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**SHLOMO ARONSON**

**ORAL HISTORY**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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**Interviews Conducted**

**December 5-12, 2011**

**By Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR**

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## SHLOMO ARONSON ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*This transcript documents the seven day interview in Israel with Shlomo Aronson, Monday December 5 to Monday December 12th, 2011, conducted by Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR and documented by Director Gina Angelone with her Israeli camera crew. The interview with Aronson takes place at his home and office in Ein Gedi (outside Jerusalem), and on site at projects in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and selected project sites across Israel. Dr. Nurit Lissovsky, from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology was instrumental in planning and logistics for this interview from the start and was an integral part of the day to day success of this project. Also interviewed were Aronson principals Ittai Aronson and Barbara Aronson who reflect on Aronson's design legacy and discuss the direction of landscape architecture today. Their interview is included as a separate section in this transcript.*

### Introduction

My name is Shlomo Aronson; I'm a landscape architect residing in Jerusalem. I'm 75 years old, practicing landscape architecture for about 50 years. It's a long time. And I have four kids, two of them are married, and I have grandchildren.

### Biography

#### Childhood

##### Remembering his Grandparents

My grandfather was the chief rabbi of Kiev. Kiev is the capital of Ukraine, a very big state with quite a lot of Jews. At the turn of the century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were five million Jews in the Ukraine and surrounding [area]. My grandfather was one of the three religious people of authority who sometimes were sent to represent the Jews of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev, Ukraine. So it was a quite important position. But he, he spent most of his time dealing with troubles, pogroms, with wars and with saving people's lives.

He was not a scholar or a person who spends his time reading or teaching the holy book. He was a very popular and strong person, very, very loved by the community. Now, he had ten children, five boys, five girls. And his house, which was quite a big



house in Kiev, was a stopping point for many Jews who were traveling in Ukraine. They had a little hostel for relatives and for those not so close. It was a place you could go to get a nice decent meal. And if you helped clean the place you would get a place to stay at night. Sometimes some people used to stay there for half a year. The immediate family was very big, and the family structure was very workable, because all you had to do was work, and they all did their work. So this is on my father's side. Most people from the family, it seems were quite nicely positioned in their fields. Nobody had anything to do with religion. Of the ten children, ten were completely anti-religious. They all admired and respected my grandfather, though.

On my mother's side, the stories were different. My grandfather on my mother's side left Russia in the same period, more or less. My grandfather was in the textile business as a small merchant. They lived in Barre, Vermont. My grandmother was very proud of being a Vermontian, a New Englander. She saw herself as a Yankee, which is OK. Every night before we went to bed, we heard the American anthem. As a child, my sister and I remember asking my mother to sing us the America, America. She was a lousy musician, but we of course did like it.

My mother didn't go to school, to university I mean. She worked first in Barre, Vermont, but then she went to New York City. I recently found pictures of her in a newspaper, which showed that she was a buyer of clothes for Bloomingdales. She went to Europe twice, which was pretty unusual. That's one thing, but she was also a very good secretary. Eventually, in the end, she was a secretary of the guy who built the electrical company in Palestine.

On my mother's side, there were four people. She was the firstborn, then two sisters and a boy whose name was Abraham. He studied journalism at Columbia [University], and was a press attaché of [Douglas] McArthur in the Second World War. He married a wonderful person, Helen, and they had four kids and lived in Washington D.C. They had a house on the lake, in New Hampshire, a fantastic place that they leased. It was not far



from Barre, Vermont. I used to go there on vacation to, from California, and later from Boston. And I took my cousin, Leah, for an afternoon drive to see it. And we looked for the place, and suddenly we saw a beautiful, expensive building made from granite. Now, I know something about stone. I looked and I saw that the details were fantastic. The place was full of, or used to be full of Italian stone masons who emigrated from Italy to United States. . . .

*Birnbaum: What I've read is that your father was a great storyteller. Can you tell us about this?*

He, my father was a very nice man, gentle, so quiet, and a loving person. I never heard my parents even once, in all my life, shout at each other. They were such a nice couple. So there was no strife at home. So I can't really tell stories about a father who beat his children, because that wasn't our situation.

But on the other hand, he wasn't that ambitious. He used to go to work. He was in charge of the Arabic department. The work was very middle-class sort of white-collar work. Anyway, his work in the electrical company, my father was advancing, not because of his desire to succeed, but partly because my mother was nagging him, and partly because he didn't have any hobbies.

### **Remembering his Childhood**

*Birnbaum: So the last, I have a couple of other things I wanted to ask about childhood. You went on hikes?*

A lot.

*Birnbaum: Lots of hikes. So what was that like?*

I mean, that time when you went outdoors you were in nature. . . . and you sort of lived in nature.



Birnbaum: *I'd like you to tell me a little bit more about what that meant. Living in nature as a kid, what did that mean?*

It was this typical Mediterranean vegetation. It was not very exciting, [it was] like Marin County in California, this landscape of soft hills.

Birnbaum: *Were you working in the landscape at all as a young person?*

I did have sort of a victory garden and it got first prize. But so what? I think the more interesting story is later in my life.

Birnbaum: *Did you go to the beach a lot?*

A lot.

Birnbaum: *Tell me more.*

We used to go to . . . nobody had a car; it was a different kind of society. We lived on the Carmel Mountain. We lived in a middle-class neighborhood; there was no upper-class in Israel at that time. And we used to walk about an hour to the sea, all the way from the French, we called it French Carmel. And you went to the cliffs of the mountain, and spent the whole day with other kids. All of us were members of the scout movement, well not a scout movement, because it was mixed girls and boys. And so these sorts of things in the summer were great. We would spend the whole day with friends swimming all the time. It was very good summer.

Quite soon, the youth movement became a very important activity. And also I started to read and started to talk to people. I had a busy social life. Anyway, I mean, actually, if you look at it, it wasn't a country in war. Because we didn't have any massacres, slaughter, or anything; we were lucky. And I mean we did have the beginning of



knowledge about what was happening in Europe. That was very upsetting. Our parents would cry for days.

But on the whole, we had a good life. We went to a private school, a sort of private school. The teachers were fabulous, because they were the crème de la crème, from European immigrants. We had such great people for literature, philosophy and history. It's a one-time treat, in a sense, to be exposed to this very rich European tradition.

### **Remembering Uncle Boris**

Birnbaum: *[Let's] talk about your Uncle Boris.*

My father had so many sisters and brothers, next to him in age, but older was Boris. Boris was very interested in art. I mean, all his life [he wanted] to paint. And of course, my grandfather wasn't involved in this.

But very soon he became quite involved with the Monte Carlo Ballet. Anyway, he was in this company, and he traveled with them to America. And he got married and divorced, he had a hard life. He became famous and successful in the 1960s, mainly [for doing] musicals. He had a great position in the family, because he made "it". The family tried to achieve a lot of things, and he was one of them [that did].

Birnbaum: *So when you were a student, for example, at Berkeley, and your uncle was having all of this success with musicals, did you go to see some of his productions?*

Yeah, whenever I was in New York, he would get me a ticket.

Birnbaum: *When you went to see these productions as a young man, that your uncle designed the sets for, what was that like?*



I didn't really realize how important he was. I knew he was a successful uncle from America. He was sent to Russia by the State Department during the height of the Cold War, and he suddenly got sick. He was a lovely man.

## **Education: The University of California, Berkeley**

### **Applying to the University of California, Berkeley**

Well, first of all, I told my students a few times, how I came to study in America. I saw a friend of mine, his name was Michael Geiger. He said he was going to school. I said "we go to school in September". He said, "yes, but in America, they have a summer session, and you can start at the middle of the year." I started asking him questions, and it sounded great. He said, "If you come [to my house] tonight, I'll give you the extra forms, so that you can see if you like it."

I remember that I read an article about California in the National Geographic Magazine. So I went home. I found the issue, and the article. It had a caption saying in Berkeley, or California, you can swim in the Pacific Ocean and it had photographs of many nice girls. And I said, "that's good, looks like a good place for me."

So I went to his home and got the forms from Michael. It was already much too late but I said, "what the hell, let's try". So after a month, we found that both of us were accepted to school; but I got to go to Berkeley, and Michael to UCLA. It was pretty amazing. So that's how I chose to [study] architecture. I didn't know, you understand, I didn't know anything about landscape architecture.

### **A Student at Berkeley**

*Birnbaum: No, that's great. So you initially went to architecture school.*

Yes, I went to architecture school.

*Birnbaum: So tell me what that was like.*



It was great.

Birnbaum: *And your professors?*

[Professor Joseph] Esherick was my teacher for the first semester. I started in the middle of the year.

Birnbaum: *Before we move on to landscape, tell me about what it was like. Were you taking a studio?*

No, let me explain how I got there. We had a class which was an introductory course [to introduce you to] the side professions, like engineering and economics. So I was sitting there, and suddenly, the whole room was suddenly filled with color. And I opened my eyes because I was kind of sleepy, and it was [Lawrence] Halprin, talking about landscape architecture, showing his private garden [the Schuman garden]. And I loved it so much that after the class ended, I went and . . . [and spoke to him]. I knew he was Jewish, I had heard his name, because his mother was a head of Hadassah. And I talked with him about it; he was very nice, and tried to help me. He gave me advice to do it [switch to landscape architecture].

So that was it. H. Leland Vaughan accepted me into [the] landscape [program]. I was a good student, good enough to be accepted without any problem. And architecture had, more students than landscape, so they didn't have a problem [with the change]. Now Berkeley at that time, it was 1959 or 1960, was getting out of the troubles of the Second World War with a lot of money. America was feeling very strong and promising. And so it looked like a golden opportunity. There was a feeling of optimism and good feeling. And of course, the whole country had to be strong and not frightened. I mean, it was a great period.



So being at Berkeley, the studies were important but not that important. I mean, [there were] all the other activities. I did so many things. I worked as a gardener, whenever I could. And, I was a member of the hiking club. I used to go to Moffitt Library, which is a room four times bigger than this room. And it had a lot of books and music. You could hear a tape, and everything was carpeted, and so full of this European, knowledge of European culture. So there were all sort of, sort of activities that don't exist anymore, I've talked to some people. But they used to . . . people used to get a much better education.

And Berkeley was great. I mean people in landscape they all came from, not all, but a lot of them were a product of rural America. So they were sons of nurserymen, people who knew a lot about trees, a lot about plants, how this failed, how that doesn't fail. There were the city boys, but they loved to hike, and many of them went to the army. I mean, it was not the typical Berkeley kind.

So there were a lot of activities. I took swimming. And I think of how many things I was doing. And of course, I didn't have anybody to give me money. My parents weren't there, and it was impossible to, or very difficult to get the money to America, so I have to do whatever I can [do]. I made good friends; I stayed mostly with the Americans, not with Israelis.

### **A Memorable Project at Berkeley**

So, I worked for Larry Halprin. He was our teacher for the last year, the senior year. The subject matter of the class was the city. Larry asked us about the city, what did we think about the city? I don't remember how it came out, but I suggested, that we make the whole project a show. The class and Larry agreed. And they made me run it. So I worked for a month on the project and then Larry invited us to 1620 Montgomery Street [the Halprin office]. It was 5:00 pm and Larry and many of his friends, engineers, and managers came. We start the presentation, and suddenly the whole electrical system collapsed. We didn't think about calculating in the [electrical pull of the] elevator; because when the elevator operated it consumed so much electricity that the whole



electrical system just shorted out. So we tried to fix it. Then after a few hours the thing worked but by that time almost everybody had gone. So that was Berkeley.

Birnbaum: *So I was just asking about places that you went to visit when you were at Berkeley. Were there landscapes at that time that you remember?*

I went to work as a farmer in Washington City, D.C. It was called Avalon, Avalon Farm, now it is suburbia. My uncle, my aunt arranged a job there. And so I drove across the country. I drove a total of seven times cross country during my time in America. So this was also something.

#### **Art Kutcher Berkeley Classmate and Friend**

Art Kutcher was a classmate of mine and we became friendly and did many things together. But in the last 20 years, we haven't [seen much of each other]. Art had a fantastic sense of design and he's known for being a great draftsman. And he enjoyed it very much. He does a great job in graphics, in drawing. His book on Jerusalem is a masterpiece, and so is his work on London. He also had a book, he used to have a book in preparation on Dublin. And he was a good friend. We did many things together. Kutcher, Levenger and I use to spend some time together, mainly when we were [working] overtime. We had a nice dinner and did some work, courtesy of the Halprin office and learned a lot about San Francisco nightlife.

#### **Memories of Joe Volpe and Robert Royston at Berkeley**

It was my sophomore year. Our teacher was [Robert] Royston. I remember working very hard at night, it was terrible. But I didn't realize how terrible it was. Royston was very strong. I didn't understand what was happening in the class, and I didn't know what to do. It was a situation where they let students from the fourth year work with students in their sophomore year. And one of the students from the senior year was Joe Volpe. And Joe Volpe, God bless him, really took me under his arm. He is such a nice guy, and he really saved me. He said something while working, I forgot what it was, and suddenly everything was so clear. That happened to me many times. I did a very good job, and I



got an A. The professor didn't know what happened, but the rest is history, because I did have that [kind of] illumination so many times. But it was really the help of this classmate. And later, every time I was teaching, I tried to see the arrangement of desks, chairs, and do all the things that can help a student.

### **Remembering J.B. Jackson, Stanley White and other Midwest Impressions**

*Birnbaum: You mentioned at lunch the other day that J.B. Jackson was there [at Berkeley]. J.B. Jackson?*

Yes. I went to any lecture he gave because he was such a great speaker, and he had wonderful ideas. He was from another generation, but I mean, his writing is something that should be on the list of every landscape architect... like [Christopher] Tunnard. So he was one of them [great thinkers].

*Birnbaum: What was he, what was he like?*

Kind of an average size and quite nice-looking, and not fat, [he was] kind of a motorcycle rider. I didn't understand everything he said, because he spoke fast. But I was very impressed by his talk. He was very, very nice.

But another guy, much older, much older than me, called [Stanley] White, came from the Midwest, and he represented to me the Midwest and the love of nature. [PAUSE] Actually, in these trips, there were many other Americans [that we met], including a guy from Kansas. We stayed, with a bunch of people, at the expense of the State of California, in some campground. I remember this guy, I forgot his name, he was a botanist, saying "Oh, Kansas, Kansas. The stars of Kansas, they were so, bright".

### **Lessons learned from Geraldine Knight Scott**

*Birnbaum: And the other person you've mentioned in the past was Geraldine Knight Scott, Gerry Scott?*



Geraldine Scott is [an example] of an aristocratic, intelligent, kind, and fascinating person. We went on trips in the summer. And she took us, on this trip; it was two weeks [long]. You didn't have to take it. It was all free, it didn't count [for credit], which was OK. Many people just took one trip but I took all of them. One week in Santa Barbara. I stayed around Mt. Herman, and I guess, one week in the High Sierras. So it was like, four weeks [total]. And when we went to Santa Barbara to one of the mansions, it was built like a palace, built in the 20s. The guy who built the airplane... What's the name?

Birnbaum: *The Hearst Castle, San Simeon.*

I recommend to all of you Americans to go and see this period piece. I don't understand why they don't make movies of all these places. Anyway, she managed to excite me so much by her stories. This [estate] also [should] be kept for the next generation.

Birnbaum: *Tell us about Geraldine Knight Scott, and her teaching of plant materials.*

She was really an expert on plants, mainly California plants. And you have this combination of instructors, Mai Arbogast, who was a mentor, and Gerry Scott. Scott used to come collect the students, [she was] always in good humor, always accommodating; telling us so much information for different plants. She knew about things like diseases, maintenance, all sorts of problems. Many times you won't remember those but you will remember the essence of the plant.

She might say something which wouldn't mean much to you, but after a while, you connect, you put together what's happening in the class. It was very illuminating.

I mean, it's not just the name of the insect which eats the leaves, but I remember she explained what happened with the American elm. So from something very boring, she told the whole story how the whole country lost these trees. But she went further. I



mean, you could see the farmer from the Midwest, looking at his familiar landscape, and suddenly it's ashes. So you learn things which you remember forever.

Birnbaum: *So my last question about Gerry Scott. If there was a particular project where you thought, you know, Gerry Scott would plant something like that here, that and it would be perfect?*

### **Plants from California to Caesarea**

At the end of Golden Gate Park, there is a famous building, [the Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Garden]. And it was all planted with one kind of succulent hybanthus. It gives a fantastic show of violet color, a dark violet ground cover. And it's really great. And I thought to myself, when visiting the place one day, it would be nice to take a slide of it. And then, many years later, one of the first projects I did was in Caesarea. We worked in Caesarea in two big stages, in the early stage, in 1972, I was a landscape architect for the Caesarea Development Company. And so I had the power to [plant hybanthus] I mean, I just went and did it. And it was beautiful.

And I came back and took another picture and thought everything was fine. The plants managed to mature and the whole thing was like a strong paint. One of the people, who lived there, in the area, went to the head of the company and said, "This sort of plant will bring snakes". They didn't know which snakes, what snakes; they didn't see any of them. But some friend told him. And our manager, the head of the development company was afraid of him. And the next day they came with the tractor [and removed the plants] and nothing was left. And so I didn't repeat it. So I mean, something is there now, but it shows you that you have to be there all the time. So this is a story about the hybanthus of Caesarea.

### **Working for Larry Halprin**

Birnbaum: *Right. So, and while you were a student at Berkeley, did you work for [Larry Halprin]?*



I went and asked for a job and he accepted me. He said, “You will be the next Arie Dvere”. Arie Dvere was an Israeli who went to Berkeley about two or three years before me-and worked with [Lawrence] Halprin, and then stayed in America. And was for many, many years he was the chief planner of the National Park Service, and a wonderful guy.

Birnbaum: *So when you worked for Halprin, what were the projects you were working on?*

Working in Larry’s office was really fun. At the beginning, the first year and a half, I worked on [the] Woodlake [development]. I did the lighting plan and [worked on] Ghirardelli [Square] a bit. I was lucky to have so much time [on these projects]. We have to do things in Israel with so much less time.

Birnbaum: *So tell me, what was the office like, and who was there?*

In the Halprin office, there were many interesting people. There was of course Halprin, and the three Musketeers, Sat Nishita, Don Carter, [Richard] Vignolo. And later Byron McCulley came. He was my classmate at Berkeley. After I went to Harvard I went back to work for Halprin. And then I did Victoria, the big master plan for the campus of Victoria [University, British Columbia, Canada]. I asked Larry what happened to it. He said it was supposed to be done; but I never went to see it. Perhaps from your research you’ll find whatever happened to it. I spent a lot of time on BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit], determining the chain and things along the BART. What a bore. Art Kutcher and I spent so many hours [working]. They wouldn’t give you for overtime, but they’d give you a dinner. You could charge [the dinner] and so Art Kutcher and I used to go to the most expensive restaurants.



But Larry wasn't really involved [in the day to day]. That was something which he didn't really like, or didn't interest him. And I think that Larry looked at my work, in the three months which I worked on it [projects], for twenty minutes maybe thirty minutes.

*Birnbaum: And what was the office environment like, was it fun?*

Yes, it was really good. There were very nice people. A feeling of accomplishment, everybody was sure that we were the best office in the world, at least in America. The whole mood in the whole country was so different. This was just an offshoot of it. The one thing which I liked about his office, the whole huge warehouse, at 1620 [Montgomery St.] was with a view to the [San Francisco] bay.

*Birnbaum: Well it sounds like, in all the stories I've ever heard, it seemed like a very fun place to work, then.*

They don't exist anymore.

*Birnbaum: Was Jean Walton someone you worked with at all?*

Yeah, yeah, I forgot about her. She, she was wonderful. She really knew plants. And she liked to play with plants. [In my own office] I was just as careful to hire good people. But our office is not that great in plant material.

Later, I asked him [Halprin] to give me a letter of recommendation and he sent me some paragraphs. But he related to me as an equal. I mean, one thing, I was really the low person in his office on the totem pole, and now he talked to me as an equal colleague, which I was not at all. I was afraid of him. I mean, he never shouted at me, which he did to other people, but he, was all of strength and self-confidence. And it's not so, I mean, the major project besides the Tayalet, which he loved and put a lot into was Sea Ranch. Sea Ranch is one of the nicest spots on Earth. Larry established a system of using



consultants. And we had quite a lot of engineers and geologists and Larry's office provided the landscape part.

### **Meeting Sandra [Aronson]**

And now more important is Sandra. Sandra came from the southwest, from a ranching family. I still remember the time she spent with her grandfather on the ranch as like the best kind of childhood one could have. When I met her, I met her in Berkeley, [University of California, Berkeley] on the exact day of the election of [President Lyndon] Johnson. Of course, Johnson won the case [the Presidency]. But I won something, I won Sandra. Sandra had just come back from a two year trip, with her pack, from around the world. She landed in San Francisco, after seeing the whole world by herself. [that was] years before people used to go on a big trip like that. But she took it, and she had a lot of adventures and nothing bad happened to her. On the contrary, she had three years of adventure. And I was so taken by her. So that is the story about Sandra.

### **Education: Harvard University**

#### **Harvard Lessons: Being in the Center of the World**

Birnbaum: *So let's start now to talk about Harvard, and how did you come to go to Harvard?*

Well, we always want to go to the best. I'm very happy I did it, because it does help you in life, if you went to the right school. I didn't realize it. And then years later, it occurred to me that it was a good decision.

I chose, for my second degree, Harvard [University] instead of Penn [University of Pennsylvania]. Everybody wants to go to Harvard. And later in life, I saw it was a good decision. But I wouldn't be that upset if I went to Penn, because I liked what they are doing. But I'm very, very happy with my association with Harvard, both as a teacher and of course as a student.



Birnbaum: *Tell me about being a student at Harvard. What was that like? --*

Being a student at Harvard puts you in the center of the world.

Birnbaum: *Tell me about Dean Sert, what was he like?*

Well, I didn't have very much contact with him. I was the only landscape architect who chose, who chose to do a project with an urban designer. I met Laurence Cutler and his wife, Sherrie, and we became a very nice team with another guy, I forgot his name. And we did a new town, a mega new town. But anyway, we did some project which had a quite trendy solution. It could have been any place in the world, when I think about it. And they loved it. It was all this pompous approach. And actually, some of it, was in the same direction [of thought], that Ben Thompson was leading, it's interesting. He was the chairman of architecture.

Birnbaum: *Sert visited you once, you said.*

Yeah, when we were writing one of the midterm presentations. And he liked it. Cutler has a good hand. Like I said, he's a nice guy. But I had learned a lot about the character of architects by working with them. And later, our teacher liked it, too. I also took a course which included a design project for the state of Massachusetts. And it was presented by a mixed team. I was sort of the leader of this team. I recall my teacher was [Stuart] Dawson.

#### **Learning from [Eduard] Sekler and James Ackerman**

Birnbaum: *I am curious if you could speak to that aspect of Harvard, people like [Eduard] Sekler and [James] Ackerman and how they inspired you?*

Two historians in architecture influenced me a lot, Sekler and Ackerman. Ackerman is an American scholar, a very nice guy, very open, and very knowledgeable, and smart. Sekler is very European. He came from Austria with a lot of knowledge. He loved the



profession, and he loved the culture he came from. I'm sure he loved Germany, because he felt that he was a German more than anything else.

I had a meeting with Sasaki and Dawson, I think, to check my list of professors and so on. I decided I was going to take many courses, because it was the last chance I would have to do it, little did I know, it would be true. So I took a course with [Aaron] Fleischer at MIT, about transportation. I took Sekler, I took required courses, and all of them for credit.

Ah. Ackerman, in his book about Palladio, [*Palladio*] put forward an idea that Palladio wanted to have a building which was built like a U. That would mean you have half the distance to walk from A to B if it's a U. Now, I wrote a paper, with all my humbleness, I took the liberty of suggesting that the main reason [he wrote that] was [that] he just wanted to, to show off to more people. I didn't find anything to rule it out.

I handed in the paper, which criticized a very deep, a very basic assumption of Ackerman. I took a chance. I knew that it was going to be either a fail or be a success. So, Sandra typed the paper. She thought I was crazy, that I would flunk out of Harvard. But I took the right risk. We got to the class about two weeks later and before the class started, Ackerman said, "Who is Aronson?" "I want to talk to you". But he's still smiling, so I thought it would be OK.

So after the class, I went to him. Ackerman pulled the paper out and said, A, or A plus or something like that. And that was it, he gave it to me, and he said how he liked it very much and he wanted to show it to Sert, to the Dean, which he did.

There's a happy end to this story. About five years ago, there was a Congress in Jerusalem about design, and all the higher echelons in the design world, were in the Jerusalem Theater. And in the list of guests was James Ackerman. So I went to him and talked to him. And he was so happy. He just was shaking, almost. He was by that time



85 or something like that and we had a great moment. It made his trip, after 50 years. . . I wish I had had more time to talk to him then, but it was a busy time. It was also very rewarding for me.

### **Inspired by Norman Newton**

I had this course with [Norman] Newton, Newton was, the best expert of the whole period of the 20s and 30s, along with Robert Moses in New York, and many others. And Newton worked with the [professional] offices of that period, and he was a pretty good professional. He was very optimistic. There was something very British about him. And we became sort of friends, not friends, but I enjoyed seeing him passing by the yard [Harvard Yard]. And I mean, let's put it this way, stopping for a minute to gossip.

The last thing you had to do in his class, which you couldn't escape, was to write about what was the role of the landscape architect? I don't know how it happened. I remember I was sitting for a whole day and I wrote something like ten pages on what I thought landscape architecture should be and what were the problems. I was smart enough not to throw it away. And forgot about it, and then about 10 or 15 years ago, I stumbled into it. I couldn't believe it, what I actually did for 40 years was written by Shlomo Aronson.

### **Remembering Hideo Sasaki**

*Birnbaum: So I asked you earlier about who the chairman of the program was. And I was curious because it was Sasaki, was it not?*

Sasaki said, let him choose [the courses] what he wants, it's fine with me. And Dawson said OK. But if you [get] stuck, we'll transfer you back. And that's what happened.

*Birnbaum: Did you, did you get along with Hid [Hideo Sasaki]?*

Yeah. I don't remember that much of what Sasaki taught us. But a few years ago, there was a 200 year celebration at Harvard. There was somebody, I think Martha Schwartz, who asked "what did you learn from Sasaki"? But because I said, "I didn't learn anything



from Sasaki” everybody was, “oh”, like, I said something about [Frederick Law] Olmsted. What? I couldn’t criticize somebody like Sasaki or like Olmsted? But I do remember Sasaki was a good crit, and a very nice person.

### **Learning about Frederick Law Olmsted**

Birnbaum: *What professor, where did you learn about Olmsted, what class?*

[I learned about him] in America, not in Israel. [I learned about him in the] first year of landscape architecture. Right away, “it’s so Olmstedian” . . . .

Birnbaum: *So what was it like, then when you went to Boston where you have all these Olmsted landscapes everywhere you look?*

Some big lawns, I mean, I like Prospect Park more. I think he’s great because he did so many different things.

### **Remembering Carl Steinitz**

I first met Carl Steinitz in the design room at GSD [Harvard Graduate School of Design]. Later, our friendship became more friendship than business. And we became friends. And then he used to come to Israel because he had a sister here. So it was more friendship than anything to do with design or any sort of thing. I always used to stay in his house at Harvard, and we used to have dinner together. He did a teaching project in Israel.

### **Mentor and Friend: Larry Halprin**

#### **As a Role Model**

Birnbaum: *Now, one of the things that you’ve said in the past, more than once, but you haven’t said today, is that Halprin has been a role model for you. How?*

I imagine he was a model, but it’s obvious. No, it was because of the duration of the acquaintance. Because [the friendship] was long, and there was a long time between



Larry's visits [to Israel]. I've visited America a few times too. He knew Sandra very well, and the kids.

Birnbaum: *Was he a role model as a landscape architect, as a community planner? I mean, in what way was he a role model?*

He was a role model in some technical things. My office today is very similar to his office at 1620 [Montgomery St.]. Also, [he was a mentor] by his teaching. He taught me to choose the important from the banal, to not be afraid of challenges, like the design for the State of Israel and to be innovative. In those ways, Larry Halprin was a mentor to me.

### **Halprin's Impact on Israel**

I know, you asked me to talk about Larry Halprin, working with Larry Halprin. So let me introduce this talk with something else, Larry's impact on Israel. Larry Halprin's important achievement in Jerusalem might be more important than any [single] Israeli design. He was a member of the Jerusalem Committee, which included the top designers in the whole world; he was a junior [person] then. Most people were of the vintage of Second World War, many European people, and of course also some Americans.

He [Larry] had the courage to tell those people to take [another look at the Master Plan and redo it]. In a sense, if he was wrong and people didn't agree with him, it could have been his demise for a long time. But he stood on his own feet and didn't give up, and eventually prevailed. And that takes a lot of courage. And I appreciated it. Art Kutcher, by that time, was in Israel, and he and Larry and I formed sort of a sub-group. We weren't invited to the deliberation of the Jerusalem Committee. But we couldn't give up the opportunity to brush with such great people.



Besides the Jerusalem conference, Larry was involved with many, many other aspects of [design]. First of all, he did the landscaping of Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, a very big project and very interesting the way he solved it.

He was a fine designer. He was very, very generous as far as money, and he was honest. I've known him for a long time and there was never once a problem of somebody trying to screw the other, which is good. He was open to ideas, and he knew how to enjoy life. He enjoyed having a martini in the afternoon.

*Birnbaum: Do you want to say anything else about Teddy [Kollek] the Mayor? You said he was fantastic. It seems like a lot of projects happened when he was mayor. Tell me about the Jerusalem Committee.*

All right, the thing which I think is the most important thing that Larry did was his involvement with the Jerusalem Committee. Well, it was right after the Six Days War, and Teddy Kollek was then the mayor. He had just become the mayor of Jerusalem. And suddenly you have a big city and a very important city, [it was] very exciting, and very important to everyone. There was a real avalanche of ideas, of feelings of all kinds, or [feelings of] depression, if you were an Arab. A lot of money was coming in, a lot of good will and a lot of bad will. And soon a lot of archeology [was underway].

At that time I was one of the few landscape architects. I don't know, maybe there were 10 or 20, now there are 350. And we were trusted by the establishment, I don't think they knew that much about what they were doing. So basically a group of about 10, 15, 20 people in their 30s, managed the whole thing, with more successes than blunders. And it was fun. And it was challenging.

And suddenly, since I took the course with [Aaron] Fleischer[a] MIT the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] on transportation, I could speak to the city, the minister of housing and so on, with authority. And I managed to slip in every so often a Harvard



name. But it didn't do much good; actually, because people didn't know what Harvard was at that time. Now everybody goes to Harvard. But [still] there was some prestige.

## Practice

### Developing a Practice in Israel

I came at the right time, More or less. What happened is that I wrote a letter to, to Teddy Kollek, the Mayor, and Teddy said OK. And I started work at the Jerusalem Municipality, City Engineer's Department. But right after two or three months of working for the municipality, I thought, the whole thing is for nothing.

[Out on my own] After a few months, I got two big projects. One was the road along the Dead Sea. And the other one was a plan for a very big area in Israel called Judean Hills. [It is] quite a big area. And so the big regional plan and many things came after it. The first ten years we were doing a lot of crash programs, around the whole city, starting with housing of this neighborhood, which was finished a long time ago and also a lot of preservation [work]. We tried not to be one kind of practice. And when I was 40, I chose not to do just housing, but [to be receptive to] more possibilities.

*Birnbaum: So tell me, what was the climate like? What was it like to practice then? Did people know what you did? Tell me what it was like. You're consulting on these projects, did people understand what you do?*

I was very lucky. And I had the [PAUSE] how to say it? People believed in me. And at that period, in the beginning, everything was new; the whole country [was new]. I got free credit in many things; it just started to work out. And I was accepted. But it took some time and some breakthroughs. So the percentage of finished projects was very, very high. But many times, I would try, not to work too fast, because even though we had the permission and the license and so on, many times you are lucky. at least I was, lucky to avoid a blunder. Because sometimes a design got passed through a committee, the design was lousy, and nothing stopped it. I tried to do so many things, many times,



to drag projects, just because [they needed more time]. Like pilots in the airplane, they needed to have so many hours in a F15 or whatever.

I think many designs depend on the person, depend on the design, and depend on the requirements. It's good to have these kinds of work stoppages. You are not responsible for them and it gives you time to reflect. Many times, as we said at Suzanne Dellal, the design was clear and it was built and everybody's happy. Or at Kreitman [Plaza], Kreitman as a design was a very, very fast [solution]. And that doesn't mean that everything was like that; at the Technion, it took longer. And [there] we were pretty close to a solution. But then we came up with this other idea which was built, and thank God, it's much better.

*Birnbaum: So tell me a little bit then, when you started the office, how many people, give me a sense of how the office has evolved over time.*

The office is a part of biology. What do I mean? I mean, you're born, you go to school, you do this and that, [have a] family. But, but the relationship between young staff to old staff is different every decade or so. We had a period where there were a lot of foreigners; and we had people who were young compared to me. I mean, it's natural. That's life. And [now] we have mostly women in the office, only three men or so now. There are 20 people, so it's not that many. I think, the whole profession will change, [because of] the relationship between men and women.

So the first period was a lot of foreigners but eventually most of them stayed in Israel. Some did not. Many people spoke English. The Hebrew-speaking [people] were a minority.

*Birnbaum: Give me a sense of what the early practice was like, the prominent people-- Peter Bugod, Esther Niv.*



Everyone you mentioned was born in Israel, like Peter Bugod was Belgian, he almost became a partner, but anyway, he backed out of it. He was a great draftsman, a very good designer, a very nice guy, could speak French that was very important. And then there was Esther Niv, she was older, something like five or ten years older than me. She was Israeli, and also very, very good, and very pleasant. And she had some experience in building and architecture. Peter also was an architect. But when they start to work for me, they became landscape architects. They practice both landscape architecture and architecture now. And then Colin Frank, who is an Englishman, is a very nice guy. They all were very nice. And we had a great time, a very social time. And people loved the office, we had these huge dinners. The whole thing was quite, quite pleasant. But then with the maturing period, and each one opened his own little office. .And then Peter left, and from the list I just mentioned, nobody stayed.

Birnbaum: *So let's talk about the 1980s.*

Well, it has to do a lot with the Promenade, because it all came together. And from the 1980s, other work was in the shadows of the Tayelet, but in a good sense. And it brought in so many projects; and that lasted for about 20 years. And then I got a bit sick, and this and that. So we came to the simple idea of making Ittai and Barbara partners. Barbara is a landscape architect, which made it very good, very easy. Ittai is an architect, and in only two years they are doing a good job. And so, I hope it continues.

Birnbaum: *So what is it like to have your son and daughter-in-law in the office? It's not something you see every day.*

It's fun.

Birnbaum: *Tell me about what that's like.*



Well, I feel, of course it's natural to [feel] kind of left out. I mean, it's not something that I command people to do. It's more, because they want to be independent. I have to say this, commercially, physically, or financially, they are doing better than me. They bring home more than I ever did. And we'll see over the next wave. Because mostly I think, in other places in the world, after a while the situation, doesn't work. You have to invent something new, some structure, not so much about the design, but more about the technical part [of the business].

*Birnbaum: What is it like having this all in the family? I mean, you guys live literally on top of each other. What is it like in terms of how the family collaboration works?*

We have always had this kind of situation. I mean, we used to eat at home through the whole childbearing era. So I mean, it wasn't, anything new, and it still is not. It has developed into an extended family. And it's wonderful to have the floor space and other things, it's worth it. And we're very close, [with] the children. And well, I don't regret it.

#### **On the transformation of Jerusalem**

*Birnbaum: Could we maybe step back, and could you tell me how, how Jerusalem has changed? How Jerusalem has changed in the 50 years you've been here? Why, because of all this change, do we need to create calm in design? What was Jerusalem like when you came back here in the 60s, and what, and how does that compare to now?*

Jerusalem transformed completely in a rapid way from a dusty old Turkish town, which really belonged more to 1099 than to modern society; [transformed] not to a paradise, but to an extremely and I think, beautiful and coveted city. Many times, when you think about the quality of life, [there are a] the few elements which are more important than the others. One [element] is the climate, and you can't beat Jerusalem. One is land, so you are killing two things. And of course, the third one would be money.



But partly because of the influence of Teddy Kollek, who was the mayor for 30 years. [He was] extremely ambitious and extremely smart, and demanding. We worked a lot with him. And he made the right decision by instinct many times. I know that in my case, he helped me so much; he helped me with design, not with personal [things]. And always knew I got a fair deal, which I did. So Jerusalem [was] transformed after the government and the municipality injected so much energy, and so much thought [into the process]. I'm sure there are many places which can be improved, but on the whole, it's a beautiful place.

## Design

### Elements of Design

#### Water as a key element

Life in Mediterranean areas, like California, South Africa, Israel, is really a matter of survival. If you live in the tropics, you have the basic amount of food on the trees around you, and if there is a drought it doesn't affect your existence. I mean, in the Mediterranean areas, either you've got nothing or you have to worry about the next step. And the use of water in a landscape project has to relate to the fact that you are not in the tropics, or temperate [zone]. When you find in the bible the stories of Abraham going to Egypt, for bread, it this lack of a constant safe source of food, that is the major thing to the life of a person in a Mediterranean climate.

#### Stone

*Birnbaum: OK, yes. So Shlomo, let's talk about stone in your work, and what's, and how you use stone and what it means to you as part of your palette.*

Stone in our parks is very central. And it takes a lot of our thought. I remember coming to Jerusalem not knowing much about stone, because I did not have much experience with it in the United States, except [in] Barre, Vermont.



And then in a good period of design and work, I noticed that it's not such a bad word, "stone". And even though it costs about 10 to 20% more, it's worth it, and with it goes the feeling of durability.

We understand stone much better than we did thirty years ago. So when we worked on other projects we hardly used any other material for cladding. We learned how to make strange shapes, like the one of the snail in Neve Tzedek. At Dung Gate we had a problem. On one hand, the Dung Gate area was used as a parking lot, and as a bus parking lot, and the road had to be designed and built there. So we got to do [this project] and now it's Beit Shalom [Park]. We were asked to do a comprehensive plan for the whole length of the southern wall, all the way from the Dung Gate to, to the Offel [eastern wall]. The only thing we liked were stone pavers which are very narrow and long, set very deep. It looks great, but it doesn't exist that much in other parts of the wall. We asked the contractor to build it and he did. I've used thousands of meters of macadem. And this something I was very emotional about. How often do you get to do a gate in the old city? Every 400 years. So that's a noblesse oblige.

So stone, in our lifetime, is something which represents aging, it represents strength and honesty. You can't glue two stones to each other, it looks terrible. And it's not good from other points of view. The Romans left us a lot of material about stone, and it's called "opus", that means work, the Romanum opus. It's a good thing, stone. Stone is very central, is a very essential element in our palette.

One of the last times we used stone was in the Jerusalem Theater, which is not that far from here. We had to do the whole piazza and we looked for stone for a long time, but we couldn't find anything which we liked. And then we decided to send an old man, to China. This guy was a stone expert, a real stone expert, an English guy who knew what was important to know about stone. He became an expert in stone after 50 years or 60 years. And he was sent to China, and he found this [stone]. They sent us 40,000 pieces.



And they sent the workers to assemble it, and all these Chinese did it in a week; something which would take a month in Israel. It was amazing.

## Principals of Design

### Continuity vs. Change in the Landscape

One of the three principals of our work in the last 50 years is continuity. And again, continuity in geographical terms it creates space. There is continuity as far as use of water; and continuity of the trees, and with time. The concept of time is a very important thing. And I'm sure we didn't mention it at all, but we should say something about it, too. Because I am starting to see that on many projects we didn't take the growth of the plant material into account.

Peter Walker, said that there are basically two kind of practices. One in which the majority of effort is working abroad. And the other kind [of practice] is working in your own country. I for sure belong to the second kind, which has a lot of advantages but lacks the excitement of travel abroad. So, of course, if you are lucky you do both. But if not, you should know that there are no limitations. There is an advantage in seeing many various trees and vegetation. When we saw Kreitman Square, I was shocked. It was another place. It was very nice, and most likely it will change. There is there a fast-growing tree; which needs a period of 10 or 20 years of rejuvenation. And you can do it, this one [tree] yes and this one no, and so on.

As a student, you make a design, but you never follow it [through]. But it should be studied. And actually, I think that in an ideal world, you would be required to make a plan, plan one, architecture number one and [plan seventeen], architecture number seventeen showing how the next one or two phases, stages [in the design] will look. So at least the client can look at this and say, "right here, if you plant here, we're going to block the ventilation and so on".



### **Creating Calm in the Landscape**

Birnbaum: *To be calm. Calming. Simplicity. Order. We said we wanted to come back and talk a little bit more about what that means and how you achieve that. Can you speak about this?*

Israel is a country, is a very tense country, full of tension, tension created by machines and by people, by every other thing. And it could become a problem, a much stronger problem in the future. Because, because life [is] so noisy, and so difficult, the major role of a landscape architect in Israel is to help create [a sense of] calmness in the landscape, visually, noise-wise, and etc.

Well, we don't realize how much things changed in the last 100 years, and how much they're going to change in the coming 100 years. And it could be a very difficult world, and we have to almost create sanctuaries for people, because the disturbing elements can be so overwhelming.

### **Thoughts on Design**

#### **On practice**

In engineering, there's a great future. This is something else I have been thinking about recently. There is an age that a young landscape architect should be made aware of. Anyway, I bring it up because to me it occurred to me; look at [Lawrence] Halprin. He got a golden age from his 40s to 50s. And then it stopped. I mean, he did good things since, but [it is] not the same as . . . Sea Ranch, motation, the Nicholet [project] and so on. He never repeated this.

The same thing happened to me. I had a very exciting period, when I was 40 or 50, but it never came with the same intensity. You could rely on the experience which you had gathered before. So it's at about the age of 40, 45 let's say, when you have to choose to become a landscape architect of raisins and almonds. I mean [to become a landscape architect] of all the good things or to [PAUSE] become a landscape architect of housing.



Because most of the work for landscape architecture in the world is around buildings and around housing. And there is a sort of a moment [when you decide] to go with quantity; most likely, most of your life you will be doing good for people but [it will be] less glamorous and less interesting than the other approach. And I made the decision not knowing that I made the decision.

We had a housing project here in Jerusalem, in the outskirts of Jerusalem, of 25,000 people, it was very successful, but it's, [it's not] the [Negev] phosphate [Works] or something which is really more exciting. I don't know if it's true. I didn't mention it to anyone, I had no idea. For me, and for Larry, whom I know very well, and I think for other people, this is a rule. I mean, also in a sense you could say, it's a second chance. But nobody can promise you [that you get] to do the Opera House of Sydney, there are limitations.

*Birnbaum: So the question I want to ask you is, here we moved from a project of designing the gates and now you're talking about planning the country. We have talked about the conveyer belt, the Dead Sea, the phosphates. I mean, did someone ever say, Shlomo, what do you think you're doing? You're a landscape architect, you should be planting trees. Who do you think you are, taking on these projects?--*

Nobody ever said it to me.

*Birnbaum: No one.*

And I was waiting all the time for it to happen. I didn't know when. But I agree with you, it's kind of odd.

*Birnbaum: So when you were teaching at Harvard, for example, or if you were lecturing anywhere, what is the message for landscape architects? What do you tell people about*



*sites like the conveyer belt and the phosphate project and the master plan for a country?*

First of all, it's a small country. Israel is really a very small country. I was lucky enough to be in the right place. People trusted me. I don't know, I mean, when we started off, my first regional park, somebody, the head of the department liked me very much, and everything we wanted to do – got approved. And he, he loved the process of planning. He came from the soil. He was this kind of type of person who was a very, very good administrator.

### **On Historical Sites**

Birnbaum: *Yes, I have it. OK. Shlomo, let me ask you something, because you know, here you are working on these sites with hundreds if not thousands of years of history, and there's something that you said a few, maybe five minutes ago, that you said a number of times. You were scared about doing the wrong thing.*

I was scared. I'm still scared. When there is a, there's a flood every so often, when something doesn't work, I always think about all the projects, and who's going to fix the problems? And I used to call all the time, call somebody and say, "What happened in your project"? I took it very seriously.

Birnbaum: *Do you think of yourself as a guardian, a custodian?*

Yes, I feel many times . . . I took a job which I thought for the country was more important. I'll do that [project] and not that [one]. This is kind of a bit of chutzpah. Who assigned me to think for other people? But I just did it. And nothing terrible happened. But it's scary. It's scary.

### **On The Sinai**

Well, you have to be there. It's, I mean, it's a great place. Of course, right now, I mentioned it a bit last time, it's a bit ruined, quite a bit ruined. But it had this sense of



another world, where you have the possibility to make something really good, I mean, excellent, not just good. But I want to say, to that [PAUSE] [it is] as if God was a big power who was trying to produce a fine piece. And in the Sinai, it worked. So thank God, [there is] a good ending. But really, it's something fantastic. And when you go there and you don't see a human being for miles, not miles, in the whole area, it's so fantastic. And the colors, I mean this red sand and so on, and the fish and the coral. I mean, you can really spend the rest of your life very happily y[there].

*Birnbaum: You were just describing Sinai very poetically, and I'm curious if you have romantic feelings towards it, if it's something you go back to.*

OK, I guess so. For sure, it's one of the strongest long-term, long-term [situations] for me. It was actually quite easy, because Israel for a change didn't blunder and was a really nice custodian. And I was part of this, [being a] custodian, a very small part of the effort. And we didn't ruin anything there; we made it much better than it was, and for sure not worse. Unfortunately, it hasn't continued, in the last 20 years. But it wasn't destroyed.

### **On the Legacy of the Profession**

*Birnbaum: So Shlomo, tell us what you've got there. What is that? You have that paper, can you tell us what it is?*

This is a manuscript, part of a manuscript which I wrote in 1965 as a term paper for Professor Newton. And I find it so interesting that the ideas we cherished in 1966 are still valid and make some sense. It was another world, of course. But we shouldn't forget the good things of each generation. - And we are part of a long chain of Renaissance men. We are part of a chain of, which will never stop.

*Birnbaum: So tell us what it says.*



I see the future of the landscape architect as a man who is capable of dealing with problems in the abstract, who believes in certain values; who operates with a small but creative staff; who use the computers to reduce the amount of work done by draftsmen; and who are very flexible and can work with other offices like his own on certain projects or problems. In short, the profession is the creative man, and not a set of rules one is supposed to perform. Because of the complexity and sophistication of the future, the future landscape architect should be educated and trained to understand the new problems, which are bound to come more and more in his lifetime. Instead of the specialists that mark our age, we need to, we need a Renaissance man. Not a man who knows everything, that is impossible, but a man who can always learn and who can try to understand everything to which he has to end. Above all to have a philosophy of life and of design. To quote Giovanni Gentile speaking of Leonardo Da Vinci, quotation, “for him, philosophy, positive or negative, was the bottom of the thought and all scientific research” .The future of landscape architecture is the future landscape architect.

*Birnbaum: So reading that today what do you think? Do you think that a lot of those things came true and you followed that path in your own practice? Well, you know, when Gina [the Director] asked you if she, if you thought you were a Renaissance man and you said that “you wish”. I think about the diversity of sites that you’ve worked on, you know, from the phosphates to the conveyer belt to the National Plan and then down to very small-scale hand-crafted projects. That sounds like a Renaissance man to me.*

### **On Transportation**

Working for Halprin, I learned quite early in my education the importance of transportation as a major player in all the countries in the world. For many, many years, except for an interlude by some people during the recession in 1929, and the [the work of Robert] Moses, nobody dealt with it.

So I was made aware at Halprin’s office about it. Including the story about the project where the California Department of Public Works tried to get Halprin to support an



unacceptable design solution. And thank God they lost. But Larry fought them and his knowledge of transportation was always greater than his fellow architects.

So then later I learned about [Gilmore] Clark and [Michael] Rapuano in a course with Norman Newton [on this subject at Harvard]. And so when I won this assignment of Road Number One, I got perhaps my best triumph. I was able to influence the geometry of the road, in such a way that everybody accepted it. I didn't have any complaints about it. Instead of [it] being the engineer, it was the landscape architect who actually [had] the important role. Suddenly people look at you not as a child or non-professional but as somebody who can say something, and show them the right way to do it. And so that's true for [Road] Number One.

And since then, we received a letter from somebody high in the DPW, the guy who was later in charge for road number Six [saying] everything I know about, about roads, is from Aronson. And he gave some examples, I think. And it's important, because there are not many examples of succeeding like this. However, the architect is in Haifa and he did carry on a study on the geometry, too. So there is some continuation. And we continue, too.

## **Practice Guidelines**

### **Lessons learned from Larry Halprin**

Larry Halprin was a genius at shifting from one scale to another. And it's really a talent. I never met anyone who can so easily address such extreme situations. I learned from him a thing or two in this lane, how to relate big scale to small scale. I learned from him not to be afraid. And to take advantage of working on big scale plans, all the way up to a National Plan. Partly this is because Israel is a small country and partly because in times of shortage, having a concept of how open space works [can move us] towards saving the country.



Larry could also talk to a big crowd of people [in a] very sophisticated [way]. We had this case in Eilat. He eventually gave me the landscape master plan for Eilat to finish. He was standing in the airport, many people were next to him and he tried to say everything about the landscape of Eilat, and he never even looked at it. He gave a fantastic speech; it made a lot of sense. Even without knowing what he was talking about. But it was just fine. I was really awed. And then we filled the gap, and nobody knew. And I asked him [about it] and he kind of smiled, but I never knew how he did it. I mean, as I said he was intelligent. So if you can stand up in front of a lot of people and invent a theory then . . . . I did it many times, too.

### **What Makes a Good Client**

*Birnbaum: So you were just talking about the mayor, what makes a good client?*

A good client should be intelligent. There is nothing to replace intelligence. So that's one thing. And then it's good if your client has some engineering education. It doesn't have to be the Nobel Prize; but [it's good if they] can understand and can read a plan and can imagine a three-dimensional project and so on. A good client is patient and not too haughty. And a good client should have a lot of money.

*Birnbaum: So have you had, who, have you had one or two favorite clients in your career?*

Yeah, I have had great clients. I had Teddy Kollek, as the mayor, [he] was a fantastic guy. And I have had people from the army when we did the redeployment after the peace treatment with Egypt. There was a great rush by the army to redeploy to the desert, and not to destroy all the natural qualities of the Negev area. They [the army] held a big meeting. I got to do the sensitive part and also to coordinate it.

And the man, who was the Director of the National Reserve, came to me and said, "look Aronson, we all trust you. If you fail us, you fail the country". Anyway, I was much



younger, too. I took it so seriously and could hardly sleep. And it was for three years, from '79 to '82, when this thing occurred; and we did a good job.

And so that's a good client, because they were intelligent and they loved the country, like so many military men. I had a great time. The main thing we did was establish a routine. Sandra, the kids, and I went on Thursday, and spent the whole time [in the country]. We stayed with friends. The people became friends after a while, because it was almost a three year [project]. And we saw them quite often, and we had time in the country. And I loved it.

### **Doing Your Homework**

Birnbaum: *So when you approach a project and you deal with the past, what's your process?*

First of all, you have to [PAUSE] state the problem. I think about it and I read about it. I like to read.

Birnbaum: *You like to do research?*

Yeah, but I like, it has to be of some [interest]. I am very lazy, and also I get bored very fast. There was a guy, his name was **Yosef Weitz** who really founded and gave the direction to the forestation [of Israel] from the British Mandate all the way up to his death, around the 1960s.

I read all his memoirs, and I had such an advantage by doing that, because this man really did something very unique, very impressive, very influential. He used to come to the site. I never met him really. But he would say, "you plant and do so and so, this up to there, and this up to here". No drawing, no nothing. And he did it and everybody adored him.



So reading about the situation helped to resolve all the other information [for me]. Because very early in the game, I needed to decide what the permanent solution was going to be. What was the important thing? Just like at Caesarea, the closing of the gap in the long wall.

### **Developing Talent in the Office**

Birnbaum: *And so when you're teaching a young person in the office about how to deal with grading, do you have any sort of rules, you know, ways that you teach them? Do you do a little sketch? I guess what I'm saying is, how much is too much?*

Well, first of all, let me tell you about students. We had a method which is a bit cold, but when we get a new guy or a new girl, we let them jump into the cold water. And some people can't perform and some people become so great. But anyway, we are not afraid to hire people with very little experience, because someone who is good will always find a way to swim to the shore. So that's one thing.

Birnbaum: *Do you like to draw? Do you like to sketch?*

I mean I'm not a born sketcher. And I always was lucky to hire people who were talented. So I found a way of really concentrating on the supervision and on the design ideas. I put less effort in working at the scale where you really solve all the problems, the transition from sketch to the [design resolution].

Birnbaum: *Did you ever, did you ever build models in the office to look at problems?*

Now, with the computer, it's become almost obsolete.

### **Planning for the Future**

In Israel, there is an unusual lack of land. The whole country's so little, and we have to look to the future. We, we have to discover, or to study, a new type of landscape which



is more intensive. It doesn't mean that we'll have less acreage of landscape, or of green elements. I mean, the majority of the parks should be more concentrated and there should be fewer of them.

So the solution is to spend, the only thing you have which is money, because all the other elements except water are restricted by size. And as you see in the Herzliya Park, we tried to build elements which [can] accommodate a large crowd of children and still feel good and not feel overcrowded. And that should be done as part of a comprehensive plan [a plan] which will assign to certain areas certain kinds of uses. Every city wants to build a park, and usually the park is named after the city. When we got the work in Herzliya the client was the mayor of course, she said that they wanted the park to be bigger than this, bigger than that. But she said nothing of the content. She became a very good friend and understood design. So [the city of] Herzliya is going to be lucky. But it could be also a sign for the future and for other places; because most of the population [of Israel] is living in areas along the coastal plain, so we should save the land and the use.

### **The future for landscape architecture**

Birnbaum: *Where would you like to see landscape architecture go in the next 50 years in Israel?*

I think it should be it should be a leading profession. That's for sure. And it doesn't seem to happen. But it should be the profession, a Renaissance profession with all sorts of new approaches. I mean, actually, if you read my paper from 50 years [ago], you can find the answer there. I'm still amazed by this luck that you found it. But it might give us some hint, It is still good and we might learn from it.

*The interview continues with a conversation with Barbara and Ittai Aronson in the Aronson office*

### **Barbara Aronson and Ittai Aronson Interview**



## Reflections

### The Office Legacy Then and Now

Ittai: That story. Well, I actually grew up in the office, literally, because the office is above our private home. And we would come home from school and just walk into the office and say hello and grab something to eat sometimes, or just look and see what everybody's doing. And it was very natural and very simple, like that. And my father made a point of taking us with him on projects. He was proud of his work, and he wanted to share it with us.

And there were also great opportunities to go on trips that, and see places that you wouldn't normally be able to go to. So we definitely spent a lot of time in the projects and on the way to projects. Anytime we went anywhere not related to work, he would have an argument with us and with my mother about whether or not we could stop on the way to see the progress on a project. This happened even if we were very late for a festive holiday dinner somewhere. So that happened a lot, too.

But I actually grew up thinking I would not be an architect. I thought I'd be a doctor. But it just worked out that I was accepted to Bezalel. I liked painting I guess. It suddenly occurred to me that it would be interesting. Maybe wanting to be a doctor was just trying not to be an architect, I don't know.

Barbara: And I remember when I came as a student 27 years ago, my desk was in the hall as people came in. And every day, the four kids would come in; they wouldn't look at us, because they were really not interested in us. They slammed the door, they ran around the corner, said hello to their father, talked, and then went back. And it was very clear that the family was a very important part of the whole business, just like Shlomo going down to have a family lunch with all the kids.

And it's quite interesting that today, if I, if I sort of reflect on that, I think that the way the office is running today is not very different [from] the way it was 27 years ago. A lot of



the values, both professionally and also how we manage the office, we took over from Shlomo, are his because he is a very kind person. He's interested in promoting people, and their ideas to get the best out of them; and ultimately to get the best, also, for the office and for the project. Also, what is the size of an office that you can comfortably handle and still retain control over what you're doing? I think all of these things are very, very constant. And the office has been between fifteen and twenty people as long as I can remember.

Ittai: Well, it obviously started a bit smaller, but it was that size for a very long time. And that created a way of managing the office that we still use today. I mean, some offices have a hierarchical organization where you have a principal and maybe a few more senior architects, and then a whole row of draftspersons. It's very common, especially in architectural firms; and he never, and we hardly ever have any draftspeople in the office. We look to hire architects.

Barbara: Half of the people are landscape architects and half of them are architects. Partially because in Israel, there just aren't that many landscape architects and partially we found that the two professions very much complement each other. And sometimes we have situations where the landscape architects have an interesting angle on the buildings that we're doing, and the architects bring a different three-dimensional understanding to the landscape. And we find it very, very . . .

Ittai: Enriching. And it also has to do with one of the main principles in the office, and that is we try to do projects in all scales. I mean, ideally we would like to do the master plan for a region, and then a detailed master plan for an area, and then maybe a park in that detailed master plan, and if possible, also the buildings in the park that we are doing. Actually to do all of the levels of the design is something that he always tried to do, and we continue to try and do today.



### Looking Back at Shlomo Aronson's Legacy

Birnbaum: *This is my last question related to biography. Describe Shlomo, and describe his personality, his demeanor, his vision.*

Ittai: Well, I see him as a father, so it's a lot of things for me. And obviously I won't go into the personal things too much. But he's a very kind man, but extremely focused on the family, and extremely focused on work. That's about it. All of his life he has had a very wide interest and knowledge in history. But that basically comes from his childhood and the way he was brought up. But as my father, in the time that I knew him, basically that's what he had in his life, his immediate family and work. He was an extreme workaholic, and very devoted family man.

Barbara: I remember Shlomo when I was a student. And I was definitely one of many students, foreign students that went through the office, that he was equally kind and attentive to a student or to a colleague or to a worker. I also remember in 1984 when Halprin came on a few trips to work with Shlomo on the Haas Promenade, I was this little light but I was able to draft elevations and details for the discussions. But Larry made you feel like you were an important contributor to the discussion. And especially now looking back and recognizing what Shlomo stands for and what he has achieved, I think that's a very, that's a very great human achievement. But also as a professional, it made me want to become a landscape architect. And it certainly made me, or influenced me in the way that I treat other people.

Ittai: In the office today.

Barbara: It's very easy to forget that, you know? It's very easy as you succeed, and people tell you that you're doing good work, [it is important] that you recognize the contributions of all the other people in the office. That they actually make it happen.



Birnbaum: *What is the creative process like in the office, and how has that been established by Shlomo?*

### **More Than an Office We Are a Family**

Barbara: We're actually very fortunate that we have such a wonderful setup in the office; we are not just working together, but that we are really a family. And from my perspective, I would say the great advantage was that I worked with your father before we got married. And I established a working relationship with him way before I became part of the family. I think that was part of [my] success of growing and becoming a partner in the office, and also becoming a part of the family.

And I remember times that I went with Shlomo on trips, and he would run so fast that I would have to run after him. And he was so busy looking at things. Today it's a bit sad that because of his condition, his impact and his involvement in the office can't be the same that it was before. But he is here as a person who gives advice, and who still supports us on a personal and emotional level.

Ittai: And you working with him all those years actually helped the office move to its next phase in a seamless way, and in a continuous way. That is something that he is very grateful about, I know.

I came into the office later, much later. I came into the office when my father was starting to get ill, and his involvement in the office was done. I had my own practice. And we decided that it didn't make sense anymore to have these two entities, so we merged my much smaller practice into the bigger, more successful office.

From the very beginning, the way the office worked was that there was a healthy mix of architects and landscape architects working together on these projects of various sizes, and various types. And I guess my little rebellion was that I went and learned architecture and not landscape architecture. But Barbara, my partner in everything is the landscape architect. And we actually, now that we are running the office, continue



the same tradition and the same method of work and the same philosophy of how to approach all of these different types of projects together. So we have this team now, with its different sensibilities and different backgrounds and different ways of looking at things at the principal level and also throughout the office [staff].

## **On Design**

### **Creating Opportunities for Landscape Architects**

Barbara: OK. Keeping in mind that I didn't study here, but I have I've practiced here for a long time; I would say practicing today as a landscape architect in Israel that we all owe a lot to Shlomo for what he has done over the past 40 to 50 years. And that wherever I go, wherever I think a lot of landscape architects in the country go, we profit from the knowledge that Shlomo gave to us. But especially the road that he carved out for landscape architects in larger scale projects.

If, for example, if we're taking the infrastructure projects, where we're working with road engineers, with structural engineers, it's clear that today they know that we're a very important and integral part of the process. We are not just coming in the back end of the project and finding ways to make it prettier, to make it greener; but on a very, very basic level, that we have to be involved in the decision-making. For example, where is a road [located]? Is it, where is it geographically? Where is it in a specific site? And I think that really goes back to Shlomo. It is part of his being fearless. [His] saying that we can make decisions about roads; we can make decisions about how to excavate mines, and decisions on how to deposit the material. In the same way that we can design parks, we can design neighborhoods. We can enter into a dialogue with architects, and tell them that we don't like where they put their building, that we think that it's better to put it in a different location. And I don't think that's a trivial thing.

Birnbaum: *Do you want to add anything to that?*

Ittai: I would say that, obviously, in the end it depends very much on the personality of the specific architect. But he [Shlomo] did, especially in the bigger projects, inform the



clients, from the start, that the landscape architect has to be in the project from the very beginning, and that his weight in the project is a heavy weight. And he made that clear to all of the clients and to all of the government agencies that we work with today.

### **The Breadth of Shlomo's Legacy**

Ittai: I think my father to a very large degree defined what the role of a landscape architect is in our built environment; for our profession of design, architectural design and landscape design in Israel. But he also touched some very iconic points in Israel that everybody sees and everybody experiences. The first that comes to my mind is the work he did in the Old City. Some of it is being modified or changed [now]. But for a very long time, [he designed] the whole piece between Zion Gate and Dung Gate and all of that work [the places] that basically every tourist that comes to this country will go through. And it was also one of the first jobs where he was trying to define how one relates to archeology. At a very important, significant archeological site, how do you intervene? What sensibilities do you have to develop in order to work in such a loaded, emotional, and religious and political place? So he set the tone, actually, for how things are done. How things should be done on a big infrastructure project, like phosphate mining in the desert, or the conveyer belt [project], or for major roads, or interchanges and things like that. How all of these things have to be treated with the utmost seriousness.

Barbara: When I came as a student coming from Europe, what's most amazing is that you have a person working in a very small country, in a very diverse country, that all of the work [we did] is actually here [in Israel] And Shlomo sometimes was sort of saying, "why don't we do work abroad"? But I think it's a great privilege for somebody to have almost fifty years of continuous work in one place, and to have such diverse work. That's actually a privilege. Recently, when we went abroad and people asked the same question, "why didn't you ever work abroad"? And I think that the conclusion [to that question] is that I had a fantastic opportunity; and that he had to stay here and work in an environment that he knew best.



Ittai: And [he worked] on everything, on every scale, and every landscape.

Barbara: The accumulative knowledge that he has . . . , he has had the opportunity to reapply it in the different areas. And I think it's, it's a great plus. As attractive and enviable as it looks for people who work all over the place, I think many times it's an economic necessity more than a decision that you want to leave an imprint in Dubai or in Shanghai. I think that Shlomo was incredibly fortunate to be given this opportunity to work for a long time in one country. And obviously, we're profiting from this legacy, and we're continuing it today.

### **Developing the Concept**

Barbara: I think that he and I work a little bit differently, because every person has his way of thinking and his way of approaching projects. But as long as I can remember, Shlomo would sit in his office, and he would do a vignette. He would do a little sketch, and he would formalize the concept. And many times, Shlomo said that coming up with a good and convincing story, a story which is generated from the site, would help us develop a formal [design] language. And it would help us address the program, whether it's [a program] for the people, or whether it's for the functional requirements for the site. And he would draft a sketch, and from there, we actually took it [to the design].

When I worked with him, for example, on the airport project, he told me about an imagery. And together we took this imagery, and we turned it into a drawing, into walls, into the theme of the agriculture, into all of these things. And maybe as straightforward as it seems, or how simplistic it is to say that you have to have a story, I find today that it helps me. And we do not always develop our first idea. In every project your gut feeling is a very important part of getting to the solution.

And it's clear today that projects are more based on analysis. They're more based on input that we're getting from other consultants. Today we work with the ecologists who very much determine what is being done. And that wasn't the case when Shlomo did a project twenty years ago. He wore the hat of all of these professions, and he knew what



should be done. And you know, most of the time it was spot-on. But there is a difference in the way we work today.

Ittai: He always said that he was very lucky to have started working when he started working. I mean, it was just after the Six Days' War, and the country was a new forum basically. And all of these new landscapes were opened up. And suddenly, the whole country was feeling that it's moving forward, [into] glorious sunshine. On the other hand, it was a very small country, and [it] did not have much regulation or the formal ways of doing things that we have today. So it was open, it was much easier. And if you were a person like my father who just goes in and works with conviction, and knows what he's doing and he could convince everybody, then it was rather easy. Today it's harder, there's much more regulation, there are more controls, and more checks and balances. And so the practice has become less free.

Barbara: But I try to look at it in a positive way. And I think the potential is that the projects even become better because they are more informed. There are those [projects] where there's too much archeology, too many restrictions, too many graves are found and that changes your design. But I think we look at it in a positive way.

Ittai: Yeah, I mean, it has its good sides and it has its downsides. There's more bureaucracy, so that's not good. But I would say that as a profession, we have evolved, we're more professional, in a lot of respects. But it came with a price, and the price is that it's [the profession is] more regulated, it's less free, it's less flowing, it takes longer. And anyway, the whole world seems to have moved to fast-forward, and everything has to be faster and cheaper and more immediate. Shlomo always says to me that it is much harder to work nowadays than when he was working, from a lot of aspects. But I think that's true in the entire Western world.

Barbara: The process was slower, and the process gave you more time to think. [Back then] you would request a survey, and they would send the survey in the mail, and then,



you had to send it to the printer; in the meantime, you had time to think about the design. Today you get an email, and then an hour later you get an email --. . . Could you please produce a design by tomorrow morning. People expect instant results, and there's very little time to think. And I envy Shlomo for his Friday mornings when he was sitting there reflecting, and he had time to go back and reconsider his ideas.

### **Design Principles Today**

Barbara: When I think of how we approach projects in the office, one [way] is the story and the story might be the story of the site or it might be a story that goes back to a cultural meaning of the landscape.

Ittai: Or [it might relate] to the historic event that took place there.

Barbara: And another one is to use an abstraction to highlight an element. Shlomo abstracted the forms, the topography of the site to find a new expression. Abstraction might also be taking a form, a channel or a little river, and then [we would] abstract it into a stone detail. Or as was the case at the airport, of taking a slice of a landscape, [the landscape going up from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem] and turning it consciously into a postcard for people visitors to see.

Another theme, I would call blending into the background, where your role is to design a landscape which becomes part of its immediate environment. If we take the Sha'ar Ha-gai Interchange, I think foremost it had a great potential to be invasive and loud in the landscape. But on the contrary, [here Shlomo created] a landscape that just blends in, that becomes part of its surroundings. It doesn't try to attract any attention to itself. And I would say the same concept, was applied to the Holocaust Museum [design]. We knew that our role was not to create something that drew attention to itself, but to create the background for people. So that they can have contemplative experiences. [We wanted] to give them spaces where they can sit down, where they can think about what they saw, and to really complement the general experience of the exhibits. But also,



because it is located in Jerusalem, in the Jerusalem Forest, [we wanted] to bring this forest into the design. [We tried] to say, there's the past and there's the present, and here we are; so that is how the pine forest came to be. So it really depends on where you want to put the emphasis in the project.

Ittai: Yeah, we are talking actually about another important principle, it's not a principle, it's a strategy, actually. How do we create sustainable and appropriate landscapes in a climate which is basically quite harsh and which has very few resources. [Ittai points to a sketch] We're basically dealing with agriculture as a main theme. We know that people respond very well to productive landscapes. It's not only the aesthetics of the lines of the tractor, that is part of it, but it's also actually something deeper in us. In human beings, it's food, it's a primeval kind of feeling, and we respond very strongly to these kinds of landscapes, because they give us comfort, they give us security, something very basic to our humanity. And these productive landscapes, or agricultural landscapes if done properly then they fit the place, because they are of the climate, of the soil, of the land, of the technology, of the culture, of the people that are doing them. So it's a very appropriate approach, [a way] to create sustainable, cheap, successful landscapes.

Barbara: Maintainable landscapes.

Ittai: And there are quite a few examples of work in that direction, like, the Interchange Project, because it's basically a big olive grove, which is very easy, cheap to construct and easy to maintain; and it is completely appropriate to its environment, and to the culture, and to its surroundings. And that was done quite a few times throughout the years. It's an important principle in the office work.

Birnbaum: *What makes an Aronson landscape?*



### **What makes an Aronson landscape?**

Barbara: What makes an Aronson landscape? [An Aronson landscape is one] which was designed by an Aronson. We're lucky that we have the same name. No, but I think it is to keep it simple, to look at the site, to understand what the site is about and to answer [to those] who we are building for. And we immediately adjust the type of project to the environment that we're in. Many times people who live in the desert want lawns and they want palm trees; and it's our job to tell them that that just might not be the right thing. And [we strive] to do projects that are that site-specific and that capture the spirit of the site.

Ittai: I think an Aronson project goes back maybe to the first things we said; we take responsibility for what we do. We see the whole picture, and do our best under the circumstances. You don't always get your way, obviously, but we do our best to be as true to what we believe is the right thing to do. Even if it means that you have to have long discussions and arguments with your clients, with the engineers, or with others to make sure that you get the right answers for the right site and for the right program. But once you establish what's the right thing to do, your responsibility is to try and make it happen.

Barbara: And I would say that that is also part of the Shlomo legacy, that if you have a finite, or a very defined budget, then you have to decide where you put your money. And instead of trying to be good, or to use very expensive materials on all the levels, make decisions where the money is best spent

Ittai: Yeah. It's public money, and we're guardians of, we're working in the public realm. So you have to be very responsible about this and how you do it.

## **Projects**

### **Beit Shalom Park**

Birnbaum: *Tell us what Beit Shalom Park is and its history.*



Well, at one point, early in the 1970s, the whole Jewish quarter, and actually the whole city, had a big problem of transportation and infrastructure. This [area] was the only place, where you could put, or create a road from east to west, from Mount Zion to Dung Gate, and further east. I was asked by the municipality to view it as one project; but divide it into four sub-areas, making four licenses and so on. It was my first big, comprehensive project. I was 30 years old. And I got this mountain of, how do you say, this possibility of erring, or of doing the wrong thing. So I felt a personal [responsibility] about it.

Now, if you look at the whole thing, this is the edge between the old city and the desert. At that time, it was, 50 years ago, the [presence of the] desert was really strongly felt. And the problems were real. We had to dig a huge infrastructure, with rooms underground, and [we had to deal with] transportation and parking. And to each one, we gave a solution and [the problems were] taken care of. Today it's still working, so that was a very good experience of working with a mega site.

There are a few things which I coined at that period, not really knowing what I was doing. One of them was to leave some of the area intact. We came in with bulldozers and reduced the height of the debris, which had accumulated for the last 400, 500 years and exposed the southern wall. We tried to keep some parts intact, and we did. And now when you walk, you have the feeling of walking along, and brushing against the old city wall. And very soon, some vegetation started to come back and we just left it and let nature become a prevailing force on the site, even though pennisetum is not exactly a biblical plant. But now it became a biblical plant.

There are seven gates altogether. We're talking about two gates, which we had to not redesign, but upgrade. So there's Zion Gate, which is a small gate in the Armenian quarter and the Jewish quarter. The thing about Zion Gate is that we couldn't find any



document of how it looked before. And by working on it, we discovered there was a certain logic [to it] which gave us a hint.

And at Dung Gate, you have to make it bigger, and the main opening deeper, so the television car could enter [through it]. King Hussein took out all the stone and put in a, concrete post, beam. We did 100, not 100, 14 or something models, one-to-five scale, and we got a gate which is in this picture. [Aronson holds a book which details this project]

Birnbaum: *And you worked with Arthur Kutcher on these projects?*

Yeah.

Birnbaum: *What was that like, working with Arthur?*

I worked with Arthur Kutcher on many things. He's brilliant. And he was a good friend. I knew him from living in San Francisco. He worked, like me, for Larry. He had such a good head, and Larry appreciated it. But he did the most boring thing. Then he went to Berlin and worked, worked there. And then I called him to come, and he became the biggest enemy of the developers. He managed to destroy, and thank God he did some terrible monsters [projects].

### **Jerusalem Botanical Garden**

Birnbaum: *So let me ask you a follow-up question to that, because we haven't talked about grading, and it seems that very often, you lay very lightly on the land. But here, at the Trottnar, and I also know that at the botanical gardens, that there were 140 cubic meters of soil brought in. There was a lot of re-grading done at the botanical gardens.*

The botanical garden was really at the edge of the university, and it was [a place where] nothing grew. I have a photograph of it; I'll send you a copy.



First, the plan was to reshape the area, and create a place where the soil and plants would be better. We changed the heights of things, and we created something like, like 30 rooms, we called them rooms. And we tried to establish a system of short views. In Jerusalem. so many places, like the Tayelet, are really an attempt to capture the long view. Well, I felt that at this place [the Botanic Garden] it was better to do the opposite. And that's what we did. And if you go there today, you will see it. And after 30 years, you can see how trees are growing fast and healthy. They need less irrigation. I mean, most solutions have multiple effects, and for sure it is true in landscape. I once gave a lecture in Cambridge, in Cambridge, England, of how a good solution is a solution which answers five different problems, and each solution will beef up the other ones.

And a very good example for this is erosion control in the Negev, which you saw the other day. So there you stop erosion, you gain much better growing season and vegetation, and so on. So usually, we try to arrive at multiple solutions.

*Birnbaum: Great. Going back to the [botanic] garden. Because you've been working there now since 1979, is it the project that the office has the longest involvement [with]?*

We are the only architect.

*BIRNBAUM: You've been working at the gardens for over thirty years. So what is that like, to continue to work at a place for . . .*

It's great.

### **Dung Gate**

*Birnbaum: Let me just read something to you that was in your book. It says here that, you know, the time you were working on the project, the approach by everybody was to have a distinction between the old and the new. And when you approached this work, the goal, and these were your words, was to blend the old and the new. And you said,*



*to preserve the style and the spirit and the characteristics of the wall. I, that's what I said, you can read it, that's what it says here. How do you deal with old and new?*

When we did Dung Gate, we were thinking about it quite a lot, and we chose to do a stone solution. And the archeologists said that was wrong. We should take down the beam, the concrete beam that Hussein erected there, and build a beam from concrete, because people will look at it and say, "ah, that was done in 1985". We said, "no". You can't come to a place with so much history and so much style and so much religion and so on, the [insertion] has to be [made] from the same material. We have to make the differences such so that you think about it. And he [the archeologist] published a letter to the editor and it became a big issue. I did the same. And we were lucky. But that was the situation. So you can see here the new one, and I think it's blending very well. It doesn't look very intrusive, or one of a particular style.

When I got the job, the whole parking lot along the wall was already built. And so I found out how it came about and not much thinking [had gone into it]. I went to Teddy Kollek, and I asked to him to destroy all this first part, all the parking, and the road. And we got to make the wall, the path, uniting Dung Gate and Zion Gate with a new style and a new vocabulary.

One method of relating old and new is to come with a completely modern material, like concrete, and use the concrete as a joining element.

Birnbaum: *And then the other option?*

And the other option is to . . . Well, there are many options. Another option is to have a colored line which will tell you which height was preserved and which is new, and so on. And I just felt for such an important stylized kind of element which has so many connections to the past, you can't just say, go home. I mean, I came, 400 years after the people who built the wall. They were great Egyptian stone masons. I had to talk to



them. And we chose another simpler solution but basically it relates indirectly to respect to our ancestors.

### **Walter and Elise Haas Promenade**

Birnbaum: *Can you tell us about The Haas Promenade?*

The Haas Promenade, in the deliberations of what to do with the crest of the UN headquarters, which is now called the Haas Promenade, [Halprin] was chosen to be the chief designer. He did a sketch and we didn't hear from him for a year or two. And then he came back and helped another architect [work to prevent building on the crest]. So [now] you have this clear view in four directions. They succeeded to cancel the idea of building hotels and embassies [there].

And so Larry could start to work. He came, with a complete set of drawings and a model. Everything was beautifully finished, with wonderful ideas. And he chose us to be the local architect. And we started work and we worked in a quite harmonious way. We provided all the, I mean, we did all the work. But most of the design for the Haas Promenade was all Larry. And, but he thought of himself very, very much like the designer, which he was.

Now I will jump to the second part of it. In the meantime, the Promenade was already under construction, people used to go there and look at the progress of the work. And then one day I, it was Shabbat, Shabbat is the day of rest. I got a telephone call from Teddy Kollek the Mayor, "Aronson, come here right away, and bring with you everything you have on . . ." I forgot the name of the project, some place, "call it X" and the crest of the UN headquarters. So I went right away to the site, to Mrs. Sherover's house, her villa. And what happened? Her only son, she was a widow, died from AIDS. And she wanted to have a finished project in a year, And she didn't want the first one, the "X", but she wanted the promenade. And she was always very, very close to this project, because it was her only son.



So on the spot, she told Teddy [Kollek] that she's was going to take the whole project. We're talking here about 5, 6, 7 million dollars. That's a lot of money. So the next thing [that happened was that] I received a telephone [call] to start the work. And we started to work on it, and we finished it in eleven months. In Jerusalem, basically you cannot use, you don't, have to carve your name in stone, like they have the contractor so and so, architect so and so. So I put our name, Larry Halprin and Shlomo Aronson in the same size [font], it was very important [to me.] So I took Larry and showed it to him, and he stood there and all he could say was, well done Shlomo. And that's it.

### **The Gabriel Sherover Promenade**

Well, the Promenade has many ideas which are in most of all parks. So if you walked in the Sherover Promenade, the first element is what we call having an element of calmness, of quiet, of less tension. That is a prevailing desire in everything we do, I will give it number one. Then there is the comprehensive design. It is very important to get the broadest possible scope of work.

Then, there is agriculture, agriculture as a theme, is a prevailing theme in all of our projects. Hopefully other people will use it too, more than [they do] now. You start to see the budding of it, but it's too slow. I think it could easily [be used a lot more], every place where you don't know what to do, put an olive. You can have a citrus orchard like we did at the airport. And it's great, because you don't have to do much maintenance. We have very nice plantation, and you see it is great; and it's so much cheaper to maintain.

There are a lot of projects that we are doing with orchards. And at the Tayelet it's olives and a wheat field. And again, it's very simple. So the third one [principle] is agriculture.

Then the fourth one is keeping in the design the element of abstraction. And we tried to have it as an integral part of the design like at Kreitman [Plaza] where the creek, the desert creek, is very undulating and the paving on the other side is quite formal.



Don't use elements which originated in some whimsical decision by the architect. I mean, you find that so much in Israel, so many overdesigned projects. And it's so meddling, at least to me, to see this. Why the hell do you have to walk like this when you can go like this? Have a good reason to do it. If not, don't do it.

Birnbaum: *Can you tell me a little bit more about that, and what the agricultural landscape means to you?*

To me, and I think to everyone [it is] an obvious solution for so many situations. And it's indigenous, it's from here, you don't have to argue about it. The connotations we have about it is in both communities, Jews and Arabs, all love this thing. Everybody wants to make it his symbol. So, again, I wrote in many places, we have to encourage it and use it.

And the tension, and the abstraction actually, between the two [stone work and agriculture] are the essence of the promenade. There is a very precise path system, using the best, the most complicated stonework with transitions of different dressings and different stones. And next to this very nice setting, are the furrows of the [PAUSE] plow. And when you look at it, you'll see that actually the stone part, which is the more expensive, is secondary to the triumph of agriculture. The plow lines were the essential element in the design. And they have lasted, they're supposed to last one season, but they have lasted even more, without any extra work. They give a rhythm and order, which is part of our mission of creating calm in the landscape. And I think it works. And it's cheaper and so on. So, and you can have big trees, because it is 30 years old, well by now, they are 60 years old or more. They don't need much water. We don't irrigate them anymore. So that's about the promenade.

The promenade is also an echo of the old city walls. So it fulfills the first principle which we talked about yesterday, of relating to the spirit of the place; so this little bit of desert vegetation is quite important.



Birnbaum: *OK. So let me, one of the things we haven't talked about specifically, even though we've mentioned it, is the Trottner Promenade.*

### **Trottner Promenade Park**

Well, there are so many things about it. [I want to say] several words about the vegetation. The Trottner is more concerned with plants. I wanted to have a peaceful piece of land, and to make an overture to the Arab population. So all of the groundcover, most of the groundcover are plants of fragrance, and ones which are used in the, by the local population and so on. So that's one thing. Also, we tried to avoid using religious, not religious, not to have [PAUSE] elements of one sect more superior than the other; or one element domineering the whole place. On Friday, when you go there, there are all these families of Arabs picnicking and going there.

Birnbaum: *What is it about the idea of a promenade and the Israelis?*

Well, Remember yesterday I told you about this rich man, who built the square, the piazza, in Neve Tzedek? That's the thing [we like to do] to be outside, getting fresh air, looking at the sea [and looking] at the coastal plain, which is where most of the people live. And with this kind of weather, it's great. But it's, not only great, it [the weather] is like this most of the year. I mean, you have just three months of cold and so the weather is really good. So why not use it.

Birnbaum: *So what's interesting, to go back to the Trottner Promenade, is unlike all these other promenades where it is about this great view, seeing the view, seeing the sunset or the sunrise, what you created at the Trottner was intimate, was inward-looking.*

Yeah, We created it for the next generation. We've created a place to sit, but it's a bit more, because of the exposed slope. The whole work, the whole shape is completely



manmade, including the location of the arches. They are not in the original location. They were further sideways. But it didn't look good. So we carved the mountain in a different way, the way it is now. I mean, it's very good. But it's, it's not the original shape. Some people, who don't understand design think that you're not allowed to change anything in a place like the promenade, and I don't agree. I think we should make it very easy and available and beautiful, and if that means changing the contour lines, change the contour lines.

### **Suzanne Dellal**

Here we are at Suzanne Dellal, in one of the first attempts of using piazza vocabulary in Tel Aviv, and in Israel as a whole. This is very urban landscape. It has the amenity of being closed to traffic and it is easy for children to play here. In another two hours, this place will be swarming with children playing and running up and down. And there will be concerts and at a different time, dance concerts too. And they will be having something rich which we lack so much in our daily life, which we should repeat in every place we can. And like I said the other day, the world will have to develop more concentrated small spaces.

We studied how to create a new element of harmony [at this site] by carefully studying the heights of walls, [their] widths, and the relationship between them. We studied the different ways of dressing the stone. The multiple use of any element here is not by chance. But all the elements, including the snail, it is an example of using the details. It could be just the whim of somebody, but it [the snail] was here. I don't know which period it was [from], but it was here.

*Birnbaum: Can you tell us about that? How your design recognizes that history of the geography and the agriculture?*

The outside influence includes the orchard. The prevailing tree was a citrus, of one kind or another. I mean, its trees are from here [the region]. [Today] there are less and less



of them because people are building housing. Instead they [the orchard trees] become remnants of a period from 100 years ago.

There used to be a road going through the site. And this road, on the advice of the architect who designed the building, was taken out right away.

Somehow at the beginning of the work I got the mayor to like it [the design]. And since then, everything was easy. Because people said it was a good project, and so we had the backing of the establishment. And we did the project and it wasn't expensive at all.

Birnbaum: *So how important is water here in the design?*

Water is important because water is the source of life in the Mediterranean, or in the desert. That's the only thing which keeps people, keeps people --alive. The whole tradition here, [pause]. . . The only example that I can think of besides Cordoba and Seville, is the Bagh [garden] in Iran. And it's a great place, but it's from a long tradition of great gardens which included water in a very precise way. And it is not European at all, not Olmstedian at all. And if you go back to what I said the other day, we are part of a chain [of designers] which started many, many years ago. It started in Athens with Pericles. [This is] something which you never hear about in an Israeli, in a European, or in an American school. Because we are part of this chain [of designers] I wish this is [would] change. So Suzanne Dellal Square, Piazza, is an example of something. A test [to the design] is if someone comes here and says, "What would you do to improve it? Here is a bundle of dollars. What are you going to do?" And so if you come back and say, "Leave it alone, it's OK". And [that is how] I feel about this place. Leave it alone is a sign of a good design.

Birnbaum: *Tell us about the mosaic artist?*



[David] Tartakover. Well, I felt toward the end, that some color and some punch, some, are missing. And so we talked about it. Around the corner lived a graphic artist. He is actually, a very nice guy, a very forceful kind of chap. And he won the Israeli Prize [for design], and was very well known. And when I came to him he got very excited about the project and he added a lot.

Birnbaum: *The other thing we haven't talked about is that you discovered the well. Tell us about the well that's around the corner by the old orchard.*

Suddenly, towards the end [of the project] this [ancient] well was discovered. So we created an axis from here, from the reception area all the way down to here. And also [it created] the element of suspense. What would happen at the end? And [in addition] you come to an area with eucalyptus trees. They are not local. Eucalyptus [trees] are from Australia. But we used them, of course.

Birnbaum: *So let's go back to the well, tell us about the well.*

The well, we don't know when it was built. We didn't find anything, but we used it as part of the concept. And of course, some of it is at a different level, because it was done a long time ago. And every child, in Tel Aviv at least, has to take a course in fifth grade and so everybody knows about the well in Suzanne Dellal, and they take it very seriously.

Birnbaum: *Now, was it your idea to always have the buildings, that you come through the building into the piazza?*

That was the architect.

And I will tell you another thing that we are doing right now, another story, is the story of Mr. Shlush. Mr. Shlush was a person who provided the money to buy Neve Tzedek from



the Jaffa people. And on the opening night the journalist from the Haaretz Newspaper, which is a very important newspaper, she was in charge of architecture and planning, came to me and asked me, “why did you use Jerusalem stone, and not Kurkur?”. Kurkur is sandstone. Kurkur is an indigenous material in this part of the country, in Tel Aviv, Jaffa, and so on.

So I said, because Mr. Shlush had a different stone in mind. For him, the stone was an achievement that they could now not only build a new neighborhood, but they could build it with stone which lasts forever. And he told me to go with Jerusalem stone, the more expensive stone, because now we are rich, you know.

### **The Master Plan for Israel**

Birnbaum: *So Shlomo, tell me about the master plan for the country.*

It sounds very promising and unusual for a landscape architect to find himself involved with an attempt to establish a plan which will answer all the planning problems of the country. But in the early 90s, there was a great flux of immigrants from Russia.

And there were big discussions and plans. People were interested in planning and we had a chance to do something positive. It was set, a team [was chosen], which was supposed to come up with a plan. The team was called 2020, because it was to [be completed] by the year 2020.

It was an attempt, not an attempt; it was the law of the land by a person named Ari Sharon to create such a plan. So it was a period of really not just talking about things, but doing them. I wasn't part of that team, but a bit later, after the 2020 was proven workable, and not just a waste of money, there was a competition, and I was part of the group which won the competition. And we started to work, the head of the team, was really a very good leader. And it was a pleasure to work with him. The whole thing was a pleasure. Again, there was a feeling optimism in the country that we would have peace right behind the corner. We used to meet every Friday and work on it. It was a



wonderful time because people were intelligent and cared a lot about what they're doing, and they're smart. Again, you can't beat that, a smart man is worth anything.

So I won't go through the process, because, but my contribution, besides the regular thing of the surveying of this, or surveying of that was. . . , Well, I won't say anything. . . because they were engineers or geologists and we think differently. We think in more imaginative vocabulary. So my contribution was to lean on the imaginative side. Throughout, a lot of it was really footwork. And we worked for about two years or more. And we started to get results. I was commissioned to do a master plan for all the public open spaces, basically, a planting plan for the country. And I made a little brochure out of it, which I was going to show to you today, but I left it in the office. So perhaps tomorrow morning, we will find the time because it's very important. It would be a good thing for people. Ah, I had some ideas which I carry all the time, and every so often, some director of this department would come to me, and we would talk about it. And the ideas were, first of all, of course that we relate and preserve. But also the idea of what I call the Green Boulevard.

### **Caesarea**

Birnbaum: *You're working with geographers, you're working with archeologists, tell us about what it's like to work in your office with these other people. What is that like? How does that work?*

What is the work of the landscape architect? . . . [ideally it is] to take, to be the head of the team, Of course, that depends on the personality of the archeologist. Some archeologists finish their work with a line on the map. And everything else that is happening around [the site], it doesn't bother them, or it doesn't influence [them]. The way we work is to look around and find what can be an inspiration, what is the story [of the site] and how to join it to other elements. It is actually one of the principles of our design.



And there are some projects where the antiquity is the most important element. Like at Caesarea, Caesarea is a very important site because it's the biggest; it has the most people, visitors, in Israel. Actually [it is] the second one, after Masada. And, it's so powerful, there's no strife between Jews and Arabs there; it doesn't belong to any of the communities. It's next to the sea, which is a great element. There's quite a lot of antiquity left, so you get the feeling [of the space]. I mean, it's not [like in] Baalbek in Lebanon. But it's in there.

[Our involvement] with Caesarea, was a long-term project. In the first stage, we were hired, as the architect of the Caesarea Development Company. We did housing for the very, very rich. President Netanyahu got a villa in Caesarea. But what happened is that, there was this great influx of Russian Jews in the 1990s. And they came to the government, and the government had to find work for them. And one of the things that they were taught was how to do archeological digging.

It was a committee of about 10 people, we were the leaders. And the most important thing was not to create another Hiroshima. [We didn't want a] place with leftover walls and steps, as if there was a big bombing raid on the whole town. It's terrible it doesn't teach you anything. It's not exciting at all. So in order to do that, we found something really good on the site, and that was a missing link.

A hippodrome is kind of horseracing [stadium], a Roman establishment. They loved it. They used to fill it up with water sometimes and sometimes just with gladiators. The most important part of the Roman citizen life was the hippodrome. The sea, managed to erode a whole quarter, or more than a quarter of the western center wall. And it allowed the establishment of a walk which starts in the old city and then you walk parallel to the sea. So you've get this wonderful breeze, even in the summer. It's a good place to sit down and have the wind blow on you. So here, the idea was that you don't want to create another Hiroshima, you want to create a Roman space, a Roman imperial space. And we did, I mean, it's not, it could be greater, but we didn't find enough stuff in the last



century, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Bedouin Pasha robbed most of the stones from the Roman period. So it's not that great. But you do have this feeling [of the history of the site], which I wanted so much.

And just as a side story, one day I received a letter from the municipality of Roma, they're doing a competition, a national competition, about the Mausoleum of Augustus in Roma. It is next to the forum. They asked if I would be a judge. So I said, well, that's something I have to do, to be a judge of the imperial Roman remains. And of course, I did it. And I had a few days where I was immersed in the problems of the reconstruction in imperial Roma. I was the only one who wasn't Italian. I don't know how they got to me. I never could understand it. But anyway, I went there. And when I talked to people, I saw how all these problems are really international. And they were quite amazed to hear that I didn't have this love for ruins. I mean, I love many other things, too.

**Kreitman Plaza – Ben Gurion University, Be'er-sheva**

Birnbaum: *Shlomo, tell us about where we are today?*

We are in the city of Be'er-Sheva, the capital of the Israeli desert, and in the middle of it there is the university. Be'er-Sheva is not a place that is famous for its scenery, this part of the desert. The people of the city complained about being neglected. They got a promise from the university to build a park. It's not exactly a park, it's more of a piazza than a park in the tradition of a Mediterranean enclosed garden. The theme, design theme, is to create a desert park, a park which has the attributes of the desert surrounding it on all four sides. And also to [have] the unique [characteristics] of the desert, the long view and a stream, like in a real desert, when a stream or a creek [appears] after the rain. So in the same way that people love to have some water in their desert home, by organizing the park in such a way, now after 20 years of being heavily used by the neighbors, the city people and the Bedouins who live around here, they have started to like the place and understood the qualities of it.



Birnbaum: *So tell me the inspiration for the creek.*

The inspiration of the creek is in the same scale of a wadi, which is the name, Arabic name for a creek like this. Most [of them] are retained by stones and the boulders. Another idea, which was important on the macro scale, is the conflict or the tension between the male and the female elements in our life. And the creek is more the feminine, and the pergola, which is made from stone, is very formal. And from these two forces [came] the understanding and came the design and detail of the creek. And when you look, and when you look at the real thing, we hope it will be convincing.

Otherwise, it had to answer the needs of the university, like having a very easy path system at the hub of the campus to [create an] area of gathering. The students like it very much, they even like to wade in the creek. We of course encourage it. This place is already 20 years old and it has not had one problem of vandalism, breaking things, or graffiti.

Birnbaum: *Tell us a little bit about the plant material selections.*

The idea was not to have a kind of very manicured sort of solution, but to use desert planting. And so it was done. But to my amazement, all this has grown so much faster [than expected]. We'll have to have a schedule of thinning the trees. Many of the trees actually originated in Arizona, and we got permission to use plant materials that are not indigenous. We also used pennisetum. So you do not have much color. [Color] is really [found] more in the landscape of the temperate zone. We are in a desert. We tried to use, and we did use quite a lot of devices to save water, and so that was the idea.

The pavement, the pavement here is a result of many years of working with stone. Most of the pavement, but not all, is made from Jerusalem Stone. This kind of dressing is very typical to the Jerusalem area. It used to be more typical, and then it was abandoned by most architects for many years. And I can say that I was one of the



people who revived the use of this stone. And the placement of relatively narrow stone, you see all of this is one stone, very narrow and very deep, about ten centimeters so it can hold up against pressure.

*Birnbaum: Shlomo, tell me about when the texture changes, and how those decisions get made.*

I decided that the closer you are to the water, the bigger the stone. And in some places, the stones become boulders to create this kind of edge [on the creek]. The further you go from the water, you get a rough finish. And slowly, slowly, when it comes to this area more or less, you see the more refined dressing. And so [there is] this game with the different dressing, different types of dressing, different colors, there are two or three colors from dark stone to very white used. So that's it about the stone.

The major design decision, the most important one, is the treatment of the space, the sizes of the space, the depth of the space and the transition zones. And if that is coming out right, you made it. If not, if something is a hurdle, you can't just leave it behind you. It has to be, so I mean, all of the things which were important to the ancestors, are still applied to us now.

Look here, we have here this stone, useful pergola, it will give you shade, it will give you location. You can add even a kiosk here and there. It will allow you to create the ramps and other things that people can use even if they are handicapped. And that's the main thing.

*Birnbaum: What does it feel, when you come back here now, you know, 17 years later, what does it feel like to see this place serving as a piazza, serving as, you know, the center of energy?*



There's hardly anything as satisfying. And I thank you for coming. Because I do go quite back often, to see the projects and how they have matured; and if I find something really glaring, I will write to the client and try to get it fixed.

Birnbaum: *So when you came in today, this morning, what did it feel like?*

I saw of course, the strength of the desert, it's so sensual. So you see, the good things which have happened and the things which didn't work out, but on the whole, I mean, when you see such a project with 17,000 students and you know the maintenance problems with and the water running day and night for 20 years . . . [sound fades]

#### **The Sha'ar Hagai Interchange Project**

Birnbaum: *OK. So tell us again about, where is the interchange, and tell us about how you became involved in this project.*

Sha'ar Hagai. Sha'ar Hagai Interchange is, has become the gate to Jerusalem from the west. And it's situated on the border between the coastal plain, coming from the west, and the Judean Mountains coming from the east. Being the main entrance to Jerusalem, this interchange has become not only just an interchange of traffic, but has a religious and [PAUSE] emotional, emotional presence on the way to Jerusalem. We were involved in this road from quite early, from the early 1970s until today. This interchange is not finished yet, but it's part of a chain [of others] which we talked about before.

Birnbaum: *Well, they were going to, before you became involved, what was going to happen? Were they going to build a bridge?*

Yeah. They were going to build a bridge and they were going to, to level and flatten the whole area. Since we worked on many other parts of old Jerusalem, and actually had a



quite big role in designing the country's transportation system, where road number one became the important road, we were asked to help find a solution.

Birnbaum: *The proposed bridge. What would that have done, if that would have, would it have blocked the views? What would happen if that got built?*

It would have blocked the view, and it would have replaced this magnificent old view with a very dense intersection which could have been anyplace. So we tried many kinds, many solutions, and we didn't arrive at anything. We tried to move the intersection further up the hill, the Judean Hill. We tried the intersection in the agricultural land, but it all came out bad. And the client, DPW, got quite upset at how we made this simple intersection into a big one. And in the end, we sat together with one of the engineers, and we came to a solution which worked. And was, was not expensive. But anyway, I'll tell you, we made some changes, and then added a lot of things, that's the important thing. So now you have an intersection which is clean. And we convinced them, I mean, people started to be supportive.

First of all, the most important thing, which you can see from most places, is the use of stone walls. The whole thing is surrounded with a very, very long wall in the landscape. And it looks so good. The other thing is, we laid the stone, the same stone which we used in Yad Vashem. I mean, this kind of work is interesting, because you will see in certain parts of the country, in the span of let's say 50, and eventually 100 years, the idea of carrying some elements from one node to the other. This relates to the idea about continuation.

Birnbaum: *The olive grove, tell me about the olive grove.*

An intersection of such magnitude can be treated only as a large scale [design]. You can't plant ice plants or petunias and think that it's going to solve your problem. And so we got a large number of trees, more than 1,000 trees, mature olive trees, about 20



years old, which right away give a presence. But if you look at the important ideas of this intersection, one is the opening, creating, or continuing to create the gate to Jerusalem and creating an agricultural section. Creating a landscape which is based on wheat fields and olive trees. And the geometry of the, of the intersection, we use always the method of digging, and not piling on. So here is a good example of many, many elements which came together in a very significant location.

Look, this was 100% right solution. I wouldn't do it differently now. I would do the same thing. After 20 years, it still holds water. I don't know what to say. I mean, I'm waiting for this question for a long time, how, how are you sure that it's going to be right?

The day, days before the opening, which was done with Rabin, he somehow suddenly understood what a good thing we did, and become very enthusiastic, and all supporting. And just the day before the opening, I had him next to me, and we talked about it, he got very excited. And there's another lesson, get your client or the people who will get the say, or the money, excited and feeling part of an important road to Jerusalem.

### **Sea Contour Lines and the Dead Sea**

Birnbaum: *When you approach a design, what do you think about using to tell a story?*

Each project is another story. And we are storytellers. And so there's no answer which is very simple, but it comes pretty fast. I could tell you where the Dead Sea [story came from]. One day the deputy, not deputy but the man in charge of development in the national ministry of tourism came and he had some money. He called a big meeting, called all his friends, and they said, we want you to design the whole Dead Sea plan and make a legal plan. And choose one or two projects to develop. So anyway, I was very happy to do it. I think we did the contour line quite early.

So I made a sketch. We had a very good and very talented worker at the office, an architect, her name was Anat Sade. I told her what I want to do, and she didn't like it. And then she resigned from this project. So I just made a drawing of exactly what was built. It just came to me. I don't know how it happened. And I have to admit that [Anat



Sade] admitted that she was wrong afterwards. I don't know why this aroused so many [people]? Because the chief architect of the Ministry of Tourism, who was a very good friend, also didn't want to approve it. Very seldom do I really get, not mad, but stubborn. I said to him, I need to tell you, through all my years of experience, this is the right solution. And he wouldn't give up, and I wouldn't give up. We were standing in a parking lot in the freezing cold. We were, not fighting but . . . I have met him many times since, and every time, not every time, but sometimes I ask him, what happened then? We don't remember. But anyway, that is how it was won. And I enjoyed it very much. And we have to repair it; many of them [the markers] are gone. That's, that's a problem. But we'll repair it, I imagine, sometime.

*Birnbaum: So tell me, along that walkway, the seating that was made from salt, where did that idea come from?*

From the site, it's the spirit of the site.

*Birnbaum: From the site, but who makes benches out of salt?*

Shlomo Aronson.

### **Yad Vashem**

*Birnbaum: So Shlomo, tell us about where we are today.*

We are today in a very sad place called Yad Vashem. It is a memorial to the six million Jews who were killed by Hitler in the Second World War.

*Birnbaum: Tell us about your collaboration here.*

For many years, Yad Vashem was a neglected campus. So at one point, about 15 years ago, a competition was held, and Moshe Safdie, Architect Safdie won the competition. He came up with the design. The idea is that you go through the museum, [PAUSE] the



museum is the most important thing. But all the grounds, the squares, piazzas, and the planting, everything was part of a comprehensive scheme.

The landscape idea for this campus is not to compete with the architecture, but to create a background worthy of it. The museum itself, the one that was done by Safdie, is very powerful. And the message is also very clear. The museum was built into the ground. So when you look at the grounds here, they are sitting on the museum.

The courtyards are not all the same, each courtyard has its own character. The entrance court allows for a big group of students and other people to come together.

Birnbaum: *So there's a series of courtyards.*

Yes, there are a series of courtyards which allow for different kind of gatherings. But the main thing which I would like to convey is that now after five years the building and the surrounding landscape, adheres to the first idea of calm.

And the benches are exactly what I mean- to take an idea and transform it into reality. That actually is our business to take dreams and make them real. And how do you do it? That's the secret of good architecture.

Birnbaum: -- *Tell us about the sequence of experiences.*

You come in, and the first thing which you see is this big opening, like a big window to the left of the entrance. And before you get to the building, there is this piazza. And the piazza embraces you with its benches, and a group of something like 12 trees. They remind you of Europe, because it is a European sort of thing. Europe and trees, trees in the snow, people are dying. I mean, nobody will ever know, unless he was told, that we thought about the trees. We used poplar. It is the architect's imagination and thinking about 1942 in Auschwitz, and the trees which can be so sad. And so we made this kind



of design which is very simple, but it has a lot of supporting ideas to create this feeling which you are talking about and look at the quality of the concrete, and the detail of the concrete. It is very, very simple and full of, I think, of strength, like it is promising something.

*Birnbaum: Remember you telling us, when initially this project came about, you were thinking you didn't want to be doing decoration, you wanted it to be austere. I mean, how, what were your feelings? I mean, on working on a project such as this?*

Well, it's a great privilege, and you feel it. But also it was depressing as hell. And everyone was acting for such a long time with extra consideration and devotion, and it was . . . I want to say a religious, religious vocabulary, but you are serious. You [see] what is important and what is unimportant, or less important. And it was a positive thing. After 50 years of not being serious, [then] suddenly [you have] such an experience penetrating more or less through your life, and not only to your professional life, but to your total life. Some people have this kind of experience when they visit here, and they even start to cry.

The End