists

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to say anything about the forms for those areas, these biomorphic forms as a signature?

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Well, when you're a designer, and I think you sense that, you see the whole thing at eye-level. You actually feel it. And then it goes all the way back to when I was studying at the university, and [to] the painting—touch was really what was as natural as a straight line to me, if it's doing a job. So that's how it happened. In many ways, they're like little paintings, the whole [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE] could be a painting. Maybe put three dimensions to it, and it worked.

INTERVIEWER: And are there particular artists, when you say it could be a painting, that you think this would be having a conversation with?

When I think about that, Henry Moore was one, as I remember. Mondrian was another, well, just name a few.

INTERVIEWER: Kandinsky?

Many people interpreted the work with Kandinsky. I didn't. But it did have that result, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: You mention Henry Moore. Did you see a Henry Moore exhibition? What was it like seeing Moore's work?

It's interesting you mention Moore, because [UNINTELLIGIBLE] work in San Francisco, I met him, and I liked him, not a big…, you know. He had commissions here—the commission for the ILWU [International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union], the dockworkers—that big building, I think there's a Henry Moore [sculpture] there, and there was one downtown in front of the old…where the Museum of Modern Art used to be. He did that. Do you remember? They have

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of course all the form, beautiful forms. But when I did the Mondrian direction, and I did it several times, it was the [UNINTELLIGIBLE] building,[xxxii] where the owner of the building lived on the top floor. And from there, you could look right down onto the garden, so that's exactly how this structure evolved to these places of use. Then there was an arbor. If you remember that picture, which was a transparency actually, you could see the forms of the arbor, but the arbor was like another plane set above. I don't know what condition that place is [in] now, but for a while it was for a couple who owned the building.

Designing along the Edges

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you one last question about Mitchell. Then if you have anything else, J.C., we haven't talked about the way, and a lot of the design work, the most active uses are along the edge of the park. I wanted to know if you'd like to speak about how one parses out those uses, because in [Santa Clara] Central Park, we saw this, where you have a lot of the active uses.

They have all age groups, and they're not very good-looking for an intimate garden that I tried to make the entire eighteen acres as a garden. If you take a 120 x 60, or 120 x 120 galvanized affair any place in the middle of that space, and it's gone. It just destroys the space absolutely. It's better to leave that thing on the edge, very much so. The swimming pool is a little different: It could be in the middle because it's an exciting space. In [Santa Clara] Central Park, we kept it to the edge. You'd think, you always put yourself into the space if you're a good landscape architect, or anything. You just put yourself into the place. You ask yourself, "What's

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it like in this park?" I would like a place—if I were elderly—to walk all the way around without having any interruption. That happened, and you listen to people.

The Lighting

INTERVIEWER: Maybe let's backtrack back to Mitchell Park about the light fixtures because you mentioned with Virginia Green's bears, that nothing was available on the market.

Well, yeah, there must have been something, but nothing that I liked that I knew about. But those were the original to the original maquette…they were. I wanted to comment about the lighting on Mitchell Park, and that lamp was developed for Mitchell Park. We designed it for Mitchell Park. It's one of the continuous, no matter how big the trees are, or how small, these lights give it a kind of, even in the daytime, they give you a feeling of freedom. I mean it's like being in the garden. It's not typical of major lighting. In fact, they've renewed them, I think, and kept the same design, but they've put in larger wattage, or more wattage recently.

SAINT MARY'S SQUARE AND PORTSMOUTH SQUARE

INTERVIEWER: Another early park was St. Mary's Square in San Francisco.

It was a roof garden. I did absolutely all the drawings on that myself. That was one of the first underground garages, and nobody thought much about the roof. I think that I was working for the engineers. It was kind of thrown in with the job of building a garage, [an] underground garage in Saint Mary's Square. And nobody said anything. We had no criteria to tell us what to do, so I just did it the way I would like it to be—you know, as a painting. Visible.

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It was connected to the neighboring high-rise building, and there was a beautiful row of poplars running around [the] Sun Yat-sen [statue], who was sitting there in the original park, I guess. People began using it a lot and, of course, it's adjacent to Chinatown, and so on. But on Portsmouth Square, sort-of same thing happened, really. I think we worked for the architect on that one. They were just a lot of fun because we had to understand the structure itself [and] because I wanted some big trees. Through the irrigation, I was aware of where those posts were, where we wanted to put in a major tree, and it was very successful. It's still pretty much the way it was designed, and I think the city has added a little bit to it on one side of that [UNINTELLIGIBLE] building.

BOWDEN PARK

Bowden came [about because there] was the tunnel from this train station [in] Palo Alto. People were going over to the community, [and they] would go under the tunnel and emerge in this space. I've forgotten now, but it's about six acres. It's small, yeah. And so my thought was to make it available and visible from the train and yet to be so articulated that it would work with the neighborhood and the children's play area, and just open space. And what you see today is pretty much what was designed, except in the end that I had focused on the big, beautiful oak tree [that] was removed to put in an underpass. That was disappointing, but it still holds together. It was a very formal. It had a series of rooms facing the railroad. You could see that. The idea was that people in the train would not be blocked off from seeing the space, but could see through these areas of trees. I think it worked out pretty well. It also allowed various

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families to actually go into the [space]; they'd have benches and lots of color and just outdoor rooms. It was a very formal arrangement.

INTERVIEWER: And there was a lot of flower-planting in the original plan.

That's right—in those individual rooms.

INTERVIEWER: And it's almost like a painting, in some ways.

Yes, definitely.

SANTA CLARA CENTRAL PARK

INTERVIEWER: Well, the other day we had the chance to walk around in Santa Clara Central Park, which in other conversations, you've told me you think that's your masterpiece.

Yeah, [it was] built in stages, and it was because a person, Earl Carmichael, he was the park and recreation director—just a fine man in all, in his love of the city also. He knew everybody, and he came to me. It [the site] was an old walnut orchard, and he said, "We need a plan for this 50 acres. It will be our central park." And he said it's going to be difficult. "Through the years, we'll just take a little bit, but what I want is a plan." And I suggested a model. He said, "That's a great idea." And although it took more than ten years to build, if we just have an allocation of about $300,000 a year. But Earl had that model under glass—a beautiful model. [It had] everything [LAUGHTER] that everybody ever wanted in that [model]. And he put it right there where the supervisors of the board (I think they called it a board, I'm not sure what they were called, but the people…the council) where they'd see it every time they went to a

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meeting. So they began asking, “When are we going to do this.” He would get an appropriation every year for that, and we would do it.

The swimming pool was big—major! And so I don't know whether they had a special bond or how it [was] arranged, but it was…Really, I attribute Earl Carmichael for just nursing that idea along. The chain structure was something that I was very interested in doing, and I explained this to Earl, and he said, “OK, we'll do it.” We had our engineer, and I tell you, it was quite an experience when they had the crane and everything, and everything was attached to the outside borders, security of the chain. And up it went. It was extremely dramatic. And then we planted wisteria around the edges. That wouldn't grow that fast, to give us some shade through that structure. Yeah, so we had, for about ten years, a canvas at the base of the structure. And finally, because the wisteria grew that we could take the canvas off. Anyway, it was really quite beautiful. It was an all-purpose [space]. Instead of having paving in the middle, we put grass. And it has a stage. And it has the barbecue units. It had individuality or places for groups, all within this one structure. And it became very popular very, very soon after that.

I did 24 parks for the City of Santa Clara (I think 24), and they’re all little dots…little places. I say, “Well, we ought to have a park around here somewhere,” and they [would] just plop it down. There’s no connection, and they have every opportunity in Santa Clara for a connection. But then all of a sudden, they say, “Well, we have to have a fence along the creek so kids can’t get into it.” And if they really are honest, they would have a galvanized fence in front of the ocean to prevent anybody from getting in there. You know, you can just imagine what Santa Clara could be, because that stream actually runs through Santa Clara Central Park—you saw it. And we’re told not to touch it. I said [to] Earl Carmichael, who’s the recreations park director, I

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said, “Earl, you’ve got to use that. It’d be wonderful in the summertime for the little kids to go down and see the pollywogs and everything. He says, “I know Bob, but I just can’t fight them.”

SUNRIVER

We actually moved a town, and we had to [LAUGHTER] to set up an office in that town, and the army engineers were, well, I guess they were our employers, but we never saw them very much. We knew everybody in the town that had to be moved. And we had about four or five people up there, and then down to two and then three. But it was a great success. We had to take care of…I think [it was] about a million cubic yards of fill. So, in the course of that, I mean design is design, right? Then we had all this material, so we built a mountain between the river and the town. And that's an experience. I haven't seen it for a long time.

[In] all my experience [throughout] my entire life, there was one place that actually answered all the problems, and that was Sunriver, Oregon. Sunriver, Oregon, was an old Army base, and it was owned by John Gray, who was the head of, I think it was, a paper company or something, but anyway he was very wealthy, and he had bought that from the Army. And he said we got to need a planner, and he came down and looked around. George Rockrise was the architect, and Rockrise recommended us—namely me—to work with them. One of his partners and I went up to find out what this was all about. He said, “well, we have all this land. I bought this.” It is 8,000 acres to begin with, and it had about fifteen miles of streams and [was] on the Deschutes River.

I remember the first meeting that we had when everybody was there—John Gray and his wife, and other people that he was getting together to do this new town or whatever. He didn’t

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know what he was going to do. I think he just expected a subdivision. So Matt, his partner, George Rockrise, and I had agreed on this. I said, "I'd like to test them." So I said, if you divide, you have the Deschutes River, a big open space and cows grazing and so on, and then around that was this forest. And we said that night that if you subdivide the river, which is what everybody does on that five miles of river, you could divide that into 500 or 1,000 hundred-foot lots. And I said you will make a million dollars or millions. And then Mrs. Gray says to Mr. Gray, "I wouldn't want that." Well I said you would make millions if you would just subdivide property, but it'll take a long time to do that.

We located the lodge, [and] in front of the lodge was enough room for cattle to graze, and horses, [and] for an airport, which you couldn't see. We kept it short so that the big jets could not land there, but you could take private [airplanes]. We had some areas where the houses had…they could park their plane right next to it, but it was a beautiful, open space. And what I said was, we'd like to keep all that beautiful open space and put the housing back in the forest. And I said I'd like to start a system of bike trails and walking trails. They now have 30 miles [of trails] in that project. And I said on the main street, you cannot sell any property on any of the main roads, and when the main road comes to a trail, the road would go up about four feet, and then we had the bicycles underneath and the hikers, so there was no interruption of the first-class citizen who could enjoy the bike rides and the trails, and that still exists today. And that's in Sun River. It became a real destination.

[END]

[i] Royston is referring to the book *Modern Public Gardens: Robert Royston and the Suburban Park*, by Reuben Rainey and J.C. Miller (2006).

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[ii] In 2007 Royston began work on what was to be his final project, a residential landscape in Palm Springs, California, comprising a one-care site with two Modernist homes.
[iii] Here Royston's recollection was mistaken. The house on the northern end of the property was indeed designed by Welton Becket & Associates, but the other home was designed by San Diego architect Richard George Wheeler (1917–1990), with later additions by the architect Albert Frey.
[iv] Hollyngsworth Leland "Punk" Vaughan (1905–1974) taught at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1930 to 1969 and was instrumental in guiding the growth of the school's landscape architecture program. In addition to Royston, his students included Garrett Eckbo, Kathryn Imlay, Asa Hanamoto, Robert Tetlow, and Mai Arbegast.
[v] Haley joined the faculty of the Art department in 1930. See: http://texts.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb4t1nb2bd&doc.view=frames&chunk.id=div00027&toc.depth=1&toc.id=.
[vi] Loran began teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1936. See: https://www.californiawatercolor.com/pages/erle-loran-biography.
[vii] Peterson had also studied at the University of California, Berkeley, graduating in 1926 with a B.A. She joined the faculty of the school's Art Department in 1928. See: http://uvac.uvic.ca/gallery/peterson/biography/.
[viii] This refers to the first standard textbook widely used to educate landscape architects, *An Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design* (1917, revised in 1929), by Henry Hubbard and Theodora Kimball.
[ix] Royston is referring to landscape architect and Berkeley professor John W. Gregg. See: https://tclf.org/pioneer/john-gregg.
[x] Garrett Eckbo had published the article "Small Gardens in the City" in *Pencil Points* magazine in September 1937. Together with Harvard classmates Dan Kiley and James Rose, Eckbo produced "Landscape Design in the Urban Environment", "Landscape Design in the Rural Environment," and "Landscape Design in the Primeval Environment", all published in *Pencil Points* (now *Progressive Architecture*) in 1938-1939, a series of articles that together mark the decisive turn toward Modernist landscape architecture in America.
[xi] Russian Hill is a San Francisco neighborhood that lies directly north of Nob Hill.
[xii] Royston had worked for Church part-time since the former's junior year at U.C. Berkeley (1938–1939).
[xiii] Marie Harbeck (1907–1963) graduated in 1932 with a B.S. in landscape architecture from Oregon State University. She joined Church's San Francisco office two years later. Harbeck, who had experimented with fabric design, helped the war effort by teaching camouflage techniques at Camp Belvoir, Virginia. While in Virginia, she met Dallas landscape architect Arthur Berger, with whom she partnered in business in 1945 and married the following year. The two went on to lecture extensively on landscape architecture and complete some 186 designs for private residences, college campuses, corporate headquarters, and resorts throughout the American South and in Jamaica, many of which embraced a Modernist approach. See: https://tclf.org/pioneer/marie-berger.
[xiv] Royston is referring to the pool at the famous Donnell Garden in Sonoma, California. Sculptor Adaline Kent made the abstract sculpture that lies within the biomorphic pool.
[xv] Adaline Kent was married to fellow artist Robert Boardman Howard, who worked in camouflage research at the beginning of World War II.
[xvi] Ralph Rodney Root's book, *Contourscaping*, was first published in 1941.
[xvii] Ladera was a project developed in 1945 by Royston and Garrett Eckbo for the Peninsula Housing Association, working alongside architects Joseph Stein and John Funk. The original proposal comprised 400 single-family houses on a 256-acre tract near Palo Alto. Due to problems with financing, only a small part of the project came to fruition.
[xviii] Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) was an influential social philosopher and urban critic. Among his many important books is The City in History (1961).
[xix] In 1950 the Levering Act was enacted by the State of California, thus requiring state employees to make a loyalty oath that disavowed radical beliefs. The law was aimed in particular at employees of the University of California.
[xx] Buckminster Fuller taught as a guest lecturer at the North Carolina State University School of Architecture from 1949 to 1955.
[xxi] Ian McHarg (1920–2001) was an influential landscape architect and theorist who taught briefly at the University of Edinburgh before becoming an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Fine Arts in 1954, where he established the Department of Landscape Architecture and M.L.A. program. Through a combination of academic research and practice, McHarg laid the foundations for his many ideas about using ecology as a basis for design and planning. See: https://tclf.org/pioneer/ian-mcharg?destination=search-results.

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[xxii] Royston is referring to architect Leonard Schultze, of the firm Schultze & Associates. See: https://tclf.org/pioneer/leonard-schultze.
[xxiii] William Wurster was the architect for Valencia Gardens, while the landscape architect of record was Tommy Church, with Royston handling the project for Church's office.
[xxiv] Here Royston is likely thinking of the animal sculptures at Valencia Gardens by Beniamino Bufano, which were originally made in the 1930s for a project at Aquatic Park under the Works Progress Administration, and which were placed under the purview of the San Francisco Art Commission in the 1940s.
[xxv] Florence Alston-Swift (1890-1977) was a well-known San Francisco-based artist whose work was exhibited in several prominent Bay Area venues, including the San Francisco Art Association, the Oakland Art Gallery, the Berkeley League of Fine Arts, the San Francisco Museum of Art, and at the Golden Gate International Exhibition in 1939. See: https://www.invaluable.com/artist/swift-florence-alston-williams-bkw7hm04oc/.
[xxvi] Landscape architect Thomas Church, with Lawrence Halprin and architect George Rockrise, designed the Donnell Garden in Sonoma for the family of Dewey and Jean Donnell. See: https://tclf.org/landscapes/donnell-garden?destination=search-results.
[xxvii] Claire Falkenstein (1908–1997) was an American sculptor and artist best known for her large-scale, abstract metal sculptures, often comprised of tangled metal and other media, such as plastic or glass. See: https://americanart.si.edu/artist/claire-falkenstein-1485.
[xxviii] Joseph Allen Stein (1912–2001) was a leading Modernist architect in the San Francisco Bay Area throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Stein and Royston collaborated professionally in addition to the work, recounted here, that made them neighbors.
[xxix] Richard Neutra (1892–1970) was a prominent Modernist architect who practiced for much of his career in Southern California.
[xxx] Norma is one of the current occupants of the home next to Royston's, which was originally built and occupied by architect Joseph Stein and his family.
[xxxi] Royston is referring to Krusi Park in Alameda, a project begun in 1954.
[xxxii] Royston is referring to his work on the Chinn Garden in San Francisco.

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