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**M. PAUL FRIEDBERG**

**ORAL HISTORY**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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**Interviews Conducted**

**October 5-6, 2006 – Minneapolis, MN**

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## M. PAUL FRIEDBERG TRANSCRIPT

*The following are transcripts of two interviews with M. Paul Friedberg, conducted by Charles Birnbaum. The first interview takes place during the annual meeting of the American Society of Landscape Architects in Minneapolis, Minnesota on October 5 and 6, 2006. The interview was conducted by Charles Birnbaum, and videographer James Sheldon in the office of Damon Farbar and on site at Peavey Plaza and the Loring Park Greenway.*

*The second interview with Paul Friedberg is carried out by Charles Birnbaum and filmed by videographer James Sheldon. It took place in New York City on May 22, 2008 at the sites of several of Paul Friedberg's New York City projects.*

### Introduction

I am Paul Friedberg, a landscape architect; I'm from New York City originally. I migrated back after many years I have a family, a second family, a young Chinese girl who's 12 years old, an Israeli wife who is in her mid-'50s. We celebrate summers in East Hampton. I have a previous family with four grandchildren, two young men in their forties. One is in the film industry, a production designer, and is responsible for some major films such as Kama Sutra, and Runaway Bride, Pollock, oh, a number of other fairly well known films. And, the other is a musician who composes children's music, plays for parties and events, and here am I struggling to make landscape architecture more interesting for the people I design for.

*Birnbaum: Great. I'm Charles Birnbaum, the President of the Landscape Foundation. I'm sitting here with Paul. This is a happy reunion. I interviewed Paul in 1981 for a few months, and the day today is October 5th, I believe, if I'm not mistaken, and we're in Minneapolis at the office of Damon Farbar.*

*Birnbaum: I thought we'd begin by talking about some of your earliest impressions, when you became aware of landscape, what New York was like growing up in the '30s?*

### Childhood and Education

#### CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

I was born in Brooklyn. I left when I was five years old. My father, a milk inspector for the city of New York, disliked the city. He was one of the few people in the family to go to college in the '20s. He went for two years to Farmingdale, and as a result that qualified him to become a civil servant. To become a civil servant in the '30s was considered a privilege, a plum of a job because you could make a constant income. This was when jobs were really hard to come by. His district initially was New



York City. And, you wouldn't believe it, but a milk inspector in those days actually was authorized to carry a gun; the reason is that these dairies or producers of milk would water down the milk that came in the milk tankers because they would make a few extra bucks by increasing the quantity of milk. He decided to take his family to a small town of 200 families in Pennsylvania on the Susquehanna River called Winfield. And, the only schooling was a one-room schoolhouse. So, from 1936-'41, somewhere around there, I went to a one-room schoolhouse which was out of the Tom Brown's School Days, I went to school in the wintertime sometimes with the milkman on a horse-drawn sled. It was a cold, stove-heated room. The ashes made a pile outside, and that became a playground, running up and playing king of the hill, the school was replete with an outhouse.

It was perfectly normal. This was life, and life all through the '30s, which was the Depression, it seemed fine. We had enough food on the table. We lived in a house. From there, we moved to Middletown, a little blue collar town about 100 miles from New York City. I went to junior high school and high school in Middletown. You weren't poor, but you weren't rich. You just weren't well off by today's standards however you weren't aware that you were deprived of anything, life was fun. You'd play sandlot ball, hide and seek, you celebrated the holidays like Halloween, went to the football games; you had pizza afterwards and that was life. Finally when you graduated out of this uncomplicated life, you had to make a decision as to what you were going and what to do. That was made for me by my father.

### **STARTING A NURSERY BUSINESS**

My father decided that he wanted to be in the nursery business, but he was too frightened to leave his job. So, he took my money. At that time and I was like 13-14, and I worked summers. That was in Pine Bush, the black dirt truck farming area; they raised celery and onions and paid a quarter an hour to give you a sense of how long ago it was. After a day's work, you made a total of maybe \$2.00. At the end of the week, you could take the money and splurge, but I was the kind of kid who didn't know what I wanted. So, I always put it in the bank. I ended up a few years later with about \$300 in the bank. My father who didn't have 300 took my \$300. In those days, you never argued with your parents. You just did what you were told to do. With my savings He bought a used truck, which we completely overhauled, and we started a small tree nursery. I went to high school half days for the last two years of high school so that I could work the other half. I would take all my courses in the morning, and be free by lunchtime. My father had a heart attack when I was 13. So, a lot of the responsibility was put on my shoulders. I was in a manner of speaking his surrogate living his life for him. Upon graduation I had to make a decision. Should I continue this marginal existence in the nursery and try to build it, or go to college? Coming from a Jewish background, there was no question: you didn't go straight to work. You went to college. The most important thing in life was your education.



## EXPERIENCES AT CORNELL

There was no question I had to go to college. It was part of a tradition. And, the difficulty was we didn't have any money to send me to college. So, I applied to three different places: Farmingdale, because that's where he went and that's where I had my heart set on, Cornell, because he told me I should apply there, and Syracuse. I don't think I ever finished my application to Syracuse as I was accepted to Cornell. And, there was no question in his mind that's where I was going. I went to Cornell to study horticulture with the notion that I would come back and run the nursery however at the end of my first term he died. His heart gave out, and I decided to leave Cornell, come back, live with my mother, and continue the nursery, which I did for about a year.

This was during the Korean War. So, at one point in the back of my mind I was thinking, I really should check and see where I stood in the draft, and went to the draft board and said, my name is such and such. Can you tell me where I stand? He looked it up and said, your mother is working; therefore, she's not a dependent. You can expect to go in about two or three months to Korea. The alternative was go back to Cornell, as they had an ROTC program, the choice was simple. I went back to school. I studied horticulture. I really studied social life, and to my pleasure discovered that I could take 80% of my courses in the art school while being enrolled in ag [agricultural] School, and this was for \$75 a term. That's about the best bargain I've ever had in my life. I enrolled in art appreciation as it was easy. You judged courses not on their content. It was on how many classes you could miss so you could have coffee, and also how easy it was to pass the course without a great deal of effort. Art appreciation was revelatory. The idea of looking at a picture, not a painting, at a picture; up until then they were all pictures, but having it now looking at it as a painting and beginning to understand the thought that communicated the issues, and the composition, to me it was a world illuminated, that I didn't know existed.

Birnbaum: *Before you move on from that, were there moments of revelation for any particular pictures?*

No, not yet, no, not yet. It was just the fact that if the position of a hand was like that or like that, it created the movement within the painting which was its composition. It wasn't arbitrary. It wasn't that the hand is pointing because there's something up there, the hand is pointing to take or direct your eye in a different direction, and the painting was self-contained. The movement within the painting was self-contained, and brought you through the painting. You followed the artist's composition and, you were able to see or read the paintings at different levels. That also opened up



a desire to demystify music, which I still haven't been able to fathom. I continue to enjoy music for its own sake. I would love to have a better understanding of music in the same way as I do art.

I took other courses, but the second course I took for the same idiotic reason was sculpture. I walked into the sculpture class. A professor named Colby was teaching it, he did chickens. He did these strange chickens, which I could understand, for me sculpture was representational. I had aunts who did sculpture, it was all faces or bodies, or figures. He came in and he instructs us to bring to the next class a special knife, and a cube of plastascene. He said, between now and the next week or two, come up with an abstract design. I first had to find out, what does that mean, 'abstract design'? Without prolonging this, I struggled just to find out what was he talking about, I began to manipulate the cube. It began to make some sense, I began to enjoy the idea that you could cut this piece of plastascene, mold it or shape it, and that one form would relate to the other. Anyway, I could go on, because that became another seminal experience in my life at Cornell. I still had aspirations of becoming either a nurseryman, or a landscape contractor.

When I got to my last week of school, at Cornell there is something called Senior Week. I think most colleges have it. That's when you celebrate you are about to enter the real world. You find the woman of your life and you celebrate. You were heading into another life. You were leaving Never-Never Land, and you were going out into the big bad world. The woman of my life said, no, I can't make it that week. She had already made another date. Desperate for a date I arranged a date with a not quite a blind date, but a woman who I barely knew, I was fixed up with her because I had to have a warm body. I met this woman. Her name was Lennie from Syracuse. She came down. And, by the end of the week we were madly in love. I mean, this was an idyllic situation. We were destined. It didn't matter who she was; I was destined to love her at the end of the week because of all the things that happened during this week.

I paid for my tuition, my room and board, by working summers in the Catskill Mountains, which was another education, including my sexual education. I made a fair amount of money. I worked day and night, and I was supposed to go back. But, because of ROTC I had to go to the army for two years. I knew that. I was scheduled to go to in the Army some time in December, and this was now June. So, when I got back, at the end of this week, I decided I didn't want to go to the Catskills and work. I had to go to New York because that's where Lennie lived. Her parents disliked me immensely because I wasn't a doctor, a lawyer, or an Indian chief. That's what they had in store for her. And, I needed a job. Meanwhile, I still was able to manage dates with her. I needed a job in New York. Now, to find a job in a nursery or even as a landscape contractor, in June in New York City especially in those days, 1955-54, it was virtually impossible. It didn't exist. So, I went to florist shops thinking that maybe they would have a use for me. I had almost no skills. I couldn't draw.

*{Outside noise}*

## **STUDYING HORTICULTURE**

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Birnbaum: *What's been interesting to me is to have you talk about these sort of two pathways from these defining moments from the sculpture course, the art appreciation course. You were studying horticulture. You've made no reference to the Cornell [plant classes].*

It was absolutely boring. I mean, really, I enjoyed some of the people.

Birnbaum: *Was Liberty Hyde Bailey this kind of overarching presence in terms of, were you using his books, his encyclopedia of horticulture?*

No, it wasn't him. It was another man.

Birnbaum: *Dirr?*

No, plant materials; it was a man who was very good ... [Liberty Hyde] Bailey was an icon, and we studied Bailey sort of peripherally. For 25 years he did research. The next 25 years he taught. The next 25 years he wrote. He was that kind of a man, who has life set out for him and he was a much disciplined man. And there was Bailey Hall at Cornell, which was named after him. There were plants and plant science I guess it was. There was this particular teacher who had written a book on plant materials, at the time very well-known. I couldn't care less about the courses there. As a matter of fact, I had a course in design where on eight-and-a-half-by-elevens you'd draw tennis courts. A guy names Chuck Cares, who went on to teach at Michigan State, was my professor, and he failed me in design. As a matter of fact, I almost I almost failed out of Cornell, I was so busy socializing. But as I say, that truly was an education. I was coming in contact with people, the type of people I'd never met before in this little blue-collar town.

The first thing, I could breeze through it. It was easy. Plant identification between the nursery and a few hours up in the laboratory you could remember, it was all memorization. Botany I couldn't care much about. If you knew that the Cambium layer was there and a few other things, but it didn't stimulate me. It wasn't an underlying sort of stimulant that would propel me into this area. Again, I was there because my father had sent me there. But still it was what I was destined to do.

Because I was on the path to this and I was just getting my credentials lined up. These other two experiences, in my mind, did not connect in any way to the fact that, design and art appreciation, and abstract sculpture or sculpture in itself was connected for me. They were independent episodes that I experienced that just were interesting to me. And to that point, we were also experimenting, my roommates, experimenting with different aspects of so-called sophisticated life. We would try out I remember different kinds of cheeses, which in some cases actually turned out to be humorous, when we got limburger or some of the smelly cheeses. I remember driving back from Cornell to New York with three or four guys in the car, with this package of limburger that we really stunk up the car. And we opened the window in Binghamton and we threw it out as we were going over a bridge, and to this day every time I go over the bridge we still suggest that we can smell that cheese. So Cornell



was just a thrill. By the end of it we had a car and we'd go to Yale for the football. That's one of the real important things about Cornell. Senior week I remember more than I do about any academic course I took.

## FINDING A JOB

When I get to New York, I can't find a job. Somebody says to me in one of these florist shops, why don't you try landscape architecture? Now you have to understand that all I have is three pages of tennis courts and a few other things sketched out in pencil, really in primitive form, with lettering that you can't read because my lettering is terrible. And that's all I have in the way of documentation that I can do design. And she says, why don't you go to a landscape architect? So I honestly said, what is that? She gives me the name of one or two firms, one of which is Carl Stelling. Stelling was a landscape architect. I'm not even sure he was a landscape architect. He could have been an engineer, or he could have been an architect, because in those days a lot of architects who couldn't get work in the '30s shifted over into landscape architecture. He did mostly highways. This was the period in which highways, right after the war, they were building highways, and the landscape architect would evaluate different routes mainly they were doing planting plans and drafting.

Now here I think it's important to say, if you want to get a sense of how long ago this was, they were working with slide rules. And most people these days don't know what a slide rule is. You go to a museum to see a slide rule. It's like a sextant. And so I walked in to Stelling's office, and they were nice enough to accept me without calling ahead. In those days it was only courteous and appropriate to call and make an appointment to be interviewed. But again, I came from a background where I wasn't familiar with the proper protocol, so I just went in, knocked on the door and said I'm looking for a job. So they sat with me and they showed me some of the work they were doing. I've said this at lectures. I opened up something called a blueprint. Not a blue line, a blue print. It's a blue sheet with white lines on it. And I look at this thing, with the lettering, and it's like magic. I said, humans did that? That wasn't done by a printing press? They said, we do this all the time. That intrigued me. That's something I think I'd want to do. Not the design, but I want to make blueprints.

My naiveté at the time was amazing, I look back and I say I couldn't be that, not just silly, but uninformed, but I was. I couldn't get a job in New York, then I decided it really as too hard on my feet and on my body to keep going from office to office, so I started calling a few offices: do you have any work and could I be interviewed? I called one guy, he said no I don't, but my friend, his name I'm trying to remember.



Birnbaum: *Arthur Hoffman?*

Arthur Hoffman, thank you. He didn't say from Hartford.

So he says I don't have any work, but my friend is looking for someone and his name is Arthur Hoffman, and let me give you his phone number. This was the first really productive {*Laughter*} lead that I had. So I took his number down. New York at that time had Wadsworth, Butterfield, those were the exchanges. If you come from New York, you know this. Butterfield 8 is at famous movie. And what it is B-U and then you punch in the rest of the number. So this was Hartford such-and-such. So I punched in H-A and then the rest of the number, and the operator gets on and says can I help you? The phone rings, this is Arthur Hoffman. I said, this is Paul Friedberg, I was recommended by so-and-so. Where did you go to school? Now this is a bone of contention, OK? I went to Cornell. His assumption was I went to Cornell landscape architecture school because I'm calling a landscape architect, and I wasn't about to disabuse him of this. So he said, OK, sounds good. And he said, when can you come, and I said, whenever you're ready. I said what is the salary? He said \$65 a week. That shows you how long ago it was, too {*Laughter*}. So I said that's OK. And he said can you start tomorrow? I said, yes. He said the train leaves at 6:00 in the morning. I said, train? And he said, actually, a repeat of the conversation, the train? Yeah, to Hartford, Connecticut. I said, your office is in Hartford, Connecticut? He said, yes, didn't you know? I said, oh yes, of course I did, and I said, but you know what? As long as this is the end of the week, how about if I made it on Monday? He said, fine. So I went on the train Monday. Now I didn't know how to draft. I didn't know how to grade. I still had these little eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheets. I go into the office and there's no one else in the office except me. He's a very nice guy. He's a one-eyed landscape architect, whose again has a Beaux Arts style and whose lettering is immaculate. These people had studied lettering to the extent that they made it an art.

So he sits me down after taking me through the office. It's a small office. He sits me down and he puts a drawing in front of me that's on cloth. If you've ever drawn on cloth, it's a very delicate material. It has a layer of gesso or something on top that you draw on. You can draw in pencil, you need a very soft pencil, but basically you draw in ink. So he gives me this and says; now the curb cut is where the car goes over the curb has to be moved to the east by about 10 feet and I'd like you to redraft it with ink.

Now for most people that's not a daunting project, is it? You can do it in about 10 minutes. So I look at it. What you have to do here, and I have to illustrate this, is take two parallel lines and then on a curve bring them together at a point. Which means you need two radii? Now to do this with a pen, that's number one. This is before Rapidographs. This was a pen that you put in ink. So I started and I did it, and of course they don't converge, so I erase it. And then the next one, I erase it. And by the time I finished, I've erased more of this drawing than what I started with. And I'm losing the surface,



which means if you put ink on the paper, it bleeds into the cloth. And I'm really getting terrified that I'm about to go on a train back to New York.

A woman walks in, and she works there part time. Very nice, [and asks] what are you doing, and I told her. She said, let me fix it, and in about three minutes she fixed the entire drawing. And at that point she became my savior and began to teach me a little bit, and then I found out actually all was not lost. Anyway, the real reason Hoffman want me there in his office was he wanted to go away that summer for vacation and needed somebody he could trust in the office that would just stay there and monitor the office. He didn't have that much work for me to do, which is what I did. I practiced planting plans and did all kinds of stuff, really "stuff" in the office, and I had a very nice time. And I would go to New York on weekends. I lived in the YMCA, which was an experience in itself. It housed a variety of people, some of whose sexual preferences {Laughter} were imposing upon me. So you really had to keep your eye out.

At the end of the summer, I had pretty much had it with commuting, and by that time, too, this relationship had sort of fizzled a little bit. I went looking for a job in New York, but now I also had some skills, a limited amount of skills. Eventually I got a job in New York with Joe Gangemi, and his lettering style was also equally beautiful, a smooth and flowing type of lettering.

I worked there from September to the end of November and then left for the Army.

## **THE ARMY YEARS**

In the army I went to Japan first, however Korea was the destination.

I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which is nowhere. To show you how far out of the mainstream it is, I was happy to be assigned to Korea to get out of Fort Sill, [and] to get out of Oklahoma. This really was red-neck country. On Saturday night you go to the square dance or the [to] dance the two-step. And it was a dry state, so without exaggeration, the guys would walk in with their pint of bourbon which they [would] get from the bootleggers. Bootlegging was a big business. That's why they kept it as a dry state because it would have killed the economy otherwise. These would take and without letup they would just drain the entire bottle, the entire pint. Then they would go looking for a fight. That was the next level. You'd escalate from that, wait a few minutes for the liquor to take affect, and I saw some brutal fights, but I also heard --some great country singers and it was wonderful. Every one of these experiences I enjoyed, because I invested myself in each one. It's just interesting to get deeper into it, and it was not premeditated. It was just that whatever I experienced I found interesting. And then I would go to the next experience, and, find that experience. Like the army, because I was in Fort Sill in the artillery I was one of the two people chosen to go to Survey Officer's School requiring another two months in Fort Sill. I was furious that I was assigned to do this, but again it's like everything in my life, the results of each of these unpremeditated activities turned into gold. And by the way, like the horticultural program at Cornell, I couldn't care less about learning



about survey. That bored me, but being in Oklahoma was fine for that extra time, mainly for the social life. But I came away with an “MO”, I guess they call it, as a survey officer. [I] didn't really know too much about what I was doing and relied a lot on manuals.

Instead of going home for the two-week vacation, I decided to go straight to Korea. And again, that was a lucky decision, because when I got there the survey officer at the division level was leaving for the States. He had finished his tour. The other soldier, who studied with me, went home, so he came two weeks later. When I got there, they put me in a captain's slot at a division level. Korea was no bargain. The division level was a mile from the DMZ. We were living on a hill, in [a space] smaller than a Quonset hut, two men, they call them Jamesways. I was given two trucks, four men and a helicopter. That was my squad. And I was in a general's mess, which meant also there were lots of other officers. I wasn't at the front lines, not that the front lines meant anything because this was after the war. But what it meant was that I could live decently. The company you socialized with were officers.

As I was at the division headquarters I had a chance then to design. The general wanted to fix his officers' club, which was up on a hill in a Quonset hut, so we created a terrace. One of the people on my crew was an architect, from this area of the world. I think from Minnesota, Minneapolis, Wisconsin, somewhere. He was a young architect and an enlisted man. And he knew about a flush toilet. So I was sent to Japan to pick up the essentials for a flush toilet and we had the first toilet in that part of Korea, which was important {Laughter}.

### EXPERIENCING OTHER CULTURES

Anyway, the part of Korea that was most interesting to me is that as a survey officer nobody bothered me, because no one knew what the hell I did. And neither did I, but that didn't matter. I found a book that came as part of the equipment on trig markers throughout Korea that the Japanese had established. The Japanese conquered Korea in 1910 and stripped it of its resources. The forests were denuded. They took the rice down to the point that the people were at a starvation level. And when they left, they had actually established a kind of culture in Korea. By the way, this is an aside; they established a culture on the part of the Koreans of survival. So when the Americans came all flush with money, flush with foods and clothing, the Koreans had no compunction about stealing, because that was part of their culture. They had acquired this behavior to survive with the Japanese [because] they had to. Except the Americans had so much, if you stole, they just let it go, whereas they [the Koreans] would get destroyed if the Japanese caught them. But anyway, I found this book on these Japanese trig markers. And I decided, as I had nothing to do, to go and research them. And for the next year I would take these trips to different parts of northern Korea to find these little granite markers. This was Korea before it became developed as it is now. We went to Korean weddings in villages surrounded by rice paddies. I had a wonderful time with these four guys just traveling around sight seeing. Seeing the earth mounds, the burial mounds, the



Buddhist sculptures and going to Seoul on weekends for women. And this is not part of landscape architecture, but it had to do with the way you adjust to different cultures. Because Americans had money and Koreans didn't. This was '55, 10 years after the war. [In] Korea, the cities were still pretty devoid of industry and work. The women, a lot of women went into prostitution, and the soldiers were all over the place. So you had a ready market. You'd go to the hotel, something called the Chosen Hotel, the only hotel in Seoul, and there would be a line of women around, outside. The hotel was walled in. There was a line of women and you'd go and you'd pick one woman, and that would be your woman for the night. And here was I coming from Victorian America where Jane Russell, the picture *Outlaw* was almost banned because she showed cleavage. [This was] coming from that kind of a culture or society into this one in Korea and in Japan. You'd go to Japan and there it wasn't even prostitutes, it was just that if a girl liked you, you'd live with her. And it was like a revelation, on a social level. And after a year and a half or two years you began to see Asian women as commonplace and beautiful, and when you saw Caucasian women, it was kind of strange.

## Professional Practice

### BECOMING A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

I graduated the Army, [and] came back and went back to [Joseph] Gangemi. I worked with him for five, six months and at one point he was asked to do a courtyard for an architect's client. I was the one who had to draw it up. By now my lettering had gotten better, when I was in Korea I took graph paper with me and every letter I wrote home I printed. I labored over this to develop my printing skill, yet it still was, by comparison primitive, but better than it was. Gangemi gave me his design and said draw it up. I looked at it and it was very much this loose landscape. Now we're getting into the essence of where I come from as a landscape architect. Up until now all I wanted was to make a living. This was a profession in which if I could get \$10,000 a year, I would be satisfied-that's all I wanted, I could live very well. That would take care of all of my needs, which is strange when you think what \$10,000 means even in today's dollars, I don't think it would even come close to the standard of living we have or I want.

It meant that I would be satisfied with a lot less, even in terms of the work; I just wanted to go to work 9 to 5, a job not a dedication. I learned grading and other line work. I was involved with lot of bureaucratic work, which means everything was prescribed by the numbers and with standardized details. When he gave me this courtyard, for some reason I became judgmental, I can't say why? But I didn't like what he had done. I felt that I wanted to take a shot at it. Nobody asked me. I did this at home and did a drawing. And in those days we had something called Pantone - Pantone for texture and press-on textures. I loved it. If you can't draw and if you've got something mechanical that you can press on, it looks good. So I did this courtyard and I brought it to him.



Birnbaum: *One of the questions I have like when you started going to Hartford, I have this image of you getting off at the train station, Bushnell Park being there. And the fact that you were for the first time working for the person, if you will, who was a landscape architect, you know, was there anything that you aware of the fact that- - -Was this an awakening of what landscape architecture could be?*

None of that came till later. I could have been, honestly, maybe this is an exaggeration, and I could have been selling shoes. OK? If someone said to me at that point in my life, you can make \$10,000 a year, maybe not selling shoes, but let's say teaching. OK? I would have gone into teaching. I would have done anything. I didn't have, when I look back, I didn't have a prescribed notion in my head of what I wanted to do. OK? My father gave me his direction, and it seemed OK. When I went to Cornell and went through that whole process, it was not because I desired to go through the process. It's because it was required that I go through it and it was a means to another place. When I got to the other place and realized that I had to make a left turn instead of a right turn or vice versa, I just made the turn and took that path for a while. But still the path was inspirational, none of it was premeditated. It was all dealing with circumstance and responding to circumstance. I would say a lot of my life in general deals with circumstantial situations and experiences. The garden that I have in East Hampton, which I love, and my house is almost all circumstantial, as you'll see. Now I can say I do things that are somewhat more premeditated. Because I understand how the game is played in some areas and I'll do some things to promote certain eventualities. But I would say that unlike, who is it, Frank Lloyd Wright or some of the others I've read about who said ever since I was three, I knew what I wanted to be. When I was three, I didn't know who I was. And as a matter of fact, you'll begin to see yet another event that takes me in a different direction. And so here I am, Gangemi and this plan, and I show it to Gangemi. And he looks at it and he's kind of, all right, I'll show it to the client too. [He is] not at all happy. I then showed him his and I made sure mine looked better. He returns and he says they picked yours. That had an effect on me. It gave me a boost, to my ego and I don't know if it changed my status in the office very much, but I was made an associate. I realized after a very short time, all that meant was you get the same pay but you work twice as hard. OK?

### **GOING OUT ON HIS OWN**

After a short period I decided I really didn't want to work for anyone, and by now I was making \$125 a week. I had more than not quite doubled my salary.

I decided I was ready to go out on my own. One of my college fraternity brother's fathers was in the steel business, and they were building a building on Eighth Street between University and Broadway. This was on the south side of the street. He said, you're a landscaper; would you want to do this? I said sure. So for \$800, OK, that was my commission. It was my first commission. I quit and I figured I would then also take unemployment, between the two I'd start. There was a chicken store down the street and for a dollar a chicken I could live for a week. I had found an apartment on the East Side for \$80 a month. This is 80<sup>th</sup> Street between Lex[ington] and Third. The landlord had violations



on the building; it was reduced to \$40 a month. I was living in luxury here. I could buy chicken guts for very little money, and sautéed they weren't so bad. I learned to live. But once again, it didn't seem as if I was being deprived. I lived well. I enjoyed all of this. I don't know if you remember in your early life when you were single, I bought these foam mattresses to sleep on, except I bought seconds, because they were cheaper. It took me a long time before I put covers on them. And people would come in and they'd pick at those until I finally had to get the covers on before the mattress completely disintegrated. In this railroad flat I had good years.

Birnbaum: *Did your project get built?*

Yup. It got built. It's still there.

Birnbaum: *So what was that like when you saw it constructed?*

That was exciting.

#### **REMEMBERING MENTOR CONRAD HAMERMAN**

Yeah, that was exciting, but I still didn't have large practice, I'd have to go back to Gangemi's office. When I came back to Gangemi's office they had a project called Roosevelt Raceway. It was a joint venture with a landscape contractor named Alan Dalsimer. Gangemi had hired Conrad Hamerman. Conrad's about that high. He had gone to landscape architecture at Cornell. He was a close friend of Roberto Burle Marx. Who the hell is Roberto Burle Marx? I don't know. Conrad intimidated me. He was very cultured, very bright, had all the right credentials, and knew a lot more than I did. And here I am, just sort of stumbling along, basically wanting to do engineering. I was happy. Engineering was simple, non-threatening.

Conrad begins, to mentor me, to know, the essence of landscape architecture. He is designing in Roberto Marx's style the plant beds in Roosevelt Raceway. And I'm watching what he's doing. He relates forms and plantings. I then meet a woman and Conrad and his wife, invited us to their place up in the Adirondacks. Conrad shows me slides of the gardens of Europe. And it's like the same experience I was having at Cornell with the art appreciation. I'm looking at these gardens and hearing how to see them, which I now can understand-that changed my sense of what they are. He shows Vaux le Vicomte, Chantilly, Bomartzo [and] all of Vignola's work in Italy. This woman becomes my wife and we decide to go to Europe.

I was going to go skiing and this was about the time they had charter flights. And I was able to get another ticket, but she didn't ski so we decided to visit these gardens, which was the dumbest thing



you could do. On one hand it's the dumbest thing you could do on a honeymoon in January to go traipsing through gardens in Italy and France. On the other hand it was an incredible experience for me to be, to see these firsthand, and to work with Conrad and hang out with him. We were fairly close. And although we were two different, you'll meet him, two different people, two unlikely people, let me put it that way, not different, unlikely people to be friends. But somehow, we had a connection.

### THE PROFESSION IN THE 1950S

And at the same time there was another man who I mentioned to you Karl Linn. This shows you also the level at which landscape architecture was practiced at the time. Karl Linn, who was a psychologist, decided he wanted to become a landscape architect. And you can call yourself landscape architect in those days without having to worry about licensing. Karl got a job with Philip Johnson to plant four or six beech trees in front of the Seagram's House and that catapulted him into fame. Can you imagine? That's all he had to do. That was the level, of practice at the time. It was highways or residential, however if you were attached to any institution work like Carl, no matter how small one could actually get recognition.

California was far ahead of the East coast where nothing was going on. Clarke and Rapuano was a big and politically connected firm doing rather banal work, mostly engineering, and a lot of engineering. Parks department, you might get a job but you could not get a commission. Could not get a commission with the New York City Department of Parks as a graduate landscape architect, OK? OK. You had to joint venture with an engineer. That was how dismal the profession was.

*Birnbaum: Because, again, I'm always looking for these linkages and what's fascinating to me is, you know, you really, I mean, other than this sort of quick brush-off of Clarke and Rapuano, you've sort of implied that they really weren't an influence. And what's interesting is here are all these Cornell alums, and you've got Gilmore Clarke, who was the dean.*

Clarke was the only one, if you look at his designs like Jones Beach --

*Birnbaum: Well, tell me about [that], I mean, that's what I want to talk about.*

Sadly enough he wasn't adequately recognized at the time, and Jones Beach is not seen a product of landscape architecture. Robert Moses was his sponsor, very much alive and very powerful during those days, and saw the value of his designs.

*Birnbaum: What I think about when you talk about going to Hoffman and describing the Beaux Arts drawings, and, you know, nine of the first 10 American Academy Fellows were Cornell graduates. I mean, so Cornell was, you know, cranking out these Beaux Art beautiful rendered people. I mean nine of the first 10. The only one who wasn't was Thomas Price.*



## GROWING THE OFFICE

Birnbaum: *But I what I want to do first, because I'm getting nervous about the time, is to just go through the chronology as we've started. And so if we can maybe go back to around the early seventies where we left off and, you know, the office moves. I mean, why does the office grow to 60 people?*

Riis gave me a lot of publicity. All kinds of opportunities drop in our lap, which was a two edge sword, a liability. All of a sudden you are so busy that you have little time to design. Design is really a function of time. It doesn't get better by just having lots of work. It gets better by having the time to put into lots of work on limited projects. And I tend to run a studio rather than an office. So I want to be involved in every project. And in doing so, I have only a limited amount of time for each project.

So we get a very large project, the first State Park in New York City, called the Harlem River State Park. It's a linear piece of land on the Harlem River which is, I forget what street it's on, but it's in the Bronx, way uptown. But it's isolated by the road, I guess it's the Major Deacon. We come back to the director of State Parks [and tell him] that it is very isolated and there are difficulties getting to it. People are going to have to come across from wherever, the subway or however they're proposing, come across the bridge to the park. And it means there's only one access point. And we don't have an audience that's going to populate the place all the time. If we could develop a community, a residential community it would improve the chance of success. At that time the [Urban Development Corporation] UDC was looking for sites. The therefore the UDC was given a site to the south of our project. The concept was correct but since we had no control over the amount of housing, it tends to overwhelm the park. But the concept that the State participate in providing recreation to those who cannot access the woodland park was valid.

As a large urban park, with architecture, we needed to enlarge our staff. And we went up to sixty people for this particular project. That year we lost more money than we ever in the history of the firm. And that's because I couldn't control it. And I guess it goes back to the fact that you have to decide whether what you want is a business or a design office. What is your primary objective, making money doing good work? I think they're mutually inconsistent. Because if you look at the nature of design, it takes time and the fees are not determine on the amount of time spent.

The fee that you get to do a project doesn't change if you say you're going to do a good design or you're going to do a banal design. So the more time you spend, the less money you make. The more changes you make for the betterment of the project, the less money, the more you suffer. So to me, it's important to understand what it is you really want, what's your objectives, what did you want to achieve? And to me it's never been a choice. I was always interested in the quality of the work.

Birnbaum: *One of the things I wanted to ask you about, we haven't talked about City College, and we haven't talked about Michael Cunningham, Dean McClure, Howard Abel, Fred Banson, Lee Weintraub,*



*sort of this whole mentoring, the school program growing people, people working in the office. Talk a little bit about that.*

Sure. One of the people not there, who should be is Jim Balsley. I can't remember specifically the timing on some of this, so I'll just talk about them as they come up. Jim worked with me for I don't know how many years, and really was my right hand. I'm not sure what there was about our personalities, we love each other, we still do, but we realized that we just could not somehow make it together. Jim went off on his own. We still see each other, but we never really, we never decide to get back together again for reasons I think, is my personality. I really like to be in control, and I think that's a liability but it's also in a way it's a part of my nature. Maybe it's what makes me do what I do. It's my dedication to design and if this is what I'm about and why should I share it. So that has inhibited me from building a structure such as some of the other offices [have], or an office that will sustain itself after I'm gone. And that doesn't necessarily bother me. But the people I've brought in, each one has brought a certain quality to the office and each one has eventually gone on, on their own.

Another person who came in, whose last name I cannot remember. While we were working on Riis was a young Japanese boy called Yoshi, and Yoshi did almost all of the drawings and sketches. He would take these ideas and he would run with them. The igloo I remember in particular, the big stone igloo. Yoshi drew the igloo and he drew a little Japanese kid in it, and we all thought that was quite funny. So in Riis, it was just Jim, myself, Yoshi and maybe a few others, but nobody memorable. Later on as we got into urban design, I attracted a lot of architects to come work for me because of the fact that we were landscape architects working in cities, and had gotten involved more and more with urban design.

A man comes to the office, an older man, he was working at I.M. Pei's office. His name was Dean McClure, and an eccentric type, no children, lives in the Village, but he's very bright, extremely bright, and he comes to me and says, I'd really like to work for you because you do urban design and that's what I'm interested in. Dean worked, and I don't remember which projects, but Dean worked on a number of projects with me on urban designs. We came up with some interesting results. Again, I can think of only one that we did and it never went ahead. As an architect, he brought a quality to it that none of the other landscape-architecture-trained employees could do.

Michael [Cunningham] is very much the same. Michael is sort of a flamboyant individual who came, had a great deal of social poise, could draw like a bandit and sketch. Michael worked and we got along very well, and would have been a partner except Michael got an opportunity to go with Olympia York and got a much better job and came to me and reluctantly said I really think I should go, and I agreed, I didn't want to hold him back.

There's another one who worked who would have been an associate or whatever, Mike Yu, who was a Taiwanese architect, landscape architect. Mike's English was unintelligible. We couldn't send him



out with a client, and yet Mike worked, could draw, and in three minutes or less could have a whole presentation ready for you. He was offered an opportunity to go to Taiwan for two years to teach. He asked me if he could take a leave of absence and he's never come back. We've done work together in Taiwan. He's brought me over to work on projects.

Then there's Lee Weintraub. Lee, when I started the program at City, let's go back a second.

### **WORKING WITH HOLLY WHYTE**

Birnbaum: *I want to ask you sort of philosophy questions about people and plants, and maybe we could start with people, because one of the things I did want to ask you earlier, which we didn't touch upon, was Holly White.*

Holly and I got along very well.

Birnbaum: *There's this quote in Process Architecture, he stated the following about your work. The most attractive elements, of course, are the people. The movement and color they bring is the pure test of design. So I'm curious.*

This is where Holly and I coincide. I feel, and I mentioned to you before, that at Carver [Houses] we got the photographs and there weren't any people in them. I feel that people orchestrate the space, and it's not a space without people. Yes, it's OK to look at a space and say gee, that's beautiful. I think that's a step, but what gives it energy and dynamism when you see people moving through it. It's like blood in a vein. The space really is for people. One of the problems I have, I like Peter's work very much. One of the problems I have, it's almost all visual, there's not enough in it in terms of what it brings you together it's what you see, not what is done in it. It doesn't take you to a different place.

Holly and I, I'll give you an example. When we were doing Battery Park, the artist wanted this particular set of stonework that you would sit on. It was more visual, more abstract. So we decided, the client and I, as a strategy we'd bring Holly in, as I couldn't be the critic. Holly looked at it and gave the same critique that I would have [made], and the artist changed and it ended up as is and is fine. Holly's philosophy and mine, deal with the same issues. A wall is an obstruction and a ledge is a place to sit, in simplistic terms.

Birnbaum: *Would you say he was a hero or a mentor?*

*Oh very much so.*

Holly and I, he wasn't so much a mentor. Holly and I were two people who sympathized, who had similar ideals. We believed in what we each were doing. He was an advocate. I was a producer. I would produce what he would advocate, but not necessarily in sequence. It was that he would look



at the work and say, that's what I'm talking about, and it would be done. Most of it, as I said, it was intuitive, empirical [it] was educational. The education and the knowledge comes from analyzing where you've been. It's always looking back. Looking back informs where you're going.

## Expanding the Profession's Scope

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY COLLEGE LANDSCAPE PROGRAM

I think I mentioned some of this to you earlier today. The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) had a guilt complex about not having sufficient minorities, mainly blacks in the profession. This is at a time when everybody was soul-searching to see if they were politically correct. It was obvious that there were not enough minorities in our profession. There was Charles Fountain, I think, from one of the black colleges, was one of the few. I would go down and lecture at these schools, and finally the ASLA said we have to do something about it. They had a conference in Washington. I forget who sponsored it; [I guess] they did, plus some others. And after the conference, which came to no conclusion, they had a follow-up committee. I was asked, even though I didn't go to the conference, if I would chair the follow-up committee. It met in New York, and one of the leaders of this committee was Karl Linn.

The result of this meeting was that it was very clear why there weren't. First thing, it's a profession that is alien to most city people. Second, even if you did have a desire to become a landscape architect, there were no schools of landscape architecture at the undergraduate level in any major city: Boston, New York, Miami, San Francisco. So the ASLA came back to me and said, can you see about starting a school in New York? I went to Bernie Sprang who was the Dean of City College, and I said the society has asked me if I would investigate the possibility of a school, are you interested? He said, absolutely, but here's what we need to do. I have to get letters from the park commissioner, from the housing commissioner, two or three others, asking for funds to start the school and to indicate why. City College's basic mission, by the way, initially when it started, was to supply staff for the New York City agencies. That was the initial responsibility or mission. So it was easy enough to say we need landscape architects. We have a large parks department. We have Housing and Urban Development [HUD]. We have all these different agencies. It was no problem at all, politically, to get it going. Bernie then says to me, look I'd like you to teach. I said, I can't, I have a practice. He said, we'd like you to run the program, not teach. I said, I can't, I have a practice. They said, I will work it so that you have two days a week, that's all you're really required; anyway you want to spend those two days. I can do that. It was an intriguing challenge, and I did it.

Now the problem was how you do recruit in a city where nobody knows what you are talking about? The high schools, they didn't understand what landscape architecture is. So initial recruitment was within the school itself. We worked it out that the first two years everybody takes the same courses. The second two years, the landscape architecture students take the same architectural history



course, except we have one of our faculty members teach a landscape component within the total, so that the architects get landscape history as well. It all seemed to work out fairly well, but now you had to convince students in City College that they should also go into landscape.

As a matter of fact, instead of attracting minorities, black and Hispanic minorities, we attracted second-degree women who wanted a profession in landscape architecture but didn't want to leave the city. Signe Nielsen being one [and another was] Charlotte Friese.

City College produced a number of students who owned their own offices. Mark, I don't think Mark Morrison was one, but I'm trying to think who else, but there was a number of them who went into the profession. I still feel that the problem is that most minorities would not want to go into landscape architecture if they have other opportunities. Architecture, for one, it's the same nickel that you pay. They would have to have some compelling reason to do it, and we don't provide enough incentive in our profession. The visibility in this area is not high enough. There isn't enough understanding of what this profession is about, that we can compel a person, a minority person, a black person, to come into the profession, especially in New York when you have, as I said, City College teaching, when teachers get more money in the profession of teaching than a starting landscape architect. So it's an uphill fight.

Birnbaum: *How did you build a faculty? Where did the faculty come from?*

The faculty, we never allowed more than one fulltime faculty until recently, so it was adjunct. That was one of the beautiful parts of this program is I could draw from who was here. So I could go to a person like Nick Quennell and say, Nick would you teach. Michael Cunningham, would you teach? These were adjuncts, and they would teach a design course. Also we set up another program where students were required to spend at least four hours a week in an office, and the office was not to ask them to do their work, but to oversee the student's work, so there was a connection to the real world. That worked for a while. One of the difficulties also, a lot of City College students have to work, so [it was a] conflict. That's City College. After twenty years, I decided I didn't want to teach skills anymore, I was fighting for a graduate program. They finally got one, but I wanted it to be a graduate and undergraduate. Now I understand it's only going to be a graduate program, and that means it will attract people with undergraduate degrees, and that will probably help the enrollment but it will not fulfill the initial mission of getting more minorities into the profession. And maybe that's not our job anyway, you know?

When you look at it, what is our responsibility? If someone wants to be a doctor, they can be a doctor. Does the profession of medicine say, no you have to have X-percentage of Asian, black, whatever in the field of medicine? I don't think so. I think you gravitate to what you want, and in this case if we don't provide enough cache as a profession, if we don't create enough incentive, then the profession gets what it deserves in a way, or who wants, who has enough interest in it to pursue it. This is my view.



Birnbaum: *And I would say I probably [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE]. I think that it's changed a lot. The salary surveys that have been done, landscape architects are making more money now than architects out of college, significantly more. And there's not enough.*

There are not enough landscape architects?

Birnbaum: *That's right. There's going to be a shortage of landscape architects. Frankly, it's different today, but still people don't know it exists.*

That's what I'm saying.

Birnbaum: *Right. I mean, after the Brady Bunch a lot of kids became architects because of Mr. Brady. I think part of it is it's not mainstream enough to know that it's visible.*

That's what I'm saying, too. We are anonymous. In the minority communities we are anonymous. People say I need a building, I can see a building. And also when you say architect, it gives me a certain cache. You say landscape architect; you know what you're saying? What are you doing in the city? I'm serious. Do you do window boxes? Do you do terraces? I started that way, it still goes on that way. And selling the profession, I think it's what you do to sell the profession, and until we can get to the point that what we do has significant visibility and excitement, it's not going to resonate.

Birnbaum: *I remember when I came into your office in the early '80s, in 1981, and meeting all of these people that had gone through the program, these young folks. I'm just kind of curious, what was that like? Because these were all kids from the city, and it was a real melting pot of an office in the early '80s. I was 23, 22, and these kids were maybe 23 to 26, 27. I remember Kyriacos Pierides.*

He's still there.

Birnbaum: *I just remember all of these folks, and they all went through the program. What did that feel like, to have these kids that came to the City College program, and they're working in the office? I think about the Olmsteds basically hiring people and sending people to Europe for two years to teach them how to see and chronicle that. I guess what I want to do is, moving away from the kind of pessimism of the situation, I mean to me this was ---.*

That's not pessimistic, by the way I don't want to sound pessimistic, not at all. All I'm saying is that I think it's just like water seeking its own level.

Birnbaum: *Well I guess then let me back up and say, the office that I witnessed at that time, was it a successful experiment?*

Having the students there?



Birnbaum: *These people that went through the program, that came from all different backgrounds and very different cultures. To me, it was unlike any office I had been in.*

Right, because it came from New York City also. It didn't recruit people from Wisconsin and --

Birnbaum: *Right, they were the people through the program, so here you are. You had this City College program that you got to shape, within the budgetary restrictions that you were dealt. And then you had this office, and then they converged, the people that came through there that you taught how to practice. Was that a successful experiment is what I'm asking.*

It's not so easy to say yes or no. It's mixed. It produced a lot of professionals, the City College. The quality of the professionals never reached the heights I would have liked it to. I could never teach, Lee was one, Lee was one of the exceptional students in terms of design. There were very few. I'm a designer. I can teach anyone to develop a skill. I can never teach anyone to come up with an idea. The problem with City was, in order to keep the program going, and that was one of its major missions was to have the program, in order to keep it going you had to make incredible compromises. And I would love, would have loved, to have had a design studio where you could pick, let's assume you say all of the schools of landscape architecture send us one or two of your best designers and we will create, as they do in certain schools, a special class for design. It never happened. That's why I wanted a graduate program, so we could look more deeply into the issues that really are essential to this profession. We don't have, that's why this foundation is so disappointing. One of the reasons we have no visibility is because we're not making ourselves relevant. We are relevant, clearly. Urban Land Institute [ULI] did an experiment a study, and they concluded that in office buildings they rent faster and at a higher rate if it was well landscaped. Well landscaped, it's a question of what does that mean, but still they're saying that there's a value in what you do. Armed with this propaganda why don't we do a mass communication?

This gets back to where you and I keep coming back to. There needs to be some form of incentive, you're not going to find somebody who will adopt the space and take an interest in it, or you're not going to find somebody who will find a need to do it out of personal purpose or an economic need. It's all about incentive. You know the story of the garbage in the park? There's a park, so the guy puts a sign up, lots of garbage around, please throw your litter in the wastebasket. Nothing, almost no result at all. Then he puts in twice as many wastepaper baskets. That helps a little. Then he puts down a dollar for every container of waste, and the park is immaculate.

And I think this is true. Our nature is we need incentives. We're a capitalist society. We don't work on the basis of the good of the community. You do. I don't know what's wrong with you [UNINTELLIGIBLE], but it is not common, it is not common. People need incentives. You see it all the time. So here we are, even in our profession. What is the incentive to be a landscape architect? You say higher pay. If you put that up in the papers, say in the Amsterdam News or something like that, that landscape architects get more money than, sure you'll get people looking into the profession.



Are they the people you want? Not necessarily, because you want people who are dedicated. I mean there's a paradox in this, too, right? I think when the profession gains sufficient cache, we'll get all kinds of people wanting to go into it and it will fulfill itself. The fact that there's a shortage, you know, doesn't mean we're going to get good people. That's the real problem. That's why you ask me about City College. That's why it didn't totally fulfill its expectations. We couldn't get enough committed good people. We got lots of people who were nice, decent, what's the right word, serious. But they didn't know how to drive a pencil to get something good out of it.

To me after beating my head for 20 years, I said, that's enough. I want to practice and not spend the time doing menial work floors and windows. Even in the office, looking for good people with talent and dedication was difficult, hard, it's very hard. But I could give it to a guy like [Dean] McClure I would say here, this is what I think, take it and either make it better or sell it. And he was very good as a front man, and also as a person with a philosophy. I needed that. That's really what I built more than anything. McClure and Jim [Balsley], except Jim was a designer. You had Michael [Cunningham]. These people who could take my ideas, and run with them. It's a different kind of office with drawbacks.

#### **DEFINING LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**

*Birnbaum: To some extent you've answered my next question already but I'm going to come back. We have these two questions that we're asking everybody. How do you define what a landscape architect is and does? --*

*But I'm just wondering if there's anything else you want to say about that?*

I think one of the things tomorrow should deal with is just exactly what that makes or defines us individually and as a profession. You cannot imbue or teach the passion that some of us have for this occupation, this profession, this way of living your life. I do think it's very clear to me it's not a nine to five. You don't walk in and say now I'm a landscape architect, I'm going to go home and play golf. Your mind, once you accept this, whatever age you do, your mind is constantly preoccupied. You look at a room and redesign it in your mind while you're constantly taking in information and you're storing it. It's not conscious but it's subconscious. And the fact that I could get up in the morning at whatever hour and can't wait to get, now it's the computer, can't wait to get to the computer.

So to confront the blank screen with or without the beginning of an idea and then the joy of reaching, reaching and finally touching something, a response to and within yourself. And it's a game you play with yourself. You almost don't care, you want the client to like it, yes, but it almost doesn't matter if you feel you've achieved what you want, you're constantly striving. It's like an appetite you can't satisfy. So to me I think, what is a landscape architect? I think it's somebody who



has this passion, in this case solving three dimensional problems and creating experience using space and elements that are common to the space. Discovering new relationships—that's us.

Birnbaum: *To that end you've triggered something that I found myself, was thinking about in Norman Newton's book [Design on the Land]. And you know, the last chapter he's sort of looking ahead, I mean people are still using his textbook from, I think it was '71 when it was first published, and he basically refers to Riis, and [Bob] Zion's vest pocket park and Paley Park and he puts it in the context of Olmsted and Vaux and basically says that this is the future of the profession. These are the heirs for the next generation of dealing with urban landscapes. Are we at the point where we're passing the baton?*

That's a good question. What I represent is history, 50 years, the last 50 years. Those are seminal years, those are extremely important years. Things have changed dramatically in those years and that's what I don't think most people understand. Because you look at the past in relation to the present and there was no present at the time that these were done. You didn't know the geometries, the vocabulary, the values of the places you worked, little existed before you as models to rely on. We've set the stage at a point now where we've explored a lot and we still haven't perfected. The opportunities that are coming up, at least in my town, or maybe even in Korea, where I'm working or global. We're trying to make useable urban spaces in places with no tradition and with tools that we've never tried before.

Everything we did at the time was based on empirical innovations as there was no precedent. Now you've got some degree of precedent, where do you carry it? This is something I'm curious about. Do you repeat it? Is this the end? Where can we go with this? We're talking about roofs now, like green roofs. Are we really talking about green roofs, taking the same tower and sticking a couple of plants on the roof? That's something I would like to deal with tomorrow with you. I started to write an article about how frustrated I am on this new fad that the profession is embracing. A building has four walls and a roof and all contribute to the same issue.--

Four walls that are obviously much bigger than the roof, right? The roof is a little patch, right? But we all feel as if we've reached heaven. A sanctimonious achieved a vindication of our mutilation of the environment by putting a few plants on the roof. What about the rest of the building? What about the streets, parking lots, garage roofs? I don't wish to demean the effort—but is too small for a dignified profession and should be nothing more than a fragment of a larger issue.

#### **WHAT IS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE?**

Birnbaum: *I've got a few more. The next one is a question we ask everybody. What is a cultural landscape to you? Because we are of course the Cultural Landscape Foundation so we like people to sort of answer that.*



{Laughter} To be humorous, the cultural landscape is you. I don't mean that as a joke. You are a force in and of yourself. I think landscapes that define our culture are important. [They] should be preserved as we do objects of art and buildings that are important. I think that we want to be able to use those not just to study but to enjoy and let people enjoy. You go to a villa in France and you walk through a garden of Le Notre, you experience another way of expressing a culture. You can enjoy it without having to be [from] that culture. You can also see the monumentality of its time, and the importance of it, the power of the aristocracy. So, I think that there is something that we gain by going back to a castle as well as a landscape. However, not everything is cultural. I must tell you, honestly, I don't remember Halprin's project in Denver [Skyline Park]. But I do remember it wasn't very successful, although I think his [Ira Keller] fore-court fountain [in Portland, Oregon] is beautiful, and some of the other works of his, but I don't think everything that I do should be preserved. I think Riis should have been because it did have meaning as a way for space to be used. So, I think cultural landscapes are landscapes that are products of a particular time and place that inform the present and add to the future. More than that, I don't know.

Birnbaum: *Well, to that end, though, if Riis has been lost, are there landscapes that you think are representative of these philosophies that we've talked about today that continue to serve in vital --*

I think Paley Park is certainly one. Paley Park is definitely one.

Birnbaum: *No, but I'm talking about your own career now.*

Oh, my own at this point? I'm sorry to say Honeywell which may be gone- would have been a good one. I think Pershing should be preserved. I think the building should come down and be rebuilt properly. I think that's a very important space. I think the fact that the ice skating is not overly successful doesn't mean we shouldn't keep it. I don't know. There are not too many that, only a few that are representative, maybe five, I would say. I'd have to go back and think of others, almost every one that I can think of has somehow been altered or destroyed in the course of time.

Birnbaum: *And what are your thoughts about right outside the window here?*

That one should be preserved, too. I agree, yeah, I think so.

Birnbaum: *But it seems that it hasn't really changed significantly, and they both seem to be at a crossroads. And, I think because we're [in] Minneapolis we should talk about them obviously in more detail tomorrow. But, also this whole issue of maintenance of public-private partnerships, do you think that that might be the way to bring that into the conversation?*

I think the responsibility should be given to the concert hall, and they should be endowed with a maintenance fee; take it away from them. Agencies that can't seem to respect or don't seem to respect the public domain should not have this responsibility, I agree with you.



Birnbaum: *I mean, one of the things I found myself thinking about is let's hypothetically say, we've mentioned Charlene Roise earlier. She's been working on a National Register [of Historic Places] nomination. The state, I think, would also entertain that. Imagine if it was designated in a way that we have a tariff that we pay when we go to the theater in New York City, there is a dollar on each ticket that goes to a restoration fund.*

I'm 100% in agreement with you. Your suggestion may or may not work but the important issue is to get it out of the hands of bureaucrats who don't have a vested interest, if you don't have any accountability or limited accountability, then identity is wasted. That's it.

### **CONTRIBUTING TO THE PROFESSION?**

Birnbaum: *Last question today. If you could sum up your career and the contributions you made to the profession, what would you say?*

Well, the one thing I'd like to say is that, and I'm not alone in this but I'm one of the few who accepts/accepted the city as a viable place to work, and to enjoy the diversity and the places that are created for people to come together, understand each other, through the joy of sharing. If there's anything, it's that. It's enjoying the city, removing the landscape architecture bias of the past the preconceived notion that the city is a hostile place. And, to me the city is where we are, the salvation. If you're going to preserve the larger landscape, the city is the only way. Density is the only way. That's it.

Birnbaum: *That's Holly White isn't it?*

Yeah. {Laughter} Holly [is] my friend.

### **LEARNING FROM OPPORTUNITIES: THE AMERICAN ACADEMY AND THE ASPEN INSTITUTE**

Birnbaum: *I know that you were a resident at the American Academy in 1981. What was that like?*

That was beautiful.

Birnbaum: *How long were you there for?*

Two months. I went to one museum the entire two months. I walked every street in Rome. Every day I felt Rome was my museum. As a resident, Adele Chatfield Taylor was there at the same time. As a resident we were provided with two experiences that stayed with me. One was a zeppelin, the Goodyear zeppelin that floated over the city of Rome slowly looking down at all these piazzas. It was unbelievable. We couldn't take pictures because the Italians thought we might be security risks. Stupid but we couldn't take pictures. The other was as Nippon [Television Network Corporation] was redoing the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel we were allowed to climb the scaffolding and get that



close to Michelangelo's paintings. Walking up we saw Botticelli's work, what's her name, the girl in the shell?

I thought that was wonderful. It was an incredible experience. I was with a woman at the time. My first wife had died in August of that year. No, it was the year before.

In total it's was quite an experience. The interesting part of the academy is the people you meet. I was a trustee for a while and we would question whether it was archaic? And I think the notion of bringing people together in this community, there in Rome was worth it..

I think the conference in Aspen was another; I was on the Board of Aspen. Bringing people together, in exotic places like Rome and Aspen is stimulating and exciting, [and] is equally important as school. I don't think it matters what you do, is what we all concluded. You know, you have to go there with an agenda, and the interesting part of it is that you never fulfill your agenda, right?

## Understanding Play

### PLAY - THE GENERATIVE SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

One of the discoveries the areas I became aware of through the work, and also by raising children, was play. It about was the manner in which we deal with behavior, human behavior tending to segregate our activities. That now we sleep, now we do this, now we do that. And we have certain predetermined behavioral patterns that we ascribe to certain activities. I think it's antithetical to who we are as an animal or as a society. The reason I bring it up that way is because children, my own children I would tend to say now you can go and play, as if that activity is relegated to the time I allocate to them to do it. Whereas in the course of time I began to watch the way they play. Learning and awareness was a matter of observation more than anything else and then some investigation into research, also contact with people who deal with developmental psychology-- who talk about play as one of the most important developmental periods of the child's life. During this period through play they will learn more than they will the rest of their life.

The easiest aspect of play for us to understand is physical, the expenditure of physical energy. So we tend to design playgrounds, you climb, jump, swing and all that. It's harder for us to think in terms of socialization, cooperation, things of that nature. I suspect it's because we don't have the mechanisms to go beyond simple solutions and real understanding.

Now what is troublesome is [that] they're supposed to grow out of this activity-play. You can see our attitude towards play as you look at the nature of the playground. In the history of the playground, you see that play elements were machines, initially developed as machines from the industrial age. Temporary playgrounds were added to Central Park and then they would take them out.



Playgrounds were mechanisms to indoctrinate the child into the industrial age where they would eventually encounter the machine as the means to make a living.

Well, without going too far as that's an entire subject, simply put, I think what we do is we tend to destroy the creative side of human nature. And in play is where we are most creative. And if we could establish that this is not a wasteful exercise. It is not a custodial period in life when you are waiting to get to somewhere else, but it is part of an ongoing process, and the only thing that changes is the nature in which you play. And therefore the idea of looking at a playground design, we should really be looking at the nature of play and then designing to the nature of play. Yes, you can compartmentalize it and compact it into an area. And that isn't in and of itself wrong. What's wrong is to say that play doesn't or shouldn't leave the playground. When you leave the playground, you leave that activity. And I think I mentioned before, there are people whose whole life is dedicated to play and those are the people we call artists.

### **FACILITATING PLAY**

I love the story, I don't know if you've ever heard of *Frederick the Mouse* by Leo Lionni. You know this story? Well, everybody should know this story. Lionni is a brilliant man. He's was art director. And he retired and went to Italy and wrote children's books. In this book that he presented at the Aspen Conference on Design. I remember thinking “oh sugar, we're going to have to hear about a children's book”? It turned out to be a most profound book. Frederick was a mouse. Everyone thought was Fredrick was lazy because he would lie around and look at the sun while everybody was gathering corn. And when everybody was gathering grains later for the wintertime, Frederick would be looking at the flowers and smelling the flowers. And they said Frederick, you're going to starve. And Frederick would just ignore what they said and go on. Anyway, winter did come and everybody is hold up in their little warrens. And they come to Frederick and they said Frederick, tell us about the sun. And Frederick tells them about the sun. And he creates sunshine in the tunnel. Tell us about the flower and the smells. And he created color through his stories about the flower. Frederick was the poet. And that's, why, to me, Frederick is an essential part of our culture.

And the idea that initially we think of think of him as being wasteful is the perversity of our culture. No significant culture in the world that we remember is without its own art. So therefore I think the notion of people being able to play, whether it's as a surrogate or whether it's through doing it itself, I think it is essential. In our work, we have to be able to find the outlet in which people can do this. I think from a cultural standpoint, we have to look at our free activities as being much more rewarding. We as landscape architects have a professional obligation to find/create the places where this can occur. The search is a never ending process. Like my garden—a product of ongoing circumstances. I put some flowers here. I look out and I say if it doesn't look like its right, and I change it. And then I have to put in a barn because of a tractor that I own, and because of the [Department of Environmental Protection] DEP or one of the other agencies, I can't just locate it



there, as there are wetlands, I have to put it in this orientation. This orientation triggers off something else. And as I go, I find myself changing my environment in a way that it is growing as I'm growing. I have a tree, a willow tree I planted when I was building a house in '60. Now it's forty years later, I am growing along with this willow tree. So we have this environment that's growing in tandem, it's changing, I'm changing. And there's a wonderful relationship to it. And working on a garden, I say working, is a form of play. And the process of design is one of ongoing accommodation and revision facilitating new opportunities. And so work as we define it and play becomes one. As Confucius has said if you enjoy your work you will never work a day in your life.

One form of facilitation is interaction-interacting with each other physically, socially and philosophically. I believe we create spaces in which people are not only allowed but are encouraged to come together in different ways. Sometimes you can come together and be on the side and just watch. And sometimes it's just a matter of passing each other. Yet another particular role and a more difficult one is to include levels of content in the design so that a subtle level of information is communicated to those who encounter it. For instance, there's this project in Phoenix, along the Arizona canal, in which we designed five rooms. In one is a disk with stone tiles in it. It has a quality, a visual decorative quality. But if you stand on the platform you can tell time. Your shadow designates the time of day. It is a sundial that can provide information or not. It's an incident in the landscape.

The next incident is a water table that is a map of an ancient canal system. Water comes out in carved grooves that represent historic time. It's a replica of the canal system of the Indians. Or it's just a table you can sit, or it's a way of measuring time through evaporation. And then you move on to the next one, not necessarily sequentially. The idea is that information can be layered in the landscape and is a vehicle to expand the palette giving it an intellectual overlay. Other tool used by the artist is ambiguity, contradiction and even conflict. The idea that we tend to think of a landscape as flowers and trees and lawn is archaic. Much of our work is a process of communication.

But that is play. You see, the nature of play there's a continuum.

Birnbaum: *No, I understand.*

And there's a linkage. I'm trying to think of how to say this. The easiest aspect of play for us to understand is physical, the expenditure of physical energy. So we tend to design playgrounds, you climb, jump, swing and all that. It's harder for us to think in terms of socialization, cooperation, things of that nature. I suspect it's because we don't have the mechanisms to go beyond simple solutions and real understanding. A lot of this approach requires supervision and maintenance which we don't have the ability to provide. I don't know how far to take this, honestly. I can expand on it, but in this forum only in a limited fashion.



## HOW TIMBERFORM DESIGN PLAY DEVELOPED

Birnbaum: *Tell me a bit about the design process. I mean, how did something like this happen?*

I'll tell you, this all comes from Leffert's

Street playground in BedSty[Bedford-Stuyvesant] where I employed pieces of timber because I had to solve a problem. I became enamored by the use of dimensional wood. Then I used it at Riis and it worked, then I had a vested interest in it. The fabricator would do whatever I wanted them to do. And, the irony of all this, when the fabricator said do you think it'll sell? I said I don't know. Luckily he had a graphic designer on staff, unusual for a wood treating company. That's what they did. They treated fir. They bought the fir. I don't even think they milled it. They fabricated and treated it. It came to them in blocks. The graphic designer turned out to be extremely creative, and he almost singlehandedly created Timberform. The first Timberform sales were little models that I had made sitting in the children's playroom in my house, gluing together little pieces of walnut that I had milled in the shop downstairs. They were a quarter inch to a foot, maybe half inch models of playgrounds. And, I would glue them together. And, I sent them out to Oregon. This guy took the photograph and made tear sheets.

That was the first selling of Timberform. Then it became a catalog. The idea of using sculptural forms for the play environment was interesting to me, this notion of play and sculpture, in the '60s it was novel. All the sculptors were into designing play pieces because some kids were climbing on a Calder [Alexander Calder]. So, they assumed that the artist really knows about kids.

However, you could never really play on this stuff. It was sculpture. Sometimes you had access to it, but the real idea was to create a play piece that was sculptural as opposed to a sculpture that was a play piece. And, it was the reverse, and it works. And, the magazine picked up on this as well. And, from there on, it became; Timberform until it became too expensive. They became so expensive. The wood became in such demand or whatever that it lost its clientele.

Birnbaum: *What about liability?*

No, liability was never a problem, strangely enough.

Oh yeah. These are all done in model form.

Birnbaum: *And who did those - Do you remember?*

Me.

Birnbaum: *You did them?*



Yeah.

That's where I had my fun. Everything here, it wasn't that I didn't have help because I did, but everything here was designed initially by me. Then it was picked up, and there was a lot of back and forth. I was always criticized by the office because I was constantly making changes and so, my associates complained about the loss of their share of the profit.

## The Elements of Design

### ON WORKING WITH PLANT MATERIAL

*Birnbaum: Let's talk a little bit about plant materials. Because there's clearly been this evolution in terms of your own psychology of plants from your early days and one of the things that's interesting to me, unlike other people of the same time frame who you can sort of often put in a box and say oh, yes, I mean you know, Kiley used XY and Z and Tommy Church used XY and Z and you do see that. I mean what does a Paul Friedberg plant palette look like?*

It depends on what country you're talking about.

*Birnbaum: Let's start here and sort of these kind of climate zones.*

I like plant material. That's the difference. That's what I've evolved. I used to think plants were annoying, now I like them very much. {Laughter} The only problem with plants is that really in most every case we unfortunately, unlike the architect, have to wait to see the results of our work and it evolves. It goes through the stages. You want when it's done to be ready to see and sometimes you can't, you don't have that luxury. And in ten or 15 years it's too big. Like a child it takes care and like a child some of them are brought up badly and that's one of the problems with plant materials. It's why you tend to want things to be more fixed.

[Lets] start out with a honey locust. You always start out with a honey locust because that is one of my favorite trees, by the way. I started out where I had, even though I knew a lot about plants because that was my background, I started out with a very simple plant palette because I really I thought plants were meant to be structural in the landscape. So trees were my trees, hedges, that type of thing.

*Birnbaum: So what were those things?*

It would be the honey locust, the plane tree, [Sycamore] and tilia [American Linden]. Very few maples. I had begun to like the plum, the purple plum, and cherries very much. I went from the [cherry] Quanson to the Yoshino. I am trying to think now, I love birch. I don't like informality in my plantings in general. Ground covers, again I go [with] junipers. I like grasses; I've become very fond



of grasses. And in Easthampton we have all kinds of grasses, as you can see. [And] rudbeckias in terms of the flowering plants.

Generally speaking I don't use a lot of flowering plants, although simple ones. Hawthorns- very much so. I used to like crabapples and hawthorns; they were also part of my palette. I think that was about it.

#### **ON DESIGNING WITH WATER - A FAVORITE MATERIAL**

Birnbaum: *Let's talk a little bit about water.*

Ah, now that's my favorite material. It is. I'm looking for new ways to explore the issue of water. I don't like these orchestrated fountains, you know, these dancing fountains. I think there's something artificial about it. However, I'm just proposing when I go back to a client that we do a fountain maze. A series of circles where you can change the maze, you know, every half hour the maze is a different maze. You know, that you enter it differently. Which I think would be fun. That would have to be orchestrated. But I think I've designed any one that really requires a computer because I think that there's something, again the maintenance. I like the idea that waterfalls. I like the idea of using water in terms of hydraulic characteristic, that it does things, it falls.

**I'm trying to think where we've used water. It's like in Israel we used it where it falls and people walk behind it. I love to use water, by the way, different ways. We used water in lower Manhattan and the idea there, what was interesting, is when we just had the disk at ground level and . . . it was like a mirror. It was beautiful. The canal was wonderful in Arizona [Arizona Canal Demonstration Project] because one of the reasons we decided not to do anything except these little rooms was that when you walked along the canal at 5:00 and the hills were turning purple, which they do, they were this purplish hue, the magic of that sunset, the magic like in the water, the purple reflected in the water and there was no wind so there was a passive mirror like quality, just had such an emotional impact on all of us. We said leave it. Instead of changing it let's just express what it is. And it turned out to be the right solution.**

Which brings us to another issue which you're not asking but the whole idea of community participation? It is such a mixed bag. This is, I think, a bill of goods we sell.

Birnbaum: *Can we come back to community participation in a minute because I just want to keep this thread.*

No, go ahead.

#### **ON DESIGNING STREET FURNITURE**



Birnbaum: *But we will come back to it. Because really what I'm doing is we're talking about your palette, if you will. And we've talked about people and then we talk about plants and water and I want to talk about sort of the furniture, how we furnish the place. And as a person who has really been very involved from the pre catalog movement to being a person who then worked and collaborated with manufacturing companies and copyrighted designs I mean can we talk a little bit about the whole sort of issue of furnishing the street and the plaza?*

Again, when I started, the catalog items were so banal and so limited that you really didn't have much in the way of choice. Now you're inundated with choice, too much so. And you could eliminate, I'd say, 75% of it and you wouldn't hurt one bit. We decided at that point, with Riis as a good example, that maybe we really have to think about designing our own. Maybe we also have to build in a lot of the activities that we want such as sitting, certainly lighting. In Riis we didn't. We used the old lollipop [fixtures]. It was a time when the lollipop was still fashionable. Then we went on and said geez, I'm bored, I'm bored. All of a sudden it's not one size fits all. And we found certainly manufacturers willing to. After we did one or two, I said, can we market it? We'd love for you to do it. And same with lightning. Sternberg at one point said can we market, I mean we came up with the idea, everything was round, [so] she said let's make it square. And we made a square, you know, cube light and they said can we market it?

The playgrounds are the things that really, generated all kinds of wood furniture. Then it became almost a direction that you took. I will now design furniture, whether I use it or not. Some of it was successful, some wasn't. I find that I use a lot less of the furniture I design now. I keep coming up with new or different [ideas]. Or it's just part of a [design] integrated into what we do. It's just like if it's a bench, it'll be part of something else, less and less free standing elements. A lot of the stuff we're doing now, I'm just thinking out loud, because I'm looking back, a lot of it is really trying to say that the furniture becomes an integral part of the design and it's not applied to the design. And so that the benches, that's where you would be sitting, the benches we would use would be abstract seating elements. They become a piece in themselves as part of this space. I like that idea more. It's only when you can't afford to do that.

In Battery Park we had Scott Burton. I don't know if you know Scott's work but he's all about furniture. Sculpture as furniture and furniture as sculpture. So we needed to do benches for this oval part and the client came to both of us and said [Cesar] Pelli and Siah [Armajoni] both said you and Scott [Burton] do the bench for this, for the oval. And so we got together and we came back with a bench that Scott and I had come up with, a single bench, and the client said, who was very good, by the way that's another good client, the Reichmans, they said fine, look, you know, enough, just get one off the shelf. Looks close enough to a teak bench, just get a teak bench.

So Scott and I said, everything else is designed for this, we can't [do that]. So then Scott and I sat down again and came up with this bench that has an arc. So if you did one bench it's only a half, so



you need two benches, and we both liked it. And Scott then also brought it, so each of us brought something to it, and that's how we managed to get our own literal piece of

furniture for this space that was not manufactured. Now we go back to something else, I truly like the idea that we, as designers should design elements for our own projects. Those elements, I think, also could be, and should be, where appropriate manufactured. And the playgrounds [where] I have designed [furniture] really brought me a certain amount of economic independence as a designer. I probably made more out of products that I've designed, passive income, because once you design it and if it sells, it sells, than I did through practicing. Every time you start a new project you have to start in the beginning again. And that's a problem because you have to come up with as good an idea, each time you come up with a good idea. With a product, if it's a good idea and somebody else is enjoying its fruit, a developer enjoys the fruit of a good building, right?

Anyway I like the idea of designing my own products. I think it's as hard to design a good product as it is to design a good project. In school I would say it takes as much energy to design a good chair as it does to do almost a whole thing. A good one, that is.

#### **WORKING WITH ARTISTS**

Birnbaum: *I think that's probably the last piece, [is talking] about working with artists. For example, when you look at Peavey and Loring I've always wondered, the fountain is that the work of a landscape architect or is that an artist? And the same with the piece right before you hit the Loring Greenway, the sort of timber form, sort of Louise Nevelson-esque kind of [sculpture].*

Yeah, all of that is ours, or mine. It started with a project we did for Spaulding & Sly in Washington, the client, that's Spaulding & Sly, said my wife is an art curator and she wants me to use an artist in this project. Fine, this is a speculative office building so we said fine. So he said now we want the artist to work with you. What? Anyway the artist came up with this idea, we didn't like it. We took her idea and transformed it to what we liked using a lot of her concepts and presented it to her. Then she came back and we worked and sat together and we finished it and it turned out to be interesting. It wasn't mind blowing but it was nice. On Battery Park the client, I forget his name but it doesn't matter.

Anyway he [tells] us-[Cesar] Pelli and me, that he wants us to work with artists. We said absolutely. No, [he said] we want artists to be an equal member of the team. We both resisted it. And then he said look, you don't understand, we're not asking you, we're telling you. And Pelli and I said fine, when do we start? So we had 26 days, we actually counted them, in which we got together in the beginning of the day and spent whatever it was, four to six to eight hours going over design possibilities- starting with a blank, and we finally came up with a design that we all liked over the course of that time. The experience was interesting.



This is something we can talk about as I think this is important, it isn't intimidating. It was for them, it was for the artist initially. It was very intimidating for them to work with designers. You know what? A designer says two lines have to meet like that, at right angles, and an artist says two lines never have to meet like that. Because the artist deals with issues that we're not familiar with, ambiguity, allusion. If it's answered then it's attacked. We say if it's not answered it's unfinished. So we have two different perceptions of the same issue, and when you bring these together it creates a new dynamic.

I work with Jackie Ferrara on many projects.

She makes a tower not like that; she makes a tower like this. One side's straight, one side's like that. But all of a sudden the tower is in motion and you begin now to understand what she is striving for tension.

So it was with Scott and Siah taking the railing and integrating a poet's letters in the railing. Taking the metal for instance, saying metal does this, so let's use metal and create a line of poetry. Working on a bench with Scott was another experience. If you respect them, and they respect you, two people with different sensibilities coming together to create a third. So it's neither this nor that, it's this. And that's fascinating. I worked with two different artists on this project in Atlanta. Jackie did paving through which she created structure and spatial organization; she then added an overlay [on the paving] that created another spatial interest or expression.

I've worked with Jody Pinto on columns [that] you saw in Syracuse, we took, I think it is six columns, we took six interesting events that happened to the city since its inception, when the city was founded, and we took those dates and those dates are reflected in the way the brick is wound by the different colors. And if you are able to decipher it one might be 1763, one might be 1840, and then you'd have to go back. But the idea is that it's a layering of information. Same thing with the work again with Jackie in Phoenix, where each one of those rooms it's a sun dial or a mosaic. I took the lead, so a lot of it's mine. The one in Alexandria, Virginia with the [Anne and Patrick] Porier is totally different. So each one brings to it, and with the Poriers I learned something too. I would work with them again in a minute; I would never work with them in the same way. If you look at that project the art is displayed. Their work should not be displayed. Because of the nature of it, it should be discovered. You should come across it. Our landscape should have been different, but we both learned that we needed another opportunity.

So I think I'll give you one last example, working with Buky Schwartz, he's an Israeli, I had this project, it's a residential project and I introduced three artists to the resident and he picked Buky and one other to work with. When Buky came over I told Buky, look, this is collaboration, you don't probably understand what collaboration is but let me explain. This is the site, you're the sculptor, we're going to work together where you're going to find a way of discovering the site and I'm going to help you discover the site, and you're going to help express that discovery. So he said great. Next



thing I know, Buky has an idea. Not the same day but, he shows me a chair, he shows me three sticks with something on them, he said you sit in the chair, you see these things. And there was the Long Island Sound behind you. I said Buky; you missed the point, that's exactly what we don't want to do. LOOK around you, look how many different experiences there are around you.

So I said let's take your chair, which is interesting, because that chair says if I sit here I'm oriented. I can just look at the chair by itself, could be interesting, but if I sit in it, again the chair doesn't move, I'm focused on something. I can move my head but if I don't, if I sit here long enough I'm focused this way usually. Not if I have two chairs. Now I have the ability to see from one chair, I go to the other chair and see something else. But two is a fixed number so we need at least three chairs because we want it to be uneven. So we went on and we decided on seven chairs. Then we went to the site, this is much later, [we] went to the site to see where the chairs would go. We decided no, we won't have seven; we [will] have five. And there is a folly that they have; a bridge that goes out, a suspension bridge, very much like the Roebling [bridge], that goes out into a pier. And we're up on a bluff that goes down 20 feet and then the water. So I said to Buky, we both came to the same conclusion, that's what we're going to look at. Five chairs in five different locations looking at the same object from five different locations. It's like there's so many views of Fuji by Hiroshige.

So what I'm saying you, it's an evolution. I wouldn't have come up with the chair; he wouldn't have come up with the way, using the site as a [catalyst], so it's the bringing of these two sensibilities together. Anyway I love working with artists, by the way. Any time I get a chance.

Birnbaum: *At the end I had some sort of broader questions. You mentioned earlier your first travels abroad and I know that if I'm not mistaken that happened during your first honeymoon.*

Yes.

Birnbaum: *And I was curious, and we just sort of glossed over Bomartzo and Lante -I'm just wondering if there was anything more you wanted to say about that experience.*

No, just that it brought everything that Conrad was telling me to life and I realized that there's beauty in these places that I saw but I didn't really perceive.

Birnbaum: *Did you travel with a sketch book then and do you do that at all?*

No. I sketch a lot but usually it has to do, with work. When I was younger I used to sketch a lot and take pictures. I divested myself of all 'stuff' and depend on my memory.

## **THOUGHTS ON MODERNISM**



Birnbaum: *A few things. First with, I want to go back to Conrad Hamerman, because in the past you've talked about him introducing you to modernism. And we haven't talked about that. You mentioned Burle Marx.*

It wasn't just modernism. It was the fact that engineering supported the art of landscape architecture. Engineering was a strut, a part of the foundation of this profession. And whereas the majority of landscape architects were at the time used as they knew how to grade and drain, and they also knew the Latin names of plants. But that was the fundamental reason for using a landscape architect. And Conrad was involved with Burle Marx and [Isamu] Noguchi as plying the art of landscape, neither one of which you would define as a modernist. At this time, who was doing modernist work? Maybe Kiley? If he was, it wasn't published. Church was designing gardens. Would you consider Church's gardens ---maybe he is a modernist.

Birnbaum: *Well, remember, as late as the 1930s you start to have the Museum of Modern Art [MOMA] shows on the West Coast looking at modernist --*

That would be Eckbo.

Birnbaum: *No, it's all the guys we just talked about.*

Church you consider modernist, huh?

Birnbaum: *Yeah.*

I guess you would.

Birnbaum: *I mean, the biomorphic forms, the breaking of --*

Right. Right.

Birnbaum: *-- axial symmetry. Absolutely.*

OK. I don't know if I agree I thought of modernism in terms of architecture, where the geometry is volumetric and the loss of decoration.

Birnbaum: *Well, one of the other terms that I'm coming across recently and Kiley described his first garden in the forties in Falls Church, Virginia as modernistic. And I'm curious if that was a word that you heard used then.*

I really think if you were to define the modern movement without looking for the specificity, it's the breaking away of the replication of the romantic natural forms. And that's really how I confront that the profession, the limp wrist style or syndrome. You take a piece of white paper and soft flowing forms would come out with sweeping lines. It was the denial that landscape architecture was only valid if it imitated or replicated nature or natural forms. And therefore the straight line was

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unnatural in nature. And when landscape architecture broke with this axiom and tried to use geometric and pure geometries that were clearly originated by man and or understandable, such as modern forms of architecture such as the rectangle, the square, the cone you have a shift into a different interpretation of landscape that we label modernistic.

## Process

### WHY MASTER PLANNING IS ESSENTIAL

Harlem River was successful, but has its limitations. It was at a time when we were testing ideas. Our project was supposed to be part of a continuous park system. The master plan shows it extending almost all the way up to the Riverside Park on the Hudson River. It ended [up] as an isolated incident, much less than we intended. This is one of the many difficulties in the practice of landscape architecture and projects that we've done in which the idea is truncated like the Harlem River [Project]. An unexecuted master plan with no infill completing the plan. It's just hard to execute the plan. There isn't a mechanism to assure that the master plan will be fulfilled.

Similar to [Harlem River is] a project in Santa Ana, which is sixty acres of land in sunny California, where the client imports us with the sole purpose of developing a master plan on the basis of open space. He wants an urban design, and he comes to the East Coast for a West Coast project because he knows our concerns and moreover he gives it to a landscape architect, since he wants it to be oriented to open space, which is a very progressive idea.

Birnbaum: *Wait, when is this, Paul? This is more recently, isn't it?*

No, this was actually; it goes back also quite a few years. This came, after the Harlem River.

Birnbaum: *OK.*

I can't think of any significant things that happened. We did a lot of other projects. We did Nielson in Chicago. This is interesting because we took a liability of the rainwater, and we said let's use that rather than thinking of it as a liability.

But those were just different projects, all of which have significance in and of themselves. Collectively they create a body of knowledge about new directions--what you might or might not do. But this notion of master planning, the landscape architect doing master planning, and not just an adjunct or an afterthought, it is an idea I like to advocate. One of our problems is that we arrive after the basic design is set and we're then asked to fill in places that have been created for us. It's certainly a way to keep the profession busy but not the way to assure the success of the larger environment.



And the difficulty, as I say, with any master plan is that in a dynamic economic environment; it's extremely difficult to assure that the end will be fulfilled. And therefore the decisions made on the initial part are dependent on the fulfillment of the total design and the project fails as you can't be assured that the design is going to be executed. Like on the Harlem River, you end up with just a truncated little park on the river. And there's no way for you to change that, you individually as a professional. I'm not sure how this could be addressed. All I know is that we should be at the very least involved in the master planning process and justify the direction of the design. In Santa Ana, the master plan for sixty acres was all based on open space. Everyone loved it. And the first phase started. It was relatively speaking successful. But then the economy changed. And the developer who was holding 40 acres of land that he's carrying says look, I've got to get rid of this. And I've got to get rid of it in the quickest and fastest way. And he wants to parcel and sell it and let each individual, regardless of the master plan, do what they want on the individual sites. And so the first phase looks nice and after that it's bastardized. This, as I say, this is a problem which has no immediate solution at this point, unless there is a mechanism in, you know, in the approval process that says if you can't guarantee the completion of the master plan, the plan must be bonded to assure the municipality that the master plan will be fulfilled. You have to have deep enough pockets if you're going to suggest that there is a larger plan here that you can carry out.

#### **PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS**

I'm trying to think of the other projects that we worked on where we did master planning of any consequence. One we are doing, which is interesting, and this leads is to the last part, I think we can conclude it, something that we'll talk about more tomorrow, is this whole idea of the public/private partnership. See, what makes Battery Park City work is that it had a vision, and the agency was able to hold out until, through difficult times, until they could fulfill the plan as originally conceived. It's also a plan based on open space, to a large extent. What you recognize in Battery Park is the World Financial Center and then all the open spaces that are attending to it. But what's also important about it, as with two or three other projects that we're working on, is that the private sector is brought in as a partner. The private sector does two things. It brings economic resources, and it brings a constant interest in the preservation of the space.

We don't have the mechanism right now in almost any one of our public facilities to really maintain new spaces. We can barely maintain the existing spaces. You really wonder if we assess the tenants related to the spaces they benefit from in terms of how valuable they are. If you drive down the West Side Highway, which is a tremendous opportunity lost to Manhattan for what was once West Way, a monumental change in the environment of New York. But if you drive down what now has become a boulevard, you see on the left-hand side one or two small parks that are at a junction of major streets, and these are left over spaces. And it's an insult; it's truly an insult to the residents of the city to think that these are supposed to be usable spaces. These are traffic islands. I don't know if you're familiar with what I'm talking about. These are traffic islands that are placed there because



they're just leftover spaces and they have no environmental, actually a bad environmental quality to them. And to think this is where you want people to congregate and enjoy themselves. The same thing with the river itself, the park and the river. Yes, it's heavily used because there's no alternative, but it's by no means an elevating experience for people who live in the city and on the river.

Birnbaum: *Are there elements, I mean granted many of these projects are covered in things like Process or the other monograph, but are there things that you'd like to bring to the record here, that get documented, about any of these projects in particular? When you talk about public/private partnerships, well I think about, for that matter, even what happened along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington during that period and how Pershing fits within that, because that was a pretty innovative program in its time. And also when you think about the kinds of landscape architects that were being employed at that moment, you have Kiley, you have Sasaki as an advisor. -*

What did Kiley do?

Birnbaum: *Kiley was the person that did the original master plan, with all the big --*

Skidmore, I thought, was --

Birnbaum: *Kiley was on that team.*

Oh, was he?

Birnbaum: *He was the landscape architect that designated on the inside of the cover of the report. Also I was told that those little square pavers that were also used here in the Loring Greenway, that sort of dark brown ceramic pavers?*

Yeah.

Birnbaum: *Well those are the same ones that were spec'd on Pennsylvania Avenue by Hideo Sasaki. So then you have Ben Shorey working with --*

OK, I'll give you the history of that.

#### **GETTING A GOOD PROJECT BUILT**

Birnbaum: *Well to that end, if we think about these people all being part of the client group. You mentioned Tommy Thompson. You mentioned earlier Mrs. Astor. In terms of this sort of coalescence of the client/patron vision, what were the projects that you think really, as you look back on a half century of work, where were those marriages the happiest? And for that matter, also, the other question I wanted to ask you, and you can take these in any order, is I also wanted to spotlight architecture experience. I mean were there particular architects that you felt were incredibly simpatico?*



There are a couple of paradoxes here. One is clients. Mrs. Astor didn't get involved with design. She just insisted that the, housing authority keep their hands off the design—we had total control. So as a client consultant relationship it was ideal. You know, there's a few other cases where we were given a lot of freedom. Ironically the worse the architect, the more freedom you have. The better the architect, the more difficult it is, for lots of reasons, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for not. At this point in time, I start out with the hope that the project will turn out as good as it can and I accept the changes. Until the design is set I really expect, it's not a resignation, it's just knowing the process and putting my energy not in disappointment but in making it as good as I can under the circumstances.

Circumstances have a great deal to do with any of these projects we work on, whether it be India, Israel or elsewhere- as I told you we're working on a project now that is virtually impossible to solve. That's in Korea. And it's caused by inheriting an impossible space, and my objective, I am trying to make it as good as I can under the circumstances that have been delivered to me. I would have loved to have started in the beginning and really said let's create the ideal situation. I don't think there is an ideal any more. I don't see and can you see, let me just ask you, can you see any projects in which you say gee, that is perfect or as close to perfect as you can get? I don't think there's any. As good as it is Battery Park is not perfect. It's very nice but it's not perfect. The buildings are dull, the architecture, yet I like it. The master plan is good, really it's about as good a piece of urban design as I've seen lately.

You know, I work in Israel, I'm working on a park in Israel, it's as good as they can do and I'm amazed that they went this far. So as a professional in an applied art, I say this is what we can accomplish. It sounds like resignation, it's not. Because I'll fight tooth and nail to get it as good as it can be done.

*Birnbaum: Sounds like Olmsted. Doesn't sound like resignation. I mean we talked about Devil in the White City. I mean isn't that the nature of practice?*

Exactly. As I said, Peavey, not Peavey, the Greenway. I'm sorry that they didn't respond. It would have been better. I'm also sorry too in looking back on my design and say geez, I wish I had this or that and its' because I change. See, this goes back again to the fact that you and preservation. I change. There's an Israeli architect, landscape architect, Yalom.

He died at 90 or 94, just died. And he was one of the first in Israel because way back, before the state, he came from a European background and the memorial [said] that he brought the green park to Israel. Over the course of his career he realized that it was a mistake, that Israel is a desert and there's something beautiful in and about the desert, and his job should have been to express the desert and [so he] looks back with a certain amount of, not disappointment but, I'm trying to get the right word. Looks back with sadness at the fact that he started something and promoted something that he can't support any more. And that if I had spent my energies in the right direction, we would



have created a landscape that was really very much an Israeli landscape instead of importing a European landscape.

I go to Tucson and I'm driving down the streets in Tucson and you see front yards with stones that are painted green. Why??

## Projects

### **PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE: PERSHING PARK AND FREEDOM PLAZA, WASHINGTON DC**

*Birnbaum: Tell us about building landscape in the nation's capital. I'm thinking about, I mean I remember being a student of landscape architecture when Anne Solay was there for the opening of Pershing, and it was [up]lifting as an experience to see all of these people, who were my heroes, building these landscapes in the nation's capital.*

All right, I'm in Alaska with Ben Thompson, on the capital city of Alaska, doing the competition. It never happened. We came in second, we should have come in first. We won the popular opinion, but we came in second because Ben aggravated the so-called powers that be, Mort Hopenfeld. I don't know if you know Mort. And I get a call after the interview on Pennsylvania Avenue to do the main space. What was that? I forget what you call it, the one that [Robert] Venturi did [Freedom Plaza].

OK, just the Plaza. It had no name at that time. I was told I'm selected, and Venturi is selected for Pershing, and [Richard] Serra is selected as the artist, the sculptor for the space. So we all meet in Washington, and I forget the guy's name, really a mindless administrator, says look guys, let's have some fun, all of you design everybody else's space, which is a license for disaster. So I feel very uncomfortable. I've got the Plaza, let me do the Plaza. So we all go away. Venturi has his eye on the Plaza. He's gotten Pershing as his commission and he's got it with a landscape architect.

*Birnbaum: George Patton.*

George Patton. Venturi, who is a very manipulative person, comes to the first meeting, we're only supposed to have sketches, with a finished model of the Plaza, sunken, commercial, and a map of Washington embossed into the paving. Well, it's an appealing idea, everybody agrees, and Venturi lobbies the board, who he has some contacts with, for the commission. Meanwhile, I feel I'm being undercut, and Serra, who is really following the rules, comes up with some ideas about tilting the Plaza, and he takes a sculptural approach, which I think is very interesting, not applicable but interesting. He's not a pleasant person either, by the way, but still his approach is decent. Then the next step is Venturi comes back again with the same design raised up, because they said we don't want it to be sunken. So he raises it up, but it's the same damned design. Then I am told that I



should work with Venturi on both of these. So I said I will meet with Venturi and we'll see if I want to do it.

So I do and I meet with him in New York. He comes to New York and we have lunch and we talk about it. I say, you know, I will work with you if we start from the beginning, if we discard what you've shown. He said, I don't want to do that. So I said, then I don't want to work with you. So then they had a competition. We'll have a competition and whoever wins the competition gets the plaza. The staff voted for my scheme, but the board voted for his, so we switched sites. That's what happened. Then Venturi raises his Plaza a number of feet. He's supposed to have little maquettes and two pylons. Serra hates the pylons, he's claims it is fascistic, like in Germany where they have the rallies,

Nuremberg. [He] goes to Nuremberg, takes pictures of Speer's work, shows it at the meeting, shows it and calls Venturi a fascist. Unfortunately, though, Serra shows what he wants to do and it's his tilted planes of steel that looks like an incinerator, there are seven planes. He's done some beautiful work. I love his work, but this was not his finest moment. It ends up where he is told to leave the project. I am given the Pershing, and Venturi ends up getting his project stripped of everything but the quotes, the little buildings which everyone thought would be too cute for words, and too kitsch. The Plaza, I think, is a disaster. It's a nowhere thing. The park turned out nicely. Nat Owings was a critic and Nat says, after it's designed, I want it to be an ice skating rink. Now by rights, the ice skating rink should have been at the Plaza. It would have been big enough. But Nat Owings has a great deal of power.

For an ice skating rink, you need a bathroom and other things like a place to change. So we have more built underground than we do above ground. We have a Zamboni room, so that's why the fountain looks the way it does, so you can drive into the fountain, and we have a nice glass pavilion. Then I forget, who was supposed to walk down the avenue, which president? There was a great deal of pressure to get the park finished. And the [Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation] PADC caved into the contractors' plea that they could not finish it in time unless they built the pavilion out of plastic. They built over our objections, out of plastic. It subsequently looks like it needs to be totally redone, and it should be. I have just seen it and the park needs help. I just drove by it. The water's not on, there seems to be a lot of problems with it, which is too bad.

One of the times, I visited the park I noticed that there were new of plantings, and at first I resented it. But then as I watched it over a period of time, the grasses and some of the other plantings were just so appropriate, and I began to realize my own deficiency in the way I approach planting, more as a staid structural element. And in studying Oehme van Sweden's approach, I really began to see that it changed the character, the use of grasses and some of the other materials, and *rudebeckia*'s, literally changed the character of the park.



Two things were happening, which I thought was quite beautiful. One is, I had developed the so-called permanent structural frame, the stone steps, and then as an overlay was this temporary changing environment that the grasses and the plants gave it. So you had permanence and impermanence working together. You need the frame for organization and for discipline, and yet the plants gave it sort of an ephemeral quality that was quite exciting and different. This experience changed my perception of how plants could and should be used. You see some of it in Arizona when we introduce grasses.

## **PEAVEY PLAZA, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA**

### ***Day one of the interview Paul talks about the Peavey Plaza project***

Anyway, I'm invited out for an interview, and I think this was the one that Dean [McClure] was with me on. And we are interviewed all about New York and safety and safety and safety. And at the end I'm told, a day or so later, and we're interviewed against Hodne Stageberg. Stageberg is still in practice. Hodne is off somewhere in a commune or something. He got really flaky. They wanted it desperately, and we got it. And the reason we got it is because I come from New York and I know about crime. This is honestly what I was told. Therefore, coming from New York gave me a certain amount of experience that I would know how to protect. This town? Crime? What are they talking about? Symphony hall was being built at that time, and there was a pit next to it because, what's his name, the architect --

Hugh [Hardy] had exposed the ground floor, the basement floor. And I am told if Ken Dayton will accept me, then I could be the landscape architect for the plaza, too. So I'm invited to Ken Dayton's house for supper, which I must say was an intimidating experience. So here I am. Ken Dayton was bigger than life. He's a short guy, but he owned Dayton's, was instrumental in getting IDC, really a very important person in this town. And whether I got this commission was dependent on whether Ken Dayton liked me. When it was all over I got it, obviously, but I'm still not convinced he liked me. Then I was asked by Tommy Thompson, who I felt was one of the most important clients I've ever worked with. Bright, understood what you were trying to get at, receptive, politically astute. He says, if you don't like the fact that it's and you want to level it, we'll be happy to level it and have the architect put a well around those windows. Obviously, given my philosophy, the idea of creating a bowl was appropriate. I said, no, no, no it's fine, leave it. I want the relationship between the street and the plaza itself. The reason for the plaza, by the way, was because Nicollet was for shopping and Nicollet was impacted by these events. They didn't want the people; they wanted them in a place they could congregate. The plaza was at the end of Nicollet and they were going to continue Nicollet.

The other caveat was the client didn't want it to be a hard, paved surface. If you make it grass, in my mind, if you make it grass, it's going to be impossible to maintain. And that's where the idea came from, making it a pool that could be easily drained. We carried that idea, that same notion, to

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Olympic Plaza in Calgary [Canada] as well. And it works beautifully in both cases. So when you want the space, the water just drains into a sump and its put back. The fountain keeps going. We don't call it a plaza. We call it a park plaza. It's bastardizing two traditional forms.

They really wanted it to be green. When it's green, it's green. And when they need a place for people to gather, shut off the feed into the plaza area, let the fountain keep, the water drains in and it becomes 70% paved. So that notion worked and works very well. We also felt that the plaza should have something to activate it more than just a fountain, and Thompson agreed. On the, I don't know which end, the entrances we had always left it unfinished. The notion was that we would make a connection. We actually had a plan, I have the drawing, a connection from the symphony into a room, a restaurant that would be at the plaza level. And you would step up to get enough headroom and you would have this restaurant with outdoor dining, facing the water, at the water level. Here's again the politics of design. Tommy Thompson was ready to fund it. He would build it out, raw space, and then lease it. The restaurateur, who was across the street, said, you know this story? Said, we don't want the city to get into competition with us. They were willing to let him have it, except they would have had to bid for it, and he killed it. So good design, even though this was a very healthy and serious and supported community, you get certain political factors that says the city shouldn't enter into private enterprise, which is a mistake. I said, look, a restaurant there would have been wonderful, even if it was a fast-food restaurant. A simple place would have been wonderful. Overlooking the water, it would have been very successful. It just never happened. There are a lot of missed opportunities in the course of time.

***It is the second day of the interview, Friday, October 6, 2006. The discussion of Peavey Plaza continues out on the plaza.***

OK, it's a week. I am called to New York and say, we have a disaster. What's wrong? The honey locust that came from Chicago had disease. So, I hop a plane, and fly out, and they show me, there's grease that's appears to be coming out of the tree. These trees all had lights that literally hung down from the trees like fruit. And, maybe it was an idea that technically needed more than we were able at the time to provide. So, they no longer are here, but these lights were hanging on these trees. And, I'm looking and I said, have you had a horticulturalist? Yes, the horticulturalist said that this is a disease that may take a year before the trees die, but it's going to die. And then, I'm looking. I'm looking. And then I finally look up, and there's a box, an electrical box, in the tree. And there's an electrician. I said, can I ask you, do you use grease? Yeah, we pack the boxes with grease. I said, what do you do if you get it on your hands? He said, we wipe it on the trunk. And, that was the end of the disease. You can see that. The honey locusts are still here, but it was truly a very dramatic moment. And, the humor is that the assumption and the reality are not the same.



But the reason we used honey locust is that they allow the light to penetrate to the lawn and allow the plants to grow. This is where the restaurant was supposed to be. This was supposed to be raised up. And, imagine if you're here, actually. Imagine if you had a restaurant facing the space, what a nice, urban amenity it would have been. But again, one of the owners who had a restaurant across the street said, you're going to impact my business. And, I couldn't find a reasonable compromise. It's sad. It talks about the selfishness and a lack of community. You asked me if I did any other projects since Grand Rapids. In Grand Rapids, you have a different scenario. They wanted a three block long pedestrian mall; two things were wrong. One is urban renewal in the '60s and '70s was supposed to rehabilitate cities. So, the concept employed was so simplistic was improve the deteriorated section, one that's rotten, and spend money to change its character dramatically. Then, what happens is the part that's reasonably healthy dies because all of the energy, now, goes to the new section. Instead of putting your money into the healthy part and reinforcing it, which would allow, it therefore, to resonate like a pebble in the water, improving adjacent areas. It's a complete reverse of a viable process and as a result, the reasonably healthy downtown of Grand Rapids died because of the new development.

Additionally the parking problems were not solved, which they did here in this city. Here the first thing they did was create garages downtown.

The merchants wanted three blocks of mall-no buses- they looked at Minneapolis, and concluded that they should have three blocks of full pedestrian mall. What you really want is a bus mall so that your 5,000 people that come downtown everyday will at least go past your stores. Oh no, we don't want those stinking busses. They didn't have those stinking busses. The mall failed, and it's the narrowness of your constituency that kills a lot of good planning.

*Birnbaum: I want to ask you a couple of questions. Let's talk a little bit about your philosophy of being seen, of being part of that, of the experience, if you will, of being in the city, the sort of genesis of this as a design typology for you.*

So much of this is empirical. You look and you watch what people are doing after the fact. You do something, the notion is to experiment. You do something. You make a move, and then you see the reaction to the move. There are things that I won't do again. I can't remember what they might be right this minute, but in this particular case, the whole notion of seeing the lower level. But what's so beautiful is how the depression sequesters the space. People walking around it can see down. Moreover, and allows the space to be safer as you can see into it. And, that wasn't a premeditated notion. It's something you saw after it was built.

It's what Herb Zube called post-construction evaluation. It's essential, but not just post construction evaluation of your projects, but of any projects. New York is a wonderful laboratory to watch people. Holly [Whyte] was good at that. He watched people; didn't do a thing. He was proactive in what you should do, not what he did. I pick up after that, and I do. I have to see what I did and what

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makes sense. The '60s were a time of guilty feelings. We weren't adequately addressing the public need. I don't know if you're aware of that period, but this is what they called a hair shirt period, when all the architects went up into Harlem and Bed-Sty[Bedford - Stuyvesant] and said we're here. Tell us what you want. We're here to sacrifice our souls, our practice, for your benefit. They said, who are you? What do you know about us? How come you're here? You're not black.

If Zube was here, he would say that post-evaluation is really your education process. All this philosophical stuff is interesting, but only if it's after it's done you review it to see if it works. So many axioms of the profession, proven false, so much of what we like and believe in doesn't work. So creating the bowl, and then coming back realizing that public open space is really a container, and I create the container. And people fill it with their activities. It's like any bowl that you would use within a kitchen or on a table. It the content. I provide the opportunity for the content. The pictures when I do show it, it shows a band, the orchestra. What do you relate to an orchestra: a stage. So, this is really the stage. That was the initial intent but the orchestra didn't cooperate. They won't practice outside; if they practiced everyday outside it would be wonderful. They said, no, we want the acoustics of the space. We want to hear. And, it's also probably a little inconvenient. But, they do it periodically, and that's nice. Can you imagine if they, even if they just put loud speakers out here when they were practicing?

But this relationship, it is the connections. The linkage you want. You have a shopping street. You need a place to relax. You need an event; this becomes a place to do an event. When it's freezing in the wintertime, it becomes an ice skating rink. And, they put up a temporary {kiosk}, at least I was told that they did, a place to serve cocoa.

*Birnbaum: One of the things I wanted to ask you about, as we talked this morning about the ability to engage the original landscape architect 20, 30, 40 years later, as we walked through this space and we see where there are the lost locust trees, we see the kind of plopping of new benches and receptacles that are not part of the original palette. There is rebuilding of walls with railroad ties, and other off-the-shelf pavers here. What is your message to people about, A, to collaborate with the original designer and possible to have them be part of the [changes]. What are your thoughts when you see these incremental changes to a landscape over time?*

Well, the answer to the specifics, you don't change the vocabulary arbitrarily. There's a sense of what is appropriate and what is not. Clearly, in an all-concrete period piece to put in block and railroad ties has been truly inconsistent, in a way, anachronistic. The interesting thing to me is that it's held up fairly well. So, the first level is, well, how do we just simply repair what is there? But more importantly: what's happened over a period of time that makes the space less usable? How can we enhance what was the original concept enriching it? So, it's therefore not a self-serving position. Should the plaza design be rethought totally? And maybe to revisit the idea of a structure in the park that could be used even temporarily, even if it was done for summers only as a pavilion.



But these walls and this corner, as you look at it, tends to encroach on the park, tends to truncate it, and it also tends to make it blocky even though we did it. But now you look at it and say, well, the parts that do work keep, because there are some very nice nooks and crannies. Some of the planting needs to be enhanced. The trees seem to be doing really well, need to be pruned a little, but that's all, seem to be doing fairly well. What amazes me is the paving. Considering what's happening in Nicollet, the paving is holding up very well.

Last night I had a conversation with one of the people who met me and took me here, he was saying that they had to spend about \$7 million just to re-point, or to take it up and use the same materials, and re-point it because they found that the under-mortar is also failing. Here there are areas that need some adjustment, as this is a harsh climate, and it's very difficult for any material or accessory . . . there's the lights they are hanging. See them? A few of them are left. It was another idea that never really worked out well enough. But, it was an idea. The lighting of the space was from these high masts, as we didn't want a lot of low lighting poles. Whether that's the best way to do it these days with the new technology is a question, and these canisters were originally stainless, with mirror-finished stainless steel. Well, the problem with that [is] the water has mineral content.

Birnbaum: *Tell me about how this design evolved.*

It was a '60s idea. Everything was new, we were trying [new] materials. They were to be sculptural. We didn't have the talent as sculptors, so these became our pass at sculpture. Looking at it now, it's really clearly a period piece. The ones on the corner were supposed to be seen looking down the mall and announce the plaza. That's why they were so high. And, they were to reflect the city. This idea of reflectivity is something that interests me. The problem is, it takes an enormous amount of maintenance to keep it. They were never yellow. They were supposed to be a pristine mirror finish steel. And, water was supposed to just ooze over the side. The water fountain obviously is [in] homage to Larry Halprin. And, it tends to work. Even now, it was our sense of an abstraction of nature as waterfall. But, the real importance of it to us was that it animates the space. When it's working, people sit around it; you can see the paths over there. And, water flows underneath it. I'm trying to remember how the handicapped get down, but there is a way which was important.

Birnbaum: *It's a question I've always wanted to ask you.*

It was considered. I'm trying to remember how we did it. Look at this, maintenance. There is the furniture, which has all been changed, these benches. And, this was the original here. They're telling you that those don't work and that we need more seating here. People don't want to sit on the steps, which was what our original idea was, and that would be something you would look to do.

***(They talk to a plaza visitor)***

Birnbaum: This is the original designer.



MAN: Oh really? Great. Are you serious?

Yeah.

MAN: What is your name?

Paul Friedberg.

MAN: I keep hearing rumors that Orchestra Hall wants to acquire and change it.

They should. Well, I don't know if they want to change it, but this is one of your --

MAN: Well, like [the] restaurant change.

What do you mean?

MAN: Like, put in a restaurant.

That's what they should do.

Interesting to hear that.

The original design had a restaurant here.

MAN: Oh, did it?

I'll just explain, the man across the street owned a restaurant and he fought it tooth and nail because he thought it would be competition. This is capitalism in action.

MAN: See, now they're looking at [the Guthrie with Stone River?], seeing what a great combo that is.

It's appropriate. It truly is appropriate. We had a design for a restaurant right in that corner.

MAN: I think it'd be great, yeah. I think so.

Imagine with the water.

The plaza would be much nicer. But, you'd be able to make an indoor/outdoor relationship, which could be nice.

MAN: Now, are you based in the Twin Cities?

New York, I came out many years ago. I can't remember when this was built.

MAN: So, what is this little project here?



They're filming me.

MAN: Well no, that's cool, but I mean for what purpose?

History. I'm an old man.

MAN: {Laughter} You're not that much older than me.

I think I got you by a few years.

MAN: Hey nice to meet you.

Same here.

But what is interesting is that these benches are telling you something. Whether you like the benches or not, they're not altogether that bad either. They're telling you something. Site elements tell you a lot of thing about the need or lack of, maintenance and public attitude, which is important. In this climate the junipers are quite appropriate. You find people sitting around here because of the water. And, this is where the water drains into here. But, you can also see the stakes as you go around: the form board, which is smooth, you have to decide, which you want it to be. This whole thing should have been sandblasted and it would have been monolithic. So if you came back you'd say, what would happen if we tested sandblasting and then tried to make it a little more coherent? That would, in fact, get rid of a lot of the materials that you see here.

But, the concept is what's really important, that you could use this space; you can see how if it was like this in the summer, it was like this all the time. But, it would not be anywhere as attractive as when you're filling [it] with water. And, what's nice about this climate is that because you can use block or brick, you don't have to put an under layer of freezing equipment. So, you get ice for nothing.

## **LORING PARK GREENWAY, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA**

***(It is day one of the interview and Paul reflects on Loring Park Greenway project)***

Now Loring, on the other hand, the Greenway was designed so that all the buildings would have entrances on the street side for vehicles, but all the buildings would have entrances onto the Loring itself so that people could walk up and down. To get to the Nicollet you'd go out of your back door, not your front door, and you'd walk up the Greenway. Not one architect put doors in the back onto the Greenway. Not one architect acknowledged the Greenway. But that's the nature of some designers. Once again, it goes back to who's teaching design? Who's teaching what's important? Because you're talking about connections and linkages. You have a public space. It's like almost like



having the lake. They don't see the Greenway as being that important. But if they had made a direct connection, every one of them made a direct connection between the Greenway and the buildings, it would have enlivened it. Meanwhile, it's only a link -the Greenway and Nicollet and Loring Park.

Birnbaum: *That's actually, when you talk about linkages, and I think about here you are, you've got Loring, the first parkland in the city. And then you have the Greenway. They you had Nicollet and Halprin, and then Peavey. To feel those connections, you began by talking about linkages this morning at breakfast. How often are there opportunities like that to really connect the dots, if you will?*

You always start out hoping for the best and wait until it gets screwed up. But it always starts out by having a lot of hope and wishes. Age has two sides-one of the disadvantages of age, aging, is that you're aging. The advantage is that you get perspective and you get a little humility. You have to expect a certain amount of disappointment in whatever you do. And what should satisfy you is how far you can achieve what you have and want, to what extent your vision is possible.

In the Anacostia project, we show a plan and then the marketing guy comes in who has to show that he's brilliant. Everybody has to show that they're brilliant, and they sometimes do it at the expense of good ideas for their own benefit.

***(It is the second day and the interview continues out on the Greenway)***

Birnbaum: *I think we should go over to Loring.*

I want to see that myself. That's one project I would design quite differently. This is one of the problems of concrete, though, and it's something you can't help. For all of the money they spent on granite, you don't relate to it that much. [Sound muffled] They were just so thrilled to get any developer who was willing to put money into it. And then, it got better. And then it became a little more independent. But look at how crappy, see, on Nicollet you've got dead wall. This shopping here should have been two stories of retail, come out; really use the space, yeah. But Halprin, also, his work doesn't look at all like the original mall.

Birnbaum: *Well, you know, when you start renovations you would say that it's got fair to poor condition, but it has a high integrity of a design. . . . It's the same deal. . . . [It] could have been 1978.*

Look at this. See, that's what I'm saying to you. Look how they [the buildings] backed up. This was supposed to be active. Wouldn't this be a nice place to sit if this moves you in? This has to do with the fact that there's a complete lack of understanding of what urban design is. This is all garage here. Well, garage is, OK, so you go back 30 feet, 40 feet in the garage. You take that space and you say, let's preserve, even if you don't have a [sound breaks] let's preserve the space. Even if you park in it temporarily until you're ready to use it.

Birnbaum: *But the irony is there's a park on top of that. I mean, you can see it from the hotel.*



Is it really a park?

Birnbaum: *So, this is also about public and private space, isn't it?*

Oh yeah, but what this also says is what's mine is mine and screw you. I don't care about you, right? And that's really a very common attitude; the tendency for a landscape architect is to look outside. The tendency for the architect is to look inside, you know? The site is internalized, and then you end up with a blank wall on the avenue, one of the most active and vibrant avenues in the cities, a blank wall.

Birnbaum: *Paul, before we move on, you talked about Larry a little bit, and we're all familiar with Larry. I want to get it by the water since that's what my question's about. But, I think about Larry's study of water movements, and the water colors, and I'm just kind of curious because as we go through this space there's going to be a number of different water features that have different sounds and different tactical experiences, and I'm just curious, the pyramid is a form that comes up but the way the pyramid is depicted changes.*

Well you asked me yesterday about water, and I said I don't orchestrate water. I just pump it up and let it come down. And, that's what you'll see in almost everything I've done. I saw it over here. Pump it up. There's no computer because once again, I think that public space, anything that requires even the least bit of maintenance can fail, can be ignored. And in this case here, you needed something to tell you something's happening. *[While looking at the pyramid at Loring Greenway]* It's just a marker. That's all it really is meant to be. Here's a space. You're invited in. So, the sound, but in this particular case it's less the sound, although I can hear it now, I would go back and say next time it should have sound. But, it's more the fact that the light on the water is something that is more intriguing to me. The whiteness of the water, the color of the water is more intriguing. And, the cobble or brick allows me to do that with almost no effort. The shape says I'm getting bored with one form, OK? I'd better look for some other forms.

Birnbaum: *I got to tell you, I miss seeing these pavers around these nice square pavers.*

You don't see them anymore; I know.

Birnbaum: *You don't. Why is that?*

I don't know. I really don't know. But here was an attempt to say we don't want walls. So, we try to use brick without walls. We took the brick and we slanted it. And, that was very successful. Here, we tried another; it's not quite as successful as you can see. This is what you learn on a technical --

Birnbaum: *Standpoint?*

Yeah, exactly. You have to find a better solution. Either you find a molded brick, or you don't use it that way. I guess at the time the changing of materials seemed appropriate but it's not, not if you

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look at it. And these lights, by the way, the mistake here, and I think it's an office mistake, if you notice the lights, these were supposed to glitter also. And it just has to do with the globe itself, what should have been a clear or a crystallized globe. Lights are important. They are the pylons that direct you in {*Sound muffled*}.

We did the original urban design here. We were brought in, I think I told you yesterday, because we are from New York and we know about vandalism. The original urban design [we had to do] studies of what do you do with the street.

That was, another sculpture we did {*Laughter*}. At that time we weren't working with sculptors. Somehow the client and everybody else felt the sculpture was too expensive. But look, there's absolutely no connection. Some of that's an afterthought on the part of the Hyatt. That wasn't our bridge there. That's their bridge.

It's nice for me to come back to this place. I haven't been back in years.

*Sound fades*

That's nice. But here are your honey locusts again, and your garbage can, which is our problem, as we didn't provide for them.

It could have been a really very important space. This really would be a nice place to walk also. Let's put some sculpture through here to address the city; if there was interrelationship between the institutions and the open space.

*[Paul comments on the age of the project]*

So, 30 years ago, 30 years ago. That's very good.

And I love this view here. It's so beautiful, I think. See, here's the case [to] come back and say that plant should be ground cover. Let's just have the grass in the center. Let's take out that form over there. Maybe we want these instead of [that], so maybe we really want ivy and something in the mounds here.

*Birnbaum: But when I see this I'd say, I've never seen anything like this before or after. I mean, the forms that you brought together and look at through your own lens, I mean --*

It's nice to hear.

*Birnbaum: But I mean I look at this and I want to know . . .*

I can only say it's intuitive. These buildings didn't exist. So, this is where could afford a space because of the way that these plots lay out, and what I really want is these buildings to link and activate, and become alive in this space. I want everybody here to look at it. I want the balconies to

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look at the space. As I say, this is the only one who even had a thought to it, a little austere, but it was the only one who had a thought to it. Here's a case when you could use it. Even ivy on the walls or something; brings these things together. That's a joke. This guy says, I'm not part of this. There's me and there's you. It was never conceived that there's us. We're in this together. This is how you get to the park. That's the event. This is the procession to the event. There are minor events, and make use of it. That's what we want you to do. You're part of a city.

Birnbaum: *One of the things I was thinking about as part of the processional experience in the way that it bulges out and narrows in sort of a European experience.*

Very thoughtful. That's very much a part of what we're about, compression and expansion. It's the idea that you want people to feel, say, the intimacy of two close walls, and then the relief of the street and the plaza. But here, look at this wall here. It's an affront.

It's an affront. It's an absolute affront. I think it would have been fine if they wanted to put patios above looking down this place so people could be, again, part of it. The cantilevers held up very well. You're right.

Birnbaum: *Now, the playground was replaced in the last couple of years. I came for the first time yesterday. I think it could have been a lot worse.*

Here is the path down. . . . Yeah, you're right. It's not bad.

Birnbaum: *I've never seen kids in this playground before. This is great.*

*[overlapping voices] so exciting for me to see the [truck noise] for climbing and I just think you brought it to another level here in terms of complete integration of this palette.*

I got to tell you, it looks better now than it has.

Birnbaum: *I mean, you said you haven't been here, when was the last time you were in these spaces?*

I honestly cannot remember. I was asked to the annual dinner some time ago, but I didn't come here to this. I only came to the main space and didn't walk through here. Maybe it's the fall, also, that looks nice, the fall colors.

Birnbaum: *But I mean, if I can just be really personal here, for a minute --*

How do I feel about it?

Birnbaum: *Yeah, I mean, what is this like?*

I look around and I railed about it yesterday. I see there it's even more emphatically expressed, and it's truly annoying, I agree. I'm enjoying the walkthrough here. It actually held up reasonably well. I



also think back where it was originally conceived how all these things were working together, what we wanted to happen. It feels successful. Remember I was telling you: keep reaching? It's not perfect, by any means, but it's got a lot of nice things. And, it's a creditable piece of work. Relatively speaking, I'm pleased. We're also looking at these structures, which is, this was Halprinesque. I didn't do that, but that's OK.

{Laughter}

Birnbaum: *No, we knew that you didn't do that. But, look at how nicely these have held up.*

That's what I'm saying.

Birnbaum: *I walked through here last night to go to the reception. And, there were downlights in all of these. I had not been here at night before. I mean, they were lit nicely.*

We'll see, that's the other thing. I like to use lighting but I wish these weren't so white; that's all. But I like the idea of the pylons that start there and then break down, and they come up again. But, they should be more anonymous.

Yeah. Wouldn't it be really wonderful if the backyards all just sort of faced on here, and this became a community all along the park, people who lived here?

Birnbaum: *Isn't that what [Bacon] did at Society Hill in the '60s?*

The last time I was at Society Hill I just barely remember it. I just know that it was a very attractive looking. I actually was in *Art Forum*, one of the art magazines, where I was accused in a nice way of being a sculptor. Did you ever see anybody sitting on one of these?

Birnbaum: *Yesterday some people were sitting here, yeah. You were commenting on the furnishings. And here it [is] all one vocabulary, discreet, receding. I mean, would you still say this is a hallmark in your work?*

Yeah, very much, very much. The consistency is extremely important. The only time I'll compromise from this is when I'm working with an artist and the purpose is to create ambiguity, which is why I enjoy working with artists because it adds a dimension to the work I never thought of. I always thought that ambiguity was something you avoided. And then I realized that it has purpose, and its purpose is to keep you off balance. Its purpose is to let you think, to bring you in more closely. This is wonderful. I wonder if the fountain is still here.

Birnbaum: *Yeah, it's under restoration.*

*Yeah. You can see it's under a box on the other side here.*



The fountain was supposed to be the terminus, OK? You have another element to sort of anchor the space. Look at how well this is held up. I'm so pleased. I would never do this again, by the way. I would never use exposed aggregate in monolithic pores. I would always use it in pieces so you could replace it because this, if it cracks or you have to replace a piece of it, it'll never look the same.

Birnbaum: *Now, there's some story about how this landed here. I can't really remember it, the snowflake [sculpture].*

I forget myself, but it was a gift. And, we had to find a place for it. We relocated it. That was it because it was the end of the mall. And, the story goes that every so often an Indian would steal a duck from the pond here [LAUGHTER]. And this is where, it's funny. But, this would be a nice place to live, actually, wouldn't it, on the mall down [here], and this is Tommy Thompson, again, tax increment financing. But you had to take a risk, and they did. I would like to know how successful now with the rents and the sales, I just feel that it would be an interesting case study for landscape architects. But, the problem is that it does not make use of the Green Way, and that is sad. It would be really nice to live right in the heart of the city, a walker, a park, this, and then the city. It would be very nice.

Birnbaum: *And, if you had to live in Minneapolis, this is the kind of place you'd want to live.*

That's because you're a city kid, too {Laughter}.

*(The interview in Minneapolis, Minnesota concludes).*

## **Interview II -**

***Charles Birnbaum and M. Paul Friedberg meet for another interview on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2008, in New York City and visit three of Paul projects.***

### **PS 166, WEST 89<sup>TH</sup> STREET PLAYGROUND, NEW YORK CITY**

This is a wonderful example of how changes in social patterns affect design. Years ago, I had finished Riis and I was asked by Sam Ratensky, who was the head of the housing and redevelopment agency in New York. And he came to me and he said, Paul, he said, there's a site in the West Side urban renewal and if we don't do something with it, it's going to be made into a housing site, and I think it would be a shame. It's right next to the school. And he said, can you come up with a design. And we did. We came up with a design which pretty much employed many of the tenets and certainly the values, our values, which was that a playground really was a challenging facility for children and also had a sufficient variety to give the child choice, and choice being a major factor in the idea of play.



So we came up with a design that Sam went to the, no, actually [Thomas] Hoving, the Park Commissioner, Hoving went to the Astor Foundation, who had been a patron of ours from Riis and Carver [Houses] and he asked them, he said based on the work that Paul has done, we've got this design of his, would you fund a playground on the West Side? And Mrs. Astor, the foundation was very open to development of open space in the city. And said OK, at the time in terms of dollars, I think what this thing cost, but it wasn't a major, I think maybe \$200,000 at the time, which was comparable to maybe a million dollars. So we came up with it at this playground and it was because of our experience with cobblestones. What we had done we built a geodesic dome in this area, in this area here. It was almost more interesting to watch the construction, the children deal with the construction of the park than the finished park itself, because while the geodesic dome was under construction, it was only the dome and [there] was no surrounding enveloping cobblestone circle. The kids came with a tire, a rubber tire and rope. And they made their own swings in it. We were fascinated, not only that they took the sand and the cobblestones, but they spent hours building, this was all during the construction period. So as I say, it became obvious that what we missed in the finished playground was having facilities that were flexible and movable and that the kids could interpret. And when we were finished with the playground, it's immutable. It stands there as an icon that's indestructible and unmovable and resists and action on the part of the kids. But what made it unique was that we wanted it to have an outdoor bathroom, not an outdoor, but a bathroom, a facility that you could access from the outdoors. And we depressed and created an amphitheatre in this area here, that went down maybe six feet and we built a pyramid over it, a play pyramid with slides and in the pyramid was the bathroom that you entered through. The playground was heavily used. It was very, very well used. But then, the neighborhood changed, or the parks department changed. It's hard to say which came first.

But it was abandoned basically and only used by the school. It started to deteriorate and no one took care, meaning neither the parks department nor the school. The school didn't have any funds; the parks department abandoned it basically. And in doing so, by rejecting it, the playground began to develop a very bad reputation, of just being a place for druggies. So the parks department came back and said, look at the request of the community we will come back. But now we have different standards and the standards are we have prescribed play equipment and we're going to flatten the entire area. A few landscape architects felt that this was an important piece and it should be preserved. And then finally I was asked to have a meeting with the parks commissioner. And he was adamant, he said, no, I am not going to preserve it. It either stays the way it is or and the school has to continue to take over, or we revise it. And at that point, the society went back to the Astor Foundation and said here's our situation, but the parks department is willing to [have] Friedberg redesign the playground, but they don't want to pay the fees because they've already paid the fees for the first redesign. And the Astor Foundation accepted that. I met again with the parks commissioner and he said if we can create a playground that meets the challenges and the values of the earlier playground, would you build it instead of your traditional playground? And this was Henry Stern, who was a bright and open administrator. He said fine, Paul. And I had known Henry from when he was a politician way back when in the '60s when we sort of grew up together. But he said one thing it had to be replicated. So we started. And the idea of visibility became essential.

The restrictions became so overwhelming and the [school] principal said the one thing I really want for the school is an amphitheatre. But if you don't have much grade change, it's very hard to have an



amphitheatre. Anyway, we manipulated the site sufficiently that a cop, a police car could drive by, look in, and have visibility to all parts of it. And we created a space that you see here which is basically a terraced area which the children come every morning and they line up outside and then they go into the school. We used the same cobblestones that existed from the earlier playground. We have a water feature on the sides. It works. The playground works. It doesn't have enough interest. A lot of its fabric, its rich fabric is gone. And the only thing that came out of it was the actual playground itself. And we went first to a major playground company and came up with an idea of doing a tree house, and that the whole playground would be a series of bridges so that you could have play at two different levels, ground level and also in the air. They accepted the idea initially and then with the restrictions that they had in terms of their production line and everything else, they finally said look, we have to back out, but we have someone else who will fabricate it for you, and that's what you see now. It is half of what we designed because of budget, because it had to be crafted rather than manufactured, it cost maybe twice what it should. From this, Game Time did pick up the idea of a tree house and they have I guess a line of playground equipment called the *Treescape*, which is really a manufactured [piece] that looks very much like this, except not quite as elegant.

{Sound breaks up}

. . . The kids would come. There's a couple of things that was interesting, too. The kids would come with cardboard boxes. They would flatten the box out and slide down, literally slide down this asphalt ramp. I had to have an operation on my back, this goes back a bit, I think the year that Bobby Kennedy was killed, and I can't remember what year that was. So I had to be in the city on the weekend. I had two kids, two young kids. This is when Amsterdam was still pretty much, I'm sorry, Columbus was still Columbus Avenue. I went to the candy store and bought three or four boxes of chalk, came to the playground with my kids. And there was a bunch of kids here, and they all said, can we have some? Can we have some? And they were spread-eagle on the ground, and they were drawing silhouettes of themselves. To me, you could take all of the construction that I did, didn't have any where as much meaning as these kids drawing themselves on the asphalt, playing with the cardboard box. It showed you that we're missing the point, that we don't understand the nature of this activity, what kids want to do. And if they can't manipulate their environment, then you really are denying them a major opportunity for development, for excitement, for interest. And even today, you know, there's this new playground that's being proposed by, I forget his name, for the parks.

Birnbaum: *Greg Geary*

No, no, this is the one who did FAO Schwarz. Anyway, and its back to the future. He has discovered what we, [Frederick] Allen was writing about, and what we were dealing with in the '60s. He's first discovered it now in 2008. They're talking about a playground where there's going to be elements in it that can be manipulated, but you're going to have to have a play leader, someone there to monitor the whole event. And that's why it, I think, is why it will fail. That one will exist as long as it's funded, but as far as being able to replicate it in the city, I doubt very much if you'll see any other playground. What you'll do is you'll bring people here and say see, this is how advanced we are. And this one example will demonstrate that, instead of making it an institution. It's just the nature of the way the administration works.



Birnbaum: *Before we move on from here, I mentioned that I wanted to just spend a couple minutes on Mrs. Astor, she was involved here at this playground. If you could tell the story of your first meeting and then [with her] at Riis.*

### **RIIS HOUSES AND THE VINCENT ASTOR FOUNDATION**

The Astor Foundation really has been extremely good to me personally, as well as to the city, but to me. This, in the early part of my career, I was about 31, 32 years old. I had barged into the profession or backed into the profession and at that time you could without having any qualifications. You didn't have to have a license. You didn't have to have an education. I had education in ornamental horti-, horticulture from Cornell. And for me, I was just trying to make a living. If I could make \$10,000 a year, that shows you how long ago it was, I would be very happy. That would be enough to sustain a family, my goal.

Anyway, the objective of going into this profession was not for any larger issue like making the world better. It was really to make a living, to sustain myself. But in the course of this rather limited work that I was doing, planting plans and [Federal Housing Authority] FHA work, [I] became somewhat, and even low-income housing which was the New York Housing Authority, I became bored and began to experiment with some ideas. And through that, I guess I must have impressed somebody at the housing authority. I get a call from them. We'd like to pick you up to look at some projects on such and such a day at such and such an hour. And I was thrilled. I was flattered that they were going to pick me up.

I lived on 88th Street. My office was also in the same place I lived. It was downstairs from where I lived. I come outside and there are two limousines. That in itself just floored me. I'm going to get in a limousine. I get in and I'm introduced to Mrs. [Brooke] Astor. Well, the Astors were well known in the city because of Astor Hotel and a number of other things. Historically you studied Astor and the fur trade. And we were taken along with two other, a landscape architect, Bob Zion and an architect, Cy Brinas around to see housing projects. And they explained to us this was going to be a competition. And to make this story short, I was taken out for lunch, got to be taken out to lunch at a fancy restaurant. In those days for me it was just a totally new experience. I was used to a cut above or below McDonald's. Anyway, I picked the same site as Cy Brinas, and the housing authority calls me up and say, look, the two of you have picked the same site. Either you want to pick another one or do you want to go with him? So I figured, two out of three is a better chance than one out of three. So I said I'll go with Cy Brinas and we designed two projects. One is called Carver House, which we had both picked, and the other was Riis in the Lower East Side.

We designed Carver House together. Cy took the lead on that, and at the end it was built and it got a certain amount of recognition. It was published. We were all very happy with it. And the Astor Foundation, Mrs. Astor comes back and says we now have seen what you've done, we think the materials and all that, because of the budget that we gave you, was low and therefore we're a little disappointed in the quality, not of the design, but the quality of the materials. We're going to give you now \$300,000. That was [like] we're going to give you a million dollars and we'd like you to design this other project. Now what we had done was a throwaway. And at this point, I took the lead in the design and we came up with Riis. And Mrs. Astor would visit it periodically to see what was going on and when she got there, here was this very elegant lady, and I guess at the time she



might have been in her fifties or sixties at the latest. And she comes to the site and these little Hispanic kids would come running up to her say, hey, there's the millionaire {Laughter}. And it was really, you know, there was a certain amount of humor. They were very, very, very accommodating, the foundation and Mrs. Astor. To show you how accommodating, when she gave the money to the housing authority, she says I'll give it to you on one condition, that you have nothing to say about the design. The designers that we pick will be the total arbiters of how this thing turns out, which was an incredible amount of both responsibility, but also freedom. And we were thrilled to have it. Since then, because of Riis and the recognition it got, and by the way, she had invited her friend, Mrs. Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, to come and open the project, which gave it even another level of recognition. But in payment for that, she said she offered Lady Bird a playground in Washington. And we did a playground there also, [Buchanan High School] I don't even know what happened to it. It's been years and years since I've seen it.

### **67TH STREET PLAYGROUND, CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK**

Birnbaum: *So, Paul, tell us the story behind the 67th Street playground.*

Yet another epic. We are requested by the Central Park Conservancy to participate in a competition for a playground in the park. Now playgrounds had been designed in the park before this. [Richard] Dattner has one on 68th Street, which is really quite good, and I think it's still there, if I'm not mistaken. But the majority of the playgrounds that were put in the park were [Robert] Moses playgrounds that were basically a flat asphalt surface encased by a six-foot, steel picket fence, with spikes on top. And you wondered like, this is for kids who are five years old or under, or somewhere, why would they need a six-foot fence and why would you also want to have spikes on top? It just was an attitude, you know, that we really have to keep them in. And by the way, that's really what fences are about. It's not to keep people out. It's to keep the kids in, so you can control it.

Anyway, we were given this playground, which had a swing, the typical, swing, slide, maybe monkey bars, flat. It had the fence. And in looking at it, the playgrounds that had been developed were more modern in nature, and they had some modern play equipment. But we said this is Central Park and you can't do that. This is not an urban experience. It is really a very natural one. How do we create a playground that fits into the park and uses the materials that the park's made of? The stone. If you look at the wall that surrounds the park and other structures in the park, they're made out of this New York schist or something, some such name. And then, how do we take, which is more important, the activities that children enjoy and bring that to this place through design, using design as the vehicle. Design is not the ultimate goal. It's the vehicle by which the ultimate goal is play. OK. So how do we do it and how do we create a situation where play is not demeaned by sort of Disneyesque-like features, or architectural forms that will work fine in an urban situation because it's sculptural. This has no need to be, have a sculptural overlay. This has a need to be an integrated, natural environment where kids can play and still be maintained in a reasonable way. So where we are standing now is an amphitheatre, which is really a place for kids to sit in a group or mothers or whoever. But moreover, it's really as a second level, it's a spray pool. So in the summertime, sprays are emitted out of the underside of the steps. Then we created a series of islands where kids could move around. That was the circulation. But then penetrating the islands with stepping columns, which is a very natural forms, wood forms, which we knew that after 15 years would have to be



replaced. And they were. But that's the cost of creating a play environment that is interesting and exciting. And we have to weigh the two issues. One is what are we going to spend for the children, to give them what they really should have, or do we really put the major emphasis on sustainability over a life cycle of the material? And obviously, my preference has always been towards the child.

So anyway, we create a bridge. The bridge is very much like some of the other bridges in Central Park. Nowhere near as elegant as those bridges, but still, in a playground, it serves a purpose. So now you can go over and under. And the area around the bridge is really designed and graded so that water will puddle in here. So in the summertime, if we want, we can have a pool, but that the water doesn't re-circulate, but it drains away. So it's a temporary situation. And when we don't want water, it becomes a circulation; it goes back into becoming a circulation path. And we like that aspect of water because it gives you two experiences within the same space. The interesting thing about all of this, and we'll go to see some of the other facilities, was that we had lots of play equipment in the playground. And the budget came in high. And we had to take I would say at least half out and by reducing it; we made the play environment much nicer. It was not cluttered. It's the play, gives the child much more opportunity to think and interpret where they are and how they want to deal with it. So we learned a lesson, that less is more. I think somebody said that if I'm not mistaken. Anyway, it's true though. Really, we do not have to over-design and so we have the sand gives us all we need. This sort of self-selecting group of kids that we bring in there, the age group is generally from two to five or six. That's OK, because there are other playgrounds reasonably close for the older kids. And so this becomes their place. Mothers love it, too, because again there are very few conflicts between age groups. You want to walk over and see the slide.

***(They continue their walk through the playground)***

-- with this, we also had to think about how do we deal with [the] handicapped. And we tried, but not too successfully to create these upper level troughs where water, which has since been abandoned because it was never installed properly and also, it doesn't meet the handicapped standards of being able to put your wheelchair underneath it. But still, that's, would have been, it's an objective that we missed, but the intention was correct. This area here, the swings, is an afterthought, not done by us, but the mothers wanted swings and I think it's OK, even though the element is antithetical to the rest of the vocabulary. But once again, you make compromises or they make compromises. But it's a separate area which allows it to be done discreetly without.

Then we came to the idea that we had within the playground a significant change of grade outside of the fence and we thought we wanted to employ that. So we designed a slide that would be integrate right into the hill and it's a granite slide. The original design is still there because whether they choose to use it and when the weather is correct, is to have water fed into the slide on the top. And the water comes down the slide in the summertime when you want it and then drains away. And the polished granite and the grade change allows the kids to get there. There is a pathway. You have two or three different pathways of getting there. One is on both sides of the slide itself where we have footholds in the granite blocks. The other is the use of again, the stepping, we call them stepping columns. And children learn through action. One of the activities that a young child needs in development is to learn to jump, step, simple movements that we take for granted. So within the park, you have the stepping columns [which] gives them the opportunity to step in various ways and discover. Here's a pathway that starts over, you have a bridge, and you have a choice here. You can



either go under the bridge or with the chains, over the bridge, or through a pathway through the planting. And it's that idea. It would be nice if we had elements that you discover as you go through it. And that comes maybe in later phases. This was hard enough to get to this place as it was. See, we were not asked to design this [the area with swings]. Had we, I doubt very much if it would have ended up looking this way. I wouldn't have encroached quite so much on this area. That's number one. It's way too much space for its use. And we probably would have gone for either hanging these [swings] on a more natural structure, or even tire swings or something that somehow is more consistent with the vocabulary and the intent of the overall design. You don't have to be a kid to have fun.

***(They talk to a woman in the park)***

Do you live around here?

WOMAN: I don't actually. I live on Long Island.

Oh, really? How do you know about this?

WOMAN: I didn't actually. I just knew that there was a park on 67th and Fifth.

Birnbaum: *Where on Long Island are you from?*

WOMAN: Alberson.

Birnbaum: *Because I grew up in Bayside.*

Birnbaum: *Where is Alberson?*

WOMAN: It's like the Great Neck.

Birnbaum: *Oh, that I know.*

*[Sound interrupted]*

WOMAN: *His name is Matthias [her son]. I thought it [the water] was a figment of my imagination. And I was looking for a spout.*

It used to have water. It would be fed into the top and the kids would . . . , it would also make sliding easier. In the summertime, it was fun to have water, have a water slide. Good. OK. It's a pleasure.

WOMAN: *Have a good day.*

***(The interview continues- they are looking at the bridge Paul designed for the playground)***

Birnbaum: *The bridge has a little bit of shadow on this side now. You know, this really is Olmsted in miniature. It's a scenographic landscape.*

***(Paul talks about the fence around the park)***



We didn't want the fence to be seen. We moved the fence. Look how high it is. And they bought it. They bought into it, OK. We don't need a six-foot what's the right word? A cast iron fence. We don't need that with a pointy top. We need something; by the way, the cost of that fence is exorbitant, almost more than the playground. So we figured a chain link is fine. Kids are not going to get passed it and we planted the fence. And there are some places you just don't see it at all. And that was the real intent. This, maybe in time, with whatever is planted there, it'll encase it.

**(Looking at the trees in the park)**

- a canopy of, this is a willow oak. And we have regular oaks. But the canopy of trees, that's the other thing. The canopy of trees gives you a roof for this park. And in the summertime, it gives you a shaded area. And in the wintertime, which is also nice, we have a lot of people that come here; the loss of leaves allows the sun to come in.

Birnbaum: *So, Paul, before we move on, the question I wanted to ask you is- had you done any work in Central Park before this?*

No. First one.

Birnbaum: *So here you are. By this point, you'd lived in the city for several decades.*

By Central Park.

Birnbaum: *Right. And here you are working in the park that is the celebrated work of [Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.] Olmsted and [Calvert] Vaux and what did that feel like?*

You know, really I don't have a good way of answering that. All I know is I was extremely respectful of the man who preceded me, and if I'm interfering in any way with what his intention was, I really was irresponsible. So my sense of it was, as minor an intervention, still accomplishing the ultimate goal, which is the play. Because Olmsted, fortunately or unfortunately, never designed for this age group. As a matter of fact, even sports came much later. So when [Robert] Moses came in and imposed his rigid formula, it really was truly antithetical to what the park was about. He urbanized the only single natural scenic place that we had in Manhattan like, maybe other than maybe Riverside Drive. So to me, it was the lighter the touch, the better. I think this is why we won the competition, is because all the others designed a playground, and we designed a natural environment for play. You didn't have any sort of religious, spiritual sense. I didn't. Because that's my nature, I guess. I attacked it as a real first problem and then an obligation. The obligation went back, as well as forward.

**BATTERY PARK CITY, NEW YORK**

**(The interview continues at Battery Park City, New York)**

I'm standing in the south park of the Battery Park City World Financial Center open space. And in life there are only a few very special opportunities for most of us. Some have none. Some have more than others. But for me, this, working here on Battery Park City was one of the most important and interesting projects of my career. I don't think we broke any new barriers, as much as we explored



some interesting circumstances. It starts out where I'm interviewed by [Cesar] Pelli and I'm accepted as the landscape architect for this project and Pelli had won a competition. There was already a site plan for the buildings and there was an open space around the buildings.

I don't remember the man's name who was the head of the Battery Park City Authority at the time, but there was a special, semi-public, semi-governmental agency called the Battery Park City Authority. And they had full control over the landfill on this part of Manhattan, landfill created by excavation for the World Trade Center, the second half of the subway. And his first name was Richard. I wish I could remember his last name. Anyway, he informed me, after I had been selected and Pelli had won, he informed us both that we were to work with artists. And we fully agreed. We said of course, we always work with artists, we like it very much. He said no, I don't think you quite understand me. It's not that I want you to find places for artists and then select an artist. They are to be co-equal members of the design team. Well, this was not only a bit of a shock to both of us, because when you think it, artists and landscape architects and architects really have different sensibilities. A landscape architect clearly relates to the architect, especially in an urban environment where the designs are often orthogonal or they used to be anyway, not so much anymore. And the artist deals with ambiguity, and we deal with the resolution of geometries. The artist, on the other hand, deals with ambiguity, inference and emotions, to a large extent. Again, I'm generalizing. So we were told that we had to do that. We didn't accept it. And they said you don't understand. Either you do it or you no longer work on the project.

Well, it was an offer we couldn't refuse, so we accepted the two artists. They had a competition. And the artists that were chosen, the two sculptors, Siah Armanjani and Scott Burton and they weren't so much chosen because of the particular design, from what we heard afterwards. More because the committee thought that they would be good to work with. And it turned out that they were absolutely right. When we first met it was like two dogs meeting and sniffing at each other. We were very suspicious of each other in a way. But after the first meeting we began to relax a little bit. And then it started. And we went through twenty-six separate days, either at my office in New York or in Pelli's office in New Haven. And we forged a design. At the point that the design was fixed, our office took over the working drawings. But up until that time it was a full collaboration. And the interesting thing to me was working with the artists, who, as I said earlier, have a different sensibility. And to begin to understand their way of thinking broadened my sense of how to approach the open space design. Since then I've worked with numerous artists. And almost in every case will encourage the client to employ an artist. It's very difficult for them to digest that. They, although they're not overly happy with landscape architects as professionals, they're terrified of artists, you know, and the economics of working with an artist. However, in every case it's worked out. When I've worked with an artist, it's worked out very well.

As you'll see as you walk through the different spaces, there was a series of three zones. One was the Plaza itself right on the waterfront. The next was an intermediate garden which we'll go to. And this, the southern garden or oval, is the last space and it's more or less a retreat. It's an oval in form and it's a colonnade, a walkway that's straddled by cherry trees. And in the spring when the cherries come out, the space is transformed by the color. The benches, we originally wanted this to be a more passive area. The plaza is the active area. We have the promenade right off the plaza. We have a number, that they call the porch. And we have a dining terrace, and that's very active. And it was intended to be active. The intermediate garden is really, as I said, a transitional space, more

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geometric and has small spaces for tables and chairs and it's again somewhat more passive. But it's exposed to the water. This space is totally enclosed, both by the cherries and just by the nature of its location. But being a passive space, it was mainly meant for seating and sitting. And we came to the authority with a plan that showed benches. And these benches were designed. In this case, it was designed by Scott Burton, whose work was known for his design of seating sculpture, or sculpture as seating. And you'll see more of that also in the plaza. The client, who was extremely good, said, you know.

The clients, the Reichmann Brothers, were one of the best clients I've ever had. They understood quality and were not willing to settle for less, although, they also were willing to take the advice of the designer, which is extremely unusual.

***(The interview continues to the next garden area)***

We come into the garden area. And what we wanted for this basically was a well-shaded space, but yet to have a different character from the other two, the plaza or what I would call the park. So we would have three very distinct spaces with their similar vocabulary, but their own sort of meaning and their expression. So again, the oval is the arc. This is the garden and then you have the plaza. [In] the garden we used a canopy of white birch, initially. And if you see now, it's evolving into River Birch. And that should communicate to those who are horticulturally oriented, the fact that white birch really doesn't do that well next to the water, although they've been here maybe 15, 20 years, which is quite a lot. But the River Birch, we're using it frequently now because of this particular lesson. Now because this is a shady area, we have populated the garden mainly with hostas and later on [with] annual impatiens. And you see the vestiges of a few impatiens from last year, the African or New Guinea impatiens. So this area is meant, as I mentioned before, for smaller groups, that more intimate, still semi-passive, a better view of the water, somewhat higher in elevation. A landscape is all about slight changes in level, and the dramatic impact of three steps, six steps. And you exploit that in your design because it gives you separation of activities, separation of also of uses and separation also of experience.

Birnbaum: *Just to take that point one step further because I remember when this opened and that slight change of grade, that 18 inches or you know, whatever it was was revolutionary in New York. And I remember Tony Walmsley going on about how it really influenced him, because this is what we needed [and] because you also had the width to do that.*

Exactly.

Birnbaum: *So I mean I think that that's a really key element in this and it was revolutionary.*

I'm not sure how I can start with that, but this idea of changing grade. You see grade changes in the landscape as a means; we have no mass, for instance. We have no volume. We have trees and yes, you could call some of them as elements of mass, but nothing to compare with what the architect works with. Our trees are usually seen through. They're lighter in nature, in terms of the way they work. They work from narrow at the bottom and big in the top. So it's a different set of relationships. But I was lucky enough to be invited to go to India when I was quite young, and this is well after I had done Riis and had a little bit of a reputation. And I went to the Ghats at the water's edge in India where all the life of the community exists. People wash themselves. They wash their

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clothes. They meet. And to me, these were very dramatic landscapes. I saw something very similar in Mexico, in the Yucatan. The Mayan ruins there were all about changes of grade. And then there was volume in the pyramids itself. By the way, the pyramid also became a part of my vocabulary and I've introduced [it] in other projects, usually as a fountain or something of that nature.

So here, we have three different levels. We have the promenade level. So actually four. [The] promenade level, we have intermediate level, and then we have a dining level. And each of these three areas ties into one of those levels. And so, walking through the entire[space], even though we have a change of grade, walking through the entire project if you are in any way handicapped, [you] have no problem, no steps because that's also managed within the design.

Birnbaum: *This is really nice through here.*

So this, this is the promenade level. It's part of the plaza. It's just adjacent to the upper level and by its proximity to it, accrues value to both. Now the promenade goes the entire length of Battery Park City. So and it intersects this particular location, which is at the north harbor. When we were dealing with this, we knew we had a basic issue we had to solve. If there was going to be a dining terrace, how do you keep the activity of the promenade, which is intense, from the dining area, and yet, not obstruct the dining area from what is the most dramatic view in the entire complex, the one that looks into the harbor itself and the Statue of Liberty. To do that, we introduced this study of a water source, and we came up with a linear fountain that negotiates one of the grade changes without it looking as if it had a functional use and yet clearly, the fountain is meant to be. Tests were done on the fountain to make sure that the water flow was even. It had to be seen as a monolithic element.

And the next level, as we come down, there are some stories that go in between, where Scott had some ideas, and in order to diffuse them, we had to bring in William H. Whyte, who's a sociologist concerned with the use of open space. And I knew him very well. So I brought Holly in to analyze the design with the intention that I knew he would criticize the particular approach that Scott had taken. We then began to work, and Scott and I worked on the step pattern that you see now, that really does what we, accommodates what we wanted, which was the grade change, creates an amphitheatre onto the promenade where people can sit, and then Scott came up with these pods and steps that again populate and animate the [space], and brings the stairs out into the space itself. Further on, now this is mainly Scott's work, was the torchiere which is an element that exactly at dusk, it is computerized, and the base takes off of a Victorian sitting arrangement. And to the right of it is another linear bench, [with the] same vocabulary. And those are basically Scott's ideas.

Siah, who is somewhat more intellectual, took the railing and introduced into the railing poetry, two pieces of poetry, single lines, and they again animate the railing. At night when the sun goes down and you get, this faces sort of due west, you get some incredible sunsets from here, you get the sun, the orange sun coming through the railing, glitters, and this railing becomes something quite special. So here is where art, art can be infused into the landscape in detail and yet not lose its purpose. There is a seamless relationship between the art and the full landscape. And this is what the intention was, is to find a way of mediating between these two disciplines and this relationship, and we feel we've managed to do that. It's an example; it may not be the most important example, of that relationship. But it's an example that at least drove me into wanting to work with artists on other projects.



When Robert Moses was in power, he created a set of standards and he was instrumental in doing Riverside Park, which was an extension of the Olmsted, what is it called? It overlooked the river there's a terminology, an appropriate terminology. Anyway, Moses, to his credit, decides he wants to bring Riverside Drive down to the river and incorporate . . . the highway. In doing so he also starts to set up a set of standards and materials. When Cooper/ Eckstut did the criteria for the master plan of all of Battery Park City and the promenade, they established a timeworn material, which is the hex block, the asphalt hex block, as well as the railing, not this railing but the railing in the rest of the park as well as the light fixtures, which are from another generation. I'm not sure I would have done that. I think I might have, although they seem to work fairly well, and they have a universal quality to them, I think my preference would have been to find a lighting element that is more contemporary, fits more into the kind of design vocabulary that we have established. OK.

I want to go one more [subject] now we can get to the water, to once again look to see if we can get closer to the water. And this entire area was designed well after the rest of the development had been finished. And we studied how we could get to the water and we had to cut through the bulkhead and we had to do a number of other quite extensive revisions. But what it does give us is a different sense in the relationship. Again, we're talking about approximately six steps closer to the water. But that six steps, in two sets of three, gives you a dramatic relationship that you don't get from the promenade. It separates you from the promenade, brings you closer, although you're not really at the water, you get the sense of it. Beyond that and much later, but by the way, you should know, the cove itself was here before any other of the development. And Pelli had to work around it in his master plan. It was part of the overall design of the landfill. It was a given. And when we were finished, it was empty. And again, to their credit, the Authority, decided to make it into a marina. And there was a great deal of conflict about this, or that. It was too elitist. Why sell slips to people who are going to be sailing expensive boats? But again, that's to me one of the negative aspects of liberalism. I think that the people who have money have a right to have their boat. And the boats animate the space for all the rest of us who don't have boats. I would love to have a boat, but I don't have a boat. The fact that they would deny the person who has the ability to have his boat here because of some social inequality or economic inequality, doesn't make sense to me. I think that there is a reality, what you gain as opposed to what you lose. And if you didn't have the boats, what you'd lose is the excitement and the thrill of seeing this array of different kinds of boats, catamarans and sailboats. And you have a yacht club that sails out of here. And maybe someday everybody will be rich and be able to have their boat here.

**The End**