

The Cultural Landscape Foundation®

Pioneers of American Landscape Design®

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**LAWRENCE HALPRIN**

**ORAL HISTORY**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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**Interviews Conducted**

**March 2003, March and December, 2008**

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## LAWRENCE HALPRIN TRANSCRIPT

*Between –March 2003 and December 2008, TCLF conducted four sets of interviews at the Office of Lawrence Halprin (initially on Battery Street in San Francisco and later in Larkspur, CA); the Halprin home and dance deck in Kentfield, CA; and Sea Ranch, CA. This oral history module includes segments from all of these sessions. It is worth noting that the initial 2003 videotaping was originally intended to capture background information about the Donnell Garden, in Sonoma, which was the subject of a TCLF Cultural Landscapes as Classrooms module. This work was ultimately expanded to include the Halprin-designed landscapes that were at that time threatened with destruction, and a short slide show presentation by Larry about his life and work. When this initial videotaping was completed, it served as the inspiration for the Pioneers Oral History series and the work that followed both on this module and others that followed.*

### **Introduction**

*This transcript documents a series of interviews with Lawrence and Anna Halprin by Charles Birnbaum in 2003 and 2008. Dee Mullen from The Office of Lawrence Halprin provided invaluable assistance. The transcripts have been organized to remove duplication of information and to provide the fullest understanding of the material. The text is taken from the 2003 transcript unless otherwise noted.*



## Childhood and Education

### HIS PARENTS AS MENTORS [MARCH 2008 INTERVIEW]

One of the reasons, I think, that I fell so directly into art forms and landscape architecture and architecture is because of my parents. My father took us on a trip, what was it called in those days? There was a word for it.

Birnbaum: *A Grand Tour?*

My parents were very influential about my becoming something, because they knew I painted and drew a lot. My mother particularly, used to take me to museums. She'd go shopping at Macy's every Saturday, and she'd drag me along, and the reason I liked it was because I'd get an ice cream soda at Schrafft's on the way up on Fifth Avenue, literally . . . And so I would do that and then at the other end, I'd go to the Museum of Art. She constantly supported my artistic feelings and so forth. And she in that sense was a mentor for me, and my father as well . . . he used to make little sketches as well [LAUGHTER], now that I think about it, but he was very busy making a living. And they took, the two of them took me on this Grand Tour through Europe and ended up in Israel, . . . for my bar mitzvah. That's how I happened to be in Jerusalem at the end. My mother was a Zionist, very big, [and] important, she was the president of Hadassah, and she also was an assistant to Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel. And so, they both had an effect on me politically and socially and artistically in that sense. They must both of them, be admitted that they're mentors, they were mentors for me.

### LIVING IN ISRAEL ON A KIBBUTZ



Birnbaum: *We talked about early influences and you mentioned earlier about the kibbutz experience and what that did to shape you.*

As you know, when I finished Poly Prep, which is a wonderful prep school in Brooklyn, New York, I went to Israel. I was 16, I think. And it wasn't so much that I ran away from home, but I did. And when I got there I ended up just by chance in a kibbutz. I was out in an orange [grove] at a time when they were picking citrus fruits. And I was picking fruit, and some of the young people who were with me picking citrus fruits said, where are you going to stay tonight? And I said gee, I don't know really. I had just come to Israel. I said, well, where can I stay around here? And they said come and stay with us. And they were kibbutz people. They hadn't settled in their permanent home. In those days there was a kind of a sequence. They started out in tents and as soon as some land was purchased they were allowed to move on to this purchased land. And they had to wait for a while. So I joined them when they were still in tents.

And as it happened, some very important ones who later formed a lot of the political left wing Labor Party movement in Israel were in that group. Several in particular had been, how would you say it? Had been dropped by parachute back behind the lines in Europe. And so I stayed with them and then their sister kibbutz asked me to come over. And I spent about a year in the kibbutz. And I was just knocked apart by the relationship between the people, by the social way of living, by the sense of egalitarianism, by the intensely debatable but very interesting way they brought up their children, and in fact by everything about it, leaving aside the sense of adventure, because it was a pioneer stage. It was like going out West before the Gold Rush here in a sense, the same feeling then. I just loved it.

The girls were pretty. There was a very interesting kind of relationship between the sexes there too, which I think was a lot similar to what we had here in the sixties. There was kind of a humorous quality about the relationship, which, it doesn't seem to exist anymore. And I remember that one of the things that also knocked me apart was that at the beginning we

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all took showers together. Now if you can imagine me from a prep school [LAUGHTER] at 16 and I need to take a shower with all these gorgeous tomatoes around, it was just spectacular. All I can remember doing was keeping my head down like this and taking a shower going like that. [LAUGHTER] But it was just damned wonderful. It really wasn't sexy. It was too embarrassing to be sexy. But it was wonderful. And the whole experience there I suppose it's fair enough to say that I learned to be a liberal, a left winger as a result of my experience in the kibbutz, left wing not in a radical sense. I didn't feel that it was radical. In fact in some ways it was very old fashioned. It was like old village life together and everybody was helping everybody else. And so I've never thought of a kibbutz as a radical form, although it is. I thought of it as just a generous lovely way for people to live together. And that part of it influenced me profoundly and influenced me all my life.

Sometimes people ask me about Sea Ranch, did that emerge from my experience on the kibbutz? Yes, it did. But again, it's like all these questions about form. Are you copying art with your form? Are you copying the kibbutz in Sea Ranch? You know, that's nonsense. What I've been influenced by is the basic quality of the experience and then I can transfer it to some new experience of mine. And that's what the influence of the kibbutz was at the Sea Ranch. And if somebody asked me did the Sea Ranch emerge from the kibbutz, I would say no. But if they said were you influenced in the design at sea ranch, you see the difference? It's an important difference for me, not only on a social level, but also on an art level.

#### **ATTENDING CORNELL**

*Birnbaum: So you come back from Israel the first time in, you were how old now? You were over there for three years, did you say?*



I was 19. And I went to Cornell. Again, things have changed so much because I went to Cornell just by going to Cornell. That was it. I mean, I don't even remember how I got in. I think called somebody up and said I've just gotten out of Poly Prep. And they said come on, you know, like that.

Birnbaum: *So now in terms of plant science, was Liberty Hyde Bailey's hand still ever present there?*

Yes. Yeah. He was, I'm trying to remember. He was a very strong influence, but I'm not sure whether he was still in retirement or whether he had recently died. I don't remember that exactly, but it was like he was, what do they call a professor?

Birnbaum: *Emeritus.*

He was an emeritus. One of his younger people was a professor there, Lee Gand I think his name was, Lee Gand. I took a lot of courses with him. I was a little torn. I loved botany and I really was interested in botany. But at the time I had the feeling I was going to go back to Israel and join a kibbutz, I was so influenced by it. And therefore I thought I better do something that would qualify me for more than just being a botanist. And so I entered horticulture. And I studied mostly horticulture in Cornell. And it was very interesting because it was at the beginning of the ecological movement. And we took courses which had to do with ecology.

Birnbaum: *You know, were there any people or books or classes that really shaped that experience for you?*

Well, all I can say about that is that I was profoundly influenced, because they gave me a language. That was really what it was. I mean, that's just a language. And I didn't look at

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any drawings or photographs. I just drew it. And I really loved plants and plant material. I knew an awful lot about them. And I think that's the main thing to say about it. I still feel that way. I don't feel about it I think the way most do, and that is that these are materials that you use. I have a hard time doing planting plans, which nowadays you have to do, not because I don't know how to do it, but because it bugs the hell out of me. [LAUGHTER] You know, it's like taking a bunch of wild animals from a zoo and writing down I want to have 10 lions here. I feel the same way about plants. I want to have 10 some of, you know, ficus something or other, put in there. It's an insult. Although I love to plant things, and I love the palette, I always think of it as a palette, the palette of these wonderful artifacts that I'm planting that are alive mean a lot to me, but not in this formalized way.

#### **THE WISCONSIN YEARS AND HOW I GOT INTO HARVARD**

I came to Harvard, in retrospect I think a lot of my life has been guided by good luck, literally. Even in the Navy after we got cut in half [his ship], I remained alive. But the way I got to Harvard was I was working towards my doctor's degree in botany. I was working on a subject called the photo period in plants. I had already gotten married, and Anna who was much better connected to the art fields than I was, said by the way, you know, there's a person near here that's an architect of some note. And his name's Frank Lloyd Wright. That was in Wisconsin, of course. And why don't we drive over there on Sunday I understand that people can come and visit.

So I didn't know anything about architecture, but I was always interested in art. I was a Sunday and weekend painter and everything else all these years. And so we went over. And when we got there I remember to this day as you walked in there was a thing carved in a stone. I think it said lintel over door said *"What a man does that is who he is"*.

And I thought, woo, that's [something]. And then we walked inside and I started hearing trumpets playing, literally. And we walked down some steps and Mr. Wright was sitting next to the piano and there were some people sitting around. There was a little concert



going on. I sat there transfixed. And we stayed all day and when I came out I said that's what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. But I didn't know how to go about it.

So I went to the library at Wisconsin and I looked up architecture. And there were quite a stack of books. And then over here there were two books, I think it was, one was *Gardens in the Modern Landscape*. And I opened it up and I could hear the same trumpets blowing. And that was Sunday. So Monday I went to the head of my department. I said what can I do about this architecture? And they said well they are upstairs from where we were in research, upstairs there's a department called landscape architecture. Why don't you go up there?

So I went up there and I talked to the prof who was there. A wonderful man and I told him the truth. I said I'm working downstairs. I know all about botany and everything, but I'm very interested [in architecture]. And he said well, come on in for one of these courses. So I entered. And two weeks later he said well, he said you're like a duck in water. You better go to Harvard. And I said gee, how do I do that? He said we're going to get you a scholarship. And two weeks later I was at Harvard.

It was before I went in to the Navy, so it was about '41, '42. And without any one of these sequences I wouldn't be where I am now, because if I hadn't gotten a scholarship or if I hadn't got Professor Aust, A-U-S-T. And when I think about it, I think it was fairly early in the semester or whatever, because I was able to go immediately into Harvard. And what happened actually was that Anna was in Wisconsin and she still had a few months, some months to graduate. So she stayed at Wisconsin. And I went to Harvard and found a rooming house and there was Jack Warnecke.

## THE HARVARD EXPERIENCE



Birnbaum: *Describe then what [it] was [like].*

It was the Gropius Hudnut period, and Chris Tunnard was there. And, you know, the funny thing is, I never took a course from Chris. . . . I was very influenced by Chris Tunnard. I still am. He actually became quite a good friend while I was at Harvard. He was teaching there at the time. And his social ideas have always been important to me and the fact that landscape architecture was essentially and is a social art has been very important to me all my life. So I can't overemphasize that kind of importance. I think Tunnard was a remarkable guy. He later, he sort of dropped a lot of it, which I thought was a shame. But he did a beautiful, a magnificent book, Manmade America. . . It was just that we talked all the time. We were very good friends. And I learned just by being around. And it was a very exciting time. Philip Johnson was there. I.M. Pei was there. There were some other people who were, Paul Rudolph was a student. I think he had graduated. But he was there all day long most of the time. We used to go water coloring. And it was one of those wonderful, wonderful periods for me where for two years I was just flying around in the clouds, working. But although I was theoretically in the landscape division, I spent most of my time in the architectural department doing studios and also learning from the other guys. I learned from all those other guys who were pretty advanced in architecture.

Birnbaum: *So what I'm kind of curious about is, OK, so it's 1941. And then from '37 to '39 you have those articles that came out in Pencil Points magazine, by [James]Rose and [Garrett] Eckbo and [Daniel Urban]Kiley, and I'm wondering if those made their way into the school at that time.*

If they did, I never heard of it. I'm not quite sure what I was taught in landscape architecture.

Birnbaum: *Was Bremer Pond still there?*



Yes, Bremer was there. I really got, really most of what I got was from the guys in the School of Architecture, and just being around. [Laszlo] Moholy-Nagy would come and give lectures. And [Marcel] Breuer, I remember spending a whole series of things with Breuer. He took us on a field trip to New York City and we looked at Radio City and other buildings. And for some reason I was allowed to tag along on all this stuff. I also became President of the students at Harvard for some reason or other, and as a result I got to know Gropius pretty well as a person. He was a stodgy old guy, but very nice. [LAUGHTER] His wife was gorgeous. You know, she had been married to, what's the musician's name? One of the great musicians at that time. She was a very lively and vivacious lady. And they had just finished a house in what was it called? Lincoln, I think was the subdivision outside of Harvard. And we went up there and I spent time in Breuer's house and Gropius' house. So I learned a lot about architecture.

Breuer's house was more interesting actually. He had one big wall I remember made out of stone. Of course Breuer was a Hungarian and much more outgoing than Gropius. But it was a wonderful time, and I often wonder about college. I learned a hell of a lot more at Harvard than I did during the four years at Cornell. . . . But mostly I have all of these memories which I think they brought [what] I hope any educational system would ever do, and that is to install in me the love of doing what it is that you're going to do for the rest of your life. And that's what I got out of Harvard.

Birnbaum: *What was studio life like then?*

I don't know. It seems to me that my memory is that they would give an assignment and then everybody would go off somewhere in the drafting room and start working at it. There were not big teams then. Everybody did it mostly by themselves. There was no intermixture of landscape architecture at all. So I just went up there and helped. I remember one project, I don't remember what the assignment was, but Philip decided that Corbusier had solved

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the problem. And so he opened this [book] when the crit came around, he had opened up a book on Corbusier, and he had drawn a finger like this and that was his presentation. There was a lot of stuff like that. And every Friday night we'd go over to Philips' house.

Remember that house that he did? And have drinks. Since I wasn't very wealthy at the time that was a very nice way to have cocktails, and Anna loved that. [LAUGHTER] It was a wonderful house. There's a little garden that Chris [Tunnard] had done, you know, a very sweet little garden. And who was it? Ron something, a German name, had done the rendering of it, a very well-known renderer at the time. I'll think of that in a moment too. It's funny because I remember the rendering as much as I remember the house almost . . . One of the great things that we did do was [to] go on field trips. And that was very interesting and very helpful. The other thing was that Bill Wurster and Catherine Wurster, or Catherine Bauer, came to Harvard towards the end of my stay there. And we became very friendly somehow. And we'd go on bicycle trips together. We went out to Cohasset and out to, Nantucket on bicycle trips together mostly to see architecture, because Bill Wurster was interested in it. And so I learned a lot that way with Bill talking about buildings. I remember very well that one time his bicycle, one of the wheels went out of kilter. He hit a stone and this was very interesting, because it was evidence of the two of them. He got down and stamped his foot, one damn bicycle down, and said all right, we'll take a bus back. And Catherine didn't say anything, but she went over to the bicycle and kicked it once and the whole thing sprang back [LAUGHTER] and so continued on bicycles.

## **THE WAR YEARS**

The other thing I think that probably sticks in my mind is, it isn't the war so much. I was on a magnificent destroyer. Magnificent not in the sense not only in its wonderful looks, sleek and wonderful and speedy, but because over the years of the war in the Pacific, it had done a remarkable job saving people who had been on other ships, not on destroyers, but big



ships as well. And they saved many, many, many people. I think hundreds, hundreds at different times. When I got there, it was getting towards the end [ of the war]. I was there for a couple of years on this ship. And I really enjoyed it a great deal and even during the war itself, during the battles I was in. I was in the Battle of Lady Gulf where we took over the Philippines. And then finally, we ended up on the way up to Tokyo, at an island at the southern end of Japan, called Okinawa. We were steaming up there. I had the squadron, my ship had the squadron, but I was in charge of it. And I thought to myself, my God, this is going to be a rough one. And I had been doing a lot of drawings all the time I was on the ship. And I thought to myself, hum, if anything happens to me, I'd like to let Anna know what went on, and I would like her to see these drawings. So I took a package of them, and there was another ship going the other way toward San Francisco, and it came fairly close. And I thought what the hell, here goes, and I threw it, pitched it across to the ship and it landed on the deck there. And I had written on it, please send this to Anna Halprin in New York City for me, signed Lieutenant Lawrence Halprin [LAUGHTER]. And that's why I have all the drawings that we're using in the book [LAUGHTER]. That was worth all the pitching that I had done [LAUGHTER].

## Professional Practice

### WORKING FOR TOMMY CHURCH

Birnbaum: *I thought it might be nice to begin before talking about the Donnell to talk a little bit about working with Tommy {Church} and going to his office.*



I really didn't know Tommy at all before I started working for him. I was at Harvard with Bill Wurster and his wife Catherine for about a year. They were there and had come to read and immersed themselves, to get away from practice. And it was war time, so we became very friendly. And he said when you get out of the Navy, please come to my office and we'll talk. So when I got out of the Navy I stopped in San Francisco. I was on survivor's leave, you know, my ship was cut in half and I was here on survivor's leave. So I was here for a while. And I went to Bill Wurster's office, but on the way up, Tommy's was on the first floor and Bill Wurster's was on the second. And I noticed his name. . . . He had had one exhibition at Harvard. So I knew the name. That was about it. He was not very well known in the East, I think. In fact I'm not sure that anybody knew anything about him. Nobody had ever talked to me about him. And I went upstairs and Bill wasn't there, but they said, well, Mr. Wurster said to hire you. And I said, gee, that's nice. But, they said, there's one condition. And that is Tommy Church has dibs on you. I never asked why, but they said he has dibs on you, so you should really talk to him first. And then if you don't want to work for Tommy come back up and we'll hire you then.

So I never stopped at Tommy's that time because that was so, it was a little excruciating to think about what I was going to do. Because I realized that, never mind being able to shift from one field to another exactly, I knew damn well that if I'd started with Wurster I'd be an architect for the rest of my life. And if I went down and talked to Tommy, I'd be a landscape architect. And so I walked around the city a lot. I talked to Anna. And I finally decided that basically I was more interested in landscape architecture anyway, so I better talk to Tommy. So about a week later I came back. I went and knocked on Tommy's door, and he was there. I said, Mr. Church, Bill Wurster said to talk to you. Oh, he said, that's good. You're hired. [LAUGHTER] And I remember exactly what he said after that. He said, I'm going to pay you more than usual, but I don't want you to come back every two seconds and ask for more money. [LAUGHTER]



So I said, well, I didn't know anything about [the] fee, I mean, salaries, I didn't have the foggiest notion about anything really. And so I was a little startled at that. He said I'm going to give \$75 a week. I had no idea whether that was good, bad or indifferent. How would I know? [LAUGHTER] But it stuck in my mind obviously. And \$75 a week is about \$2.00 an hour, a little less.

Birnbaum: *And when you went to the office, what was the office like?*

Well, it was like this. It was a little bigger than this. But, well, we had a place where we had coffee just like the one we have here, which was about this big. And then there was another room not very big where we did our drafting. This other space was bigger than this, but not terribly bigger. The whole place was about half the size of our office.

#### **STARTING HIS OWN PRACTICE [FROM THE MARCH, 2008 INTERVIEW]**

Birnbaum: *So let's talk a little bit about early practice.*

When I finished with Tommy, it was very difficult for me to leave because I was enjoying it and towards the end, we did the Donnell garden together and things were going so well, and I liked Tommy a lot, and he liked me. But Tommy was not interested on a social level with anything really. He was a designer and a wonderful guy, but he didn't want to change the world as far as socialism goes, or Zionism. And so, he at one point asked me if I'd like to be a partner and I said no, Tommy, I think I need to go off on my own. And so, he gave me a book on Chinese gardens as I went. And in it, it said, "to Larry, who loved me and left me".

But at the very beginning, there's no question that I had learned a great deal from him. He was a wonderful site planner, in addition to being a designer of gardens. And he even was very apt about doing large-scale things, but he didn't do very many of those actually. So I

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started off then, and as usual, you have to start with somebody, so my Anna's parents had just decided to move from Chicago and occupy our area [LAUGHTER]. And so, they asked me to do a garden and a house. I started right at the beginning there. I selected a site for them to build a house on. I recommended that they hire [Bill] Wurster, whom I could work with, and between us we could make a very nice place. So that was the beginning of my practice, in a garden, and it's really one of the nicest gardens I ever did, including some sculpture and other things. It's never, let's see, I don't think it's ever been published really. By now, they're not here with us anymore, so there's somebody else that owns the place, but we have plenty of photographs.

Then the funniest thing I know of is a lot of people will stand behind me on this, I never know quite why people hire me, or how it comes about. Let's put it that way. It's always somehow that there is a chemical kind of relationship or people have seen something that you've done, and particularly at the beginning, when I hadn't any background. I did a few friends' backyard gardens, literally, small ones, some in the city in San Francisco and some in the suburbs. I enjoyed them a lot actually, especially if they were friends. You know, there's nothing like having a client that you get along with and that you end up being a friend of. In fact, I'd never have been able to do a really remarkable place with somebody who was not a good client. Clients make a big difference and I think that's one thing to tell young people. And how you get it, that way I don't know for sure. [LAUGHTER] And so, at the very beginning, we did a lot of little gardens, some of them that are represented by that book. . . . But the earliest gardens were little, tiny ones. They were backyard gardens. And Tommy and I, actually, we had once written an article for a magazine called *Little Gardens* and I liked it a lot. Have you ever seen it?

Birnbaum: *We could lead up to the McIntyre [garden] because that really seemed to be --*



Oh, the McIntyre was a transition garden. It was a really interesting one and it had a lot to do with what many of the public gardens that I did later [how they felt]. And the origins of it, because [of] it and the Donnell garden, I think, are two . . . that were very important to the character and quality of my background and work on gardens. I was always glad to do gardens, even after I dropped them, I mean, dropped doing them, partly because I like doing sketches. In some ways, I prefer the sketches than I do to the big paintings . . . you don't have to spend the rest of the day and very often it's much more evocative, because it doesn't deal with a lot of the details. And the same way I felt about gardens after awhile, that the quality of them were the most important things and how it made places where people could really enjoy their lives in it. And that's really what I was trying to do for them.

*Birnbaum: So during that period, I mean how many people were in the office, when you were doing gardens?*

Jean Walton. She was the first person I hired because she [UNINTELLIGIBLE] at the beginning as a secretary and a plants person. Then after that, shortly there was a young man that came over from Israel, who wanted to learn about how to do gardens.

*Birnbaum: Now how would construction supervision work on projects then? Were you overseeing the construction of the gardens yourself, or were people on the staff doing that?*

It then became a combination because a person like Rich Haag would look at the gardens and then I would go out quite often also. Particularly, it's sort of funny to say this, but when it's a garden, the people for whom you're doing it demand your presence all the time. It doesn't matter whether you're working on a town hall in Jerusalem, but I remember the Haases saying to me, I don't care what else you're doing, we need you out there. And more and more I realized that gardens and houses reflect so much the real person's, not the superficial images of them, but the real persons that you're working for, and their souls, and what they really want life to be about. And therefore, they really want you there if they need you. And also, I also learned sadly, that very often these works led to people's

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divorces because what happened is that they would finally realize we really don't get along and we really have different points of view about life. . . . I must say that many, many of the people that I worked with early on, with [UNINTELLIGIBLE] turned out to be friends, including Richard Goldman and his son. Then here it is. It gets bigger and bigger, you see.

#### **REFLECTIONS ON BUILDING A PRACTICE TOO LARGE [MARCH, 2008]**

*[Birnbaum and Halprin are looking at pictures in his office journals.]*

At one point, we finally ended up with 80 people. When we were working for BART, at one point, you know what BART is, don't you? [Bay Area Rapid Transit] It was, Don Evans from Wurster, Bernardi and Evans, and I were asked to do the site planning for the BART system, where it goes and how it goes and so forth. It was as a result of that that I designed notation actually, so that I could write scores. So at that time, we had to have a lot of people, or thought we did. And we ended up with, I think it was 60 or 80 people, something like that. It was way beyond what I should have had. And it was as a result of that primarily, that I decided to cut back on the size of the office to about 16 to 20, that's a good size, even 40, which I had for awhile. But you'd be surprised, we had a wonderful time most of the time. . . . and it was a little like a big family. George . . . You know George? He was a partner at Joe Esherick's office. A lot of good guys were architects. [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

. . . at one point somewhere down the line, I decided it was OK to have as many people as this, but in addition to the architects, I had people who were photographers, ecologists, engineers, a whole range of diversity of people. And that was the most interesting part of it. . . . And I remember, especially here, that in the morning, when I'd come to the office early, the [Don] Sutherland guy from Holland would be in there playing a flute, and this whole space which was very tall and wonderful, would be full, almost like a church, full of the sound of his flute. And it was a wonderful way to start the day.



I liked it a lot, but then it became difficult. Difficult to the extent that I couldn't handle all the finances, and it became an administrative problem as well. And I'm not a very good administrator, nor do I want to be. And it showed. And then a lot of the young people who came into the project, whereas the earliest people always understood that I was the real designer, that I was going to be in charge of all the design parts, and they would be carried out at the end afterwards. The new people, many of them because they had worked in a different office, would come in and assume that I was going to let them design, which wasn't the case. . . . So I, one day did what they call a deck talk. And it was at that point I told everybody that I really didn't like where everything was going, that it had changed from a family arrangement into a kind of thing which [UNINTELLIGIBLE] . . . I didn't want to have that anymore and so I was going to separate people out. And after I did that, which was difficult to do, I hired back a few people and got it down to 16, I think it was, something like that. But that part of it wasn't very nice. I was upset about that and so was everybody else.

*Birnbaum: Now during this time, you were obviously transitioning to more public works when the office got bigger.*

Yes. That's what caused the change, because I really wanted to do public works. That's really all that I ever wanted to do since, although I slipped every now and then if a good friend called up and said I have just bought a house, I want you to do the garden. Every now and then that would happen. But once I shifted over to public works, it required a fairly large number of people actually because especially when some of it was abroad. I was working in Japan at one point and the Virgin Islands, in Jerusalem, and I had to go to those places as well. So it got to be difficult, and I didn't want to have a big office where people were partners and that they owned the office as well as I did. You know, that didn't go with me not because I was opposed to sharing, but because I wanted to be sure that I still remained the top designer and that's basically what I was.



## REFLECTIONS ON TRAINING NEW PROFESSIONALS

Birnbaum: *So there's sort of this, you know crossroads for the profession. Anything you want to say?*

I suppose I'd like to say something about most of the profession and to young people who might be interested in coming into it. It seems to me that of all the professions . . . it's the one that seems to grasp the whole sphere of environments, much more than architecture or planning or engineering. It seems to have a handle on, could have, and sometimes does have, a handle on the whole thing. There are specialties. And of course there's invariably the idea that well, when it comes to a bridge you have to have an engineer [design it], but why do you think that? I do bridges. Or when it comes to buildings, you have to have an architect. Well, I have usually select architects that I like to work with. In other words, this [landscape architecture] is actually because of the general nature of things, an overview profession, I think, much more than a specific profession, one which is basically philosophical and design-oriented and socially oriented, rather than a specific part of things. And one which could and often does guide ideas for the development of every kind of place that human beings occupy.

And therefore I appeal to, in a sense; I'd appeal to anybody who is trying to enter the profession, not to get bogged down in specialties immediately, but to have a general understanding of what the whole thing is about.

With an understanding also that it isn't necessary to do what a lot of offices, I think, are doing. And that is to say well, if we're going to work with architects, why don't we have some architects on our staff? Or if we're going to work with engineers, why don't we have some engineers? Because what happens then is, first of all, you usually then end up with second-grade architects or engineers. Is that a hard thing to say? I think it's true. And then



you end up with these mammoth organizations that produce commodity designs that are able to say well, we in-house, we'll do anything you want us to do. And it seems to me that that is a lesser degree of excitement and creativity possible.

I think I'm much more in favor of saying let's go to the effort of having teams that you work with where the best people in the field can work together on teams. I don't want to sound egotistical, but I have often worked with teams of great architects and engineers and sociologists where we took a leading role through workshops and so on and got to the core together on a global level of what we should be doing on large-scale projects. And that seems to me what I'd like to offer as a way of doing things.

And I also am curious about another thing, and that is that it seems to me that the university education is not necessarily the best way to go. Because it seems to me that the best way to go is to go back to a degree to the old apprentice idea where young people, perhaps after having a college education, young people could come in to an office, spend four or five years the way I did at Tommy's office, see what goes on. We do this all the time. Young guys here stay four or five years, which is usually the length of time they ought to stay. By that time they know much more about it. They've learned a lot watching things and being participants in it. And then they're ready to practice.

. . . And it's a very creative and wonderful way to work. And it also allows people of different, particularly different interests to add to what any office is doing and enlarge the office itself is an idea.

#### **REMEMBERING THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS IN THE HALPRIN OFFICE**

*Birnbaum: So basically the question is about the sort of, the last sort of 15 years in the office and who [were] this handful, half-dozen folks who are in the office during that time that worked on these projects.*



Gary Roth on Yosemite. He was in the office from Penn [University of Pennsylvania] for the last 15 years, I think, wasn't it? Off and on, off and on only because when he was at Penn he didn't work for us, but then he came back and he worked for us. And then he got married and then he worked for us [LAUGHTER].

Paul Scardina. Paul Scardina started working for me about 20, 25 years. And he, I should say that it was very important in that these folks were not only good designers, which they were, but I also felt that doing the working drawings became very important on all these big projects, because if I had turned some of the working drawings over to other people, they wouldn't have been that good. And Paul on the FDR Memorial worked all the way through, did all the working drawings and made it all sing. Then there was Andrew.

Andy Sullivan. He came from Chicago. When he first came in I thought to myself, what the hell? He talks so funny anyway. And I don't know whether he . . . he was talking a little bit about some of the parks that he did in Chicago. And Jesus, they were little parks, so what the hell good were they? And I don't know for sure whether he's any good at all. For some reason I decided that if he wasn't any good, I was going to make him good. [LAUGHTER] And he turned out to be wonderful, absolutely wonderful. And he did Stern Grove. . . . UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE] He also worked on, let's see, I think he worked on George [Lucas] thing for a while, a little bit.

Steve Cook, who is the head of [Halprin] Conservancy. And I'm very proud of him actually . . . he took a workshop. He was at the University of Pennsylvania. He took a workshop from me . . . He was a good workshopper and he was very emotional during all of that time. And then when it was, when he graduated, he came and asked to work for us. And I said sure. And he started and he helped a lot with the Roosevelt Memorial. He did most of the models, he built them. And he was very good at that. I'm very proud of him. He's also

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turned out to be a very good designer. And I think he's going to be one of the best people we've ever had in the office.

I hate to say this because it makes me cry, Jim Burns, who was a dear, dear friend, came from the East Coast. He ran the New York office. I had an office there. And he came out here and wanted to write about our workshops. And then I said to him well, it's pretty hard to describe. So he said OK, I'll take one of them. And he did, and from then on he devoted his life to helping me with workshops. That's Jim Burns. And damn him, he just, he left us.

## **Collaboration with Anna**

### **HOW THE DANCE DECK EVOLVED - [MARCH, 2008]**

*Birnbaum continues the interview with Larry and is joined by Anna Halprin at their home in Kentfield.*

ANNA: Oh well, I'd been trying to juggle various hats, you know, a mother primarily, a wife primarily [LAUGHTER], a career primarily, and a housekeeper primarily. All these things really had to be juggled. And I had to make a decision about which one of these things that I was juggling took priority. And it was my children. And what was the point in having children if I was in the city all the time practicing my career. So I thought I was going to have to give up one or the other. And so I said that I wish I had a studio connected to the home so I wouldn't have to be away from my girls as they grew up. So that's how Larry designed the dance deck.



LARRY: Yeah. And it was OK with me because actually when we came out here it was a very hard decision for Anna anyway to come out here because all the dance important works were being done on the East Coast. But in order to be with me she had to give that all up and then start a new [life] out here. Now it turned out that that was a great decision, and it gave a great opportunity for new creativity. But at the time it seemed like a hard thing to do, didn't it?

ANNA: Oh, yeah. It was like, this was the boon town, there was nothing going [OVERLAPPING VOICES] on here. It never occurred to me that I could continue being a dancer. But what seemed a curse at the time turned out to be a blessing because there was nothing going on here, I felt free to start from scratch and redefine what dance could be. And the kind of dance that was happening in New York, I was on Broadway to begin with. There was nothing like that here.

LARRY: . . . we decided that we would not do a deck that seemed like an outdoor theater with walls in it and a presidium arch and all the things that a normal theater would have. And it influenced it on an interdisciplinary level. It made for a completely new kind of a dance theater. . . . There was no shape like this ever. And so it was responding to the environment itself, to what's there in the environment, to the character of the environment. And it all influenced the shape of the deck and how it fit.

Birnbaum: *Can you tell us a little bit about dealing with the trees and the vegetation and your philosophy about the trees there.*

LARRY: The shape of the deck had a lot to do with the trees themselves because we had to go around the trees to allow them to live. And that was more important than making it a special shape. There are still some of those trees there. In fact there are a large number of redwood trees at the bottom of the hill and that actually [it] had to stop, the deck had to

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stop when it got to them. They also are very good for the sound, because they're very good for capturing sound of nature.

#### **THE FUTURE OF THE DANCE DECK [MARCH, 2008]**

*Anna and Larry discuss what will happen to the Dance Deck over time.*

ANNA: OK. Well, I'd like to see the deck maintain its original form. There's a piece of it that's missing. I'd like to see that put back on. And then I'd like to see some continuation of the deck as it moves out into the four acres. I'd like to see, right now the four acres that are beyond the deck is just essentially the way it was. It just has a pathway. But since we've been performing out there so much, I can see the possibility of continuing some aspect of the deck structure continuing out into the four acres.

LARRY: I have a different concern really. I would like to be sure that it was used for the reason that it was built. And the only way that I can imagine that happening is if some kind of group community activity, some neighborhood group would take it over and use it in the way that it has started out to be. Or some architectural group like Charles Moore's group that he has, or the Conservancy that is up in Portland, so that it would continue [to be] used but on a public and organizational level, so that it could continue its life-performing reasons for creativity and social programs. I must say that I don't yet know how we're going to accomplish that, because when we're not here any longer I don't know who's going to take care of it. But I think we're going to somehow have to encourage some form of that idea.

ANNA: I feel that the deck was built at a certain scale, for a certain reasons, at a certain time, and times change. And I don't know what the changes are going to be in our time, but I would suspect that it was organic and useful, it would have to change. However, I don't know. But I would be open to that.



Birnbaum: *Well, it's interesting to hear you say that. I'm looking right now at a quote that Larry wrote in 1949 for Impulse Dance magazine.*

ANNA: Yeah. [LAUGHTER] I remember that.

Birnbaum: *And in that article he says, our lives have changed over the years. So have our dances and our gardens. So really if we extend that thought to say well, what did that mean then? What would it mean in the future? But I think it's interesting that that was 1949. And I don't know if there's anything you'd reflect on that in terms of similarities, differences. I mean, obviously you both have perfected your craft over the last six decades since that statement was made. And I'm wondering in revisiting that how you might think of just some of those shifts, and how those shifts might be sort of benchmarks in the work, in the collaboration. And we may have touched upon this already by looking at RSVP and notation, take part in all those things. But I'm just wondering if there's anything else that I may not have touched upon within that context.*

LARRY: I still think that it's going to depend a lot, the changes are going to depend an awful lot on who takes over the deck, what are their concerns, what do they want to achieve? And all of that will have incredible impact on what happens to the deck, I think. I mean, that little thing that I talked to you about this afternoon, for example, was a perfect example of what not to do. . . . I don't want to particularly think through how to change the deck itself at this moment. I think it obviously has to modify or do whatever. But then it's going to depend on who takes over, what their intentions are and how socially involved they are and on and on and on.

ANNA: I'm thinking about another thing. I'm thinking about death and everything dies. And everything has its time to live and time to die. And I think it'll have its normal time to die, but like things that die, humans that die, they may die, but they leave behind them some

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kind of legacy. And I think that the most realistic way for me to think about the deck since I've been living in it for so many years, is that it will leave a legacy. . . .that the materialistic aspect of the dance, of the deck, is not important. It's the legacy it leaves with others who may take this idea and apply it and through their own creativity find other ways of creating decks.

#### **ANNA AND LARRY ON THE INTERSECTION OF DANCE AND NATURE**

*Birnbaum: And would like to talk, number one, about what it means to dance in nature and also the concept of abstracting nature in both of your work.*

**ANNA:** One of the most important shifts for a dancer is to give up the notion that you're the object and everybody must look at you. And that's a very difficult concept for the average dancer to understand, that you're not an object in space. You're just part of space. And that is such a shift in a dancer's attitude about themselves that it takes a lot of experience being able to focus on specific exercises in which you treat objects or forms in nature as equal to you, as having a life as their own which is just as important as you are. And that it's just as wonderful to look at a rock as it is to look at a human form and that they're all part of nature, all part of the same thing. And so it's a philosophical shift that affects a dancer. And to be able to give oneself over to becoming part of nature changes your consciousness so you literally become animated by the natural forces and you begin to relate to yourself in a totally different way. It's such a new experience for the average dancer that it's totally life transforming to be able to shift that kind of awareness.

I have a film out called *Returning Home*, and home being nature, in which I'm in mud, I become mud. I'm in stone, I become stone. It's very powerful kind of transformative experience to have, and everything is your witness, everything that's there. The tree is your witness and that's as important as witness to you as if a human being were sitting there witnessing you.



LARRY: Yeah. Well, I think partly because of my constant not only use of nature as a remarkable form that is being made by energy or life forms, but also that it has to include those in design. And that I tend to, it's not a sense of abstracting nature, it's paying homage to nature, that trees have shapes that are gorgeous and plants have a beauty about them. And all of those are evidence of the fact that they are living elements that you have to deal with, and that are absolutely important. And that's why I use things like that to give me what the idea of my form is that I'm going to design with. And that's certainly the case here in the dance deck.

**LARRY AND ANNA ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION – [MARCH, 2008]**

*Birnbaum: I would like both of you to describe how you do this, your areas of overlap and how you may have influenced each other, which we've only just sort of touched on a little bit.*

ANNA: I can start and sort of fumble through it a little bit. That's a really huge question, so from the point of view of my medium, which is very different from Larry's medium actually. I mean, there's overlapping in terms of our philosophy about freedom of expression. But I used to say I make beautiful, no, he makes beautiful environments. And I always say, I make beautiful humans, so the two together create a whole. But I have to really go back to a kind of germinal idea, so that this is again, not a romantic statement. When I came out here from the East Coast, dance was based on the personalities of major figures like Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, blah, blah, blah. And when I, I objected to that. I always objected to that, but I didn't know what to do about it until I came out here.

There were no great dancers to imitate. And so then I realized I really had to find out what was the nature of movement. And I did human dissection for a year to discover what was the nature of the human body, how did it really work objectively. And then I discovered that well, within the nature of the body itself, a whole language is different. It's not look at me do

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this movement, now you do it. But oh, you can flex, you can flex, you can extend, you can rotate in, you can rotate out. It's a whole new language. And by speaking a new language, you're allowing a certain freedom to emerge from your colleagues or your students, whoever you're working with. Because it wasn't my, it wasn't terminology that just applied to my body. This applies to all bodies, whether you're black, white, Asian, red, whatever color, whatever culture, all bodies have the same human nature. And then out of that you discover well, but when you do a movement like this, which is, say, rotation of the shoulders, rotation of the wrist, blah, blah, blah, it creates a certain feeling that's different than a movement like that. So then you say oh, well, the human body has other aspects which are emotions, a tree, maybe it has an emotion. I don't know. Maybe it does. . . . You know, I'm dealing with emotions. And I'm feeling sad because something in my life has been sad. So I'm dealing with my own personal mythology.

He's not dealing with any of that in that same way. But he is, because when he designs the way he designs with that sense of freedom and that sense of acknowledgment that there are human beings interacting in his environment, he's creating them the possibility to find their feelings, to experience feelings, to go to certain areas in the environment because of their personal needs in their life. So I come from it from the inside. And he comes at the same thing, but from the outside. So you get the two together, you have something very holistic.

And that in a sense is what healings all about, is being whole. And that's what peace is all about, being whole. So I think our work interfaces in a very interesting way. But you really have to understand, especially because I think people understand more about gardens and landscape architects than they do about dance. They don't know what dance is. It can be tap dancing, ballroom dancing, folk dancing, modern dancing, post-modern dancing. It's not just gardens. It's all these layers of associations. And God forbid it should be an art. That's the last thing people think about when they think about dance. But I think that it's from that

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philosophical point of view. And I think we come together in our concern for a humanness, a kind of humanness and respect for individual freedom.

Birnbaum: *Larry it's your turn.*

LARRY: Yeah. Well, I have a responsibility on the same level, a different kind of a responsibility than Anna has. Because what I have to do determines how people live and how they relate to various other people, how they relate to social problems, and how they relate to nature itself. And all of those things if you're careful about it, you need to be giving people a form of freedom. Because when I design places I don't just say well, I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that and do the other thing. I very much of the time, as you know, I allow and ask people to participate, those people who are going to be influenced by a design in a city or in the country or wherever. I want them to articulate what they perceive they would like their lives to be about and how they're supposed to be. And then I can start with them to design shapes and forms that will allow them to achieve that kind of freedom and self-joyfulness.

#### **ANNA'S REFLECTIONS ON THE HALPRIN PROJECTS**

ANNA: . . . I had just come from the Yerba Buena Gardens. And at the Yerba Buena Gardens, there was something so rigid and decorative about it, and it wasn't pleasant at all for me to be in that space. And then I went to the campus, George Lucas's campus for some reason. And suddenly I started to breathe differently. There was a flow, there was a lack of ego. I mean, he wasn't imposing his special style on it. You just felt like he was working with the land and it flowed and you felt like you could flow with it. And the stream, it was something; I could see children and their mothers sitting by the stream. And the whole thing became so humanistic. And it was, and I just can tell whenever I'm in one of his spaces. Like the Stern Grove space, as soon as I went into that space I was just wow, this is just like the Delphi. You



know, it was so ancient and the rocks just seemed to come right out of the ground and this scale was just so immense. And yet it was very, what's the word? It was very generous. It wasn't imposing. It wasn't, it didn't have a kind of egomaniac [OVERLAPPING VOICES].

LARRY: I used the word insistence there.

ANNA: Well, it wasn't, that wasn't what I felt. [LAUGHTER] I just felt inspired.

LARRY: Oh, good. That's better.

ANNA: I was just inspired. I was so inspired that I said, when I came back I said oh, I want to do a dance in that site. But you know what? I want the audience to be sitting on the stage. And I want the dancers to be where the audience is, because that's where the excitement is and the inspiration.

**HAVING SO MUCH FUN - [MARCH, 2008]**

*Anna and Larry conversation continues.*

ANNA: It's been a great life. [LAUGHTER]

LARRY: Yeah, we've been married how long now, 60 --

ANNA: Sixty-seven.

LARRY: Sixty-seven.

ANNA: Yup. Married 67 years

LARRY: Sixty-seven years. It hardly seems possible. From amongst other things, it doesn't seem like 67 years. I would say it felt like ten years or something like that.

ANNA: [LAUGHTER]

LARRY: It's gone by very fast.

ANNA: Yeah, it does really.



LARRY: I must confess that I want to hold to it for a while.

ANNA: You're having so much fun.

LARRY: Yeah. Yeah. I want to get rid of this goddamn, what do you call it?

ANNA: Arthritis?

LARRY: Arthritis of course, but that isn't going to happen. But other than that, it's been remarkable and a lot of fun. That is partly why I'm trying to do this book to tell people about how it all happened and why it happened and so forth. LAUGHTER] Is that right?

ANNA: I guess so.

## Design Philosophy

### LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AS AN ART FORM

I think that, you see, I'll go back on something. When I say that landscape architecture is an art, I think it's very different than when other people say it's an art. I think what they mean, and there are a lot of practitioners even, who think that if it's an art, therefore its shapes and forms should be like an art shape and form. And that its importance is like you would have for a museum painting or sculpture. And therefore a lot of people who think that way design that way. That's not what I mean by art.

I think there's no question that I'm influenced a lot by painters and sculptors. But for me the fact that landscape is an art involves the fact that it's an art whose need or importance is that it develops in other people a sense of creativity for themselves and artistic expression for themselves. And they react to it in the way of sensory and . . . and culturally and emotionally, the way any other art would affect them. When it does that then it becomes an art. It doesn't matter what its shapes are or jagged shapes that make it look some paintings.

Birnbaum: *When you said that you are influenced by other painters and other artists, sculptors, who would those people be?*



. . . all the painters that were painting at that time, for example, Arp and Kandinsky, Picasso. I'm not very selective about that. I don't care what time it is, so I don't think that I could say that there is a particular form of art that I'm influenced by. I'm influenced by it in the same way that I hope other people are influenced by my stuff, and that is that no matter where it comes from or what it's doing, its effects on me, is what counts. Not the shapes or the forms, that's how I feel about it. I think that it has social importance. And that's why in the Roosevelt Memorial I used art as a social comment. Again, I don't think of it in the same way that the communists thought of it, in that way of influencing people to believe in communism. But I certainly think that it can have a profound effect on people's thinking. And I remember particularly several times that I've been at the Roosevelt Memorial where I've seen young fathers walking around with their kids and explaining to them what some of the quotations were in the art particularly, and see this is what was happening in those days and that's why it's important to know about, and so that it's a learning experience as well. The important thing [is] art doesn't get better or worse. It remains equally good since the most primitive times. They made as good art [then] as we make today or anybody else will ever. Science changes and improves, but art doesn't. Because art comes from a different human place, [it] expresses all the human conditions and therefore how could it get any better?

*Birnbaum: How do we begin to get people to sort of celebrate the landscapes and to see them and to understand them?*

In the long run I think that landscape architecture is a very conservative kind of art form or profession. And the reason for that is not because of the shapes that are now in style or art in style, but because as an art form, according to my definition, it is talking basically to allow other people to be creative and to enjoy on a sensory and cultural and mythical level for themselves. And when it does that, then it's an art form. Now that's very conservative. So I think in that sense the question of style is secondary

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### WHAT IS A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT?

Birnbaum: *One of the things I thought would be fun to sort of ask you is quite simply, what does it mean to you being a landscape architect? What has it meant?*

If somebody comes to me and asks me about [landscape architecture], you know, I very often say what do you think a landscape architect is or does? That then immediately throws them, because the definition of what a landscape architect does and is, is very obscure, and it's very ambiguous. I think it ought to be kept that way; because it's a rather indefinable profession, which makes me happy. It's like saying what is a painter? Well, what is a painter? A painter makes paintings. And what is a landscape architect? He makes places. Or he maybe doesn't make places. Maybe he preserves places. Or maybe he doesn't preserve places. Maybe he makes streets. And if he doesn't make streets, well, then what else does he do? Well, maybe he makes parks. And if he doesn't make parks, what else does he do? Well, maybe he writes about it. And if he doesn't write about it, then maybe he, maybe he makes pieces of sculpture to put in people's places. You know, you could go on and on and on. And I think you could keep on going until he certainly decides where houses go or makes communities or makes underwater parks. I mean, you could go on and on and on and on and on. And that's what I like about landscape architecture because it gives; it's such a wide-ranging subject of creativity that it becomes more and more fascinating the longer you practice it. Because it isn't any one of those things, it's all of those things. That's why I like it and that's what it's so exciting for me.

In addition to that I, because . . . . I am in theater a lot and make places for Anna to dance in, I do costumes for her and backgrounds. And, you know, I made a theater for her to dance in, I did a studio for her. It's been on that level a very creative and rewarding way of living. And I feel very strongly about it. I'm a general practitioner, if you want to use the medical



terms for it. And I really like that. I wouldn't want to be a freeway designer or a specialist in any form of what we do because I think it would be limiting. And that's also part of what I always say, that if I were a client and somebody wanted to ask me, which very often people do, do you know about good hospital architecture? I would always say that I don't think you ought to hire a hospital architect. You ought to hire a good designer and then he could get all the information about hospital design from some consultant. But the minute you start getting specialists you limit everything and it becomes rote and uninteresting. Does that answer the question?

### DESIGNING FOR CITIES

Birnbaum: How, you know, what was the impact of *Cities* when it came out? [*Referring to Halprin's book- Cities, published in 1963.*]

. . . The question of *Cities* and I suppose how did it come about to be . . . There have been a couple of things that from my point of view either by chance or because of my interest has expanded the idea of what landscape architects do, one of them was my interest in cities. I was traveling a lot at that time and for various reasons, not just for fun, but for projects that I was involved in or on the way to someplace. I had when I was 13 been taken on a Grand Tour by my parents. And I remember I was just overwhelmed by the cities and loved them. And it was much more than stopping in at every cathedral, which is what the usual thing is. I was more and more amazed by what made cities wonderful, which is not what you can say about American cities, I remember at that time. I mean, American cities at that time, I think they've gotten better somewhat, maybe partly because of this [book] and the influence it's had. But they were dismal in those days. I remember as a kid the only thing I remember about Manhattan was walking up and down Fifth Avenue with my mother and stopping in at Schrafft's and having an ice cream soda. That was the extent of what a city was. And in general there weren't cities, except for Chicago, there weren't cities that you could say well,

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they were interesting to walk around in. Where a street, which was usually just a place that cars drove up and down, where streets had any quality of being for pedestrians on an emotional level or a pleasure level. And they [cities] certainly weren't places where anybody in his right mind would want to live, as far as my experience was. And so I thought as I went through, I amassed all these photographs of places around the world where all of a sudden you would say well, gee, that's a wonderful place to be. I would love to live here. And a lot of it had to do with the street furniture in the broadest sense of the term, street furniture in the sense that the street was for pedestrians, that the sidewalk was a pleasant place to walk, that it was wide enough so that it was comfortable, that you weren't being crowded by the cars, that there were places to sit down on the street and that there were buildings that weren't jammed up against a sidewalk and that you walked directly from the sidewalk into the building.

And so I gradually got it together in a form that I just titled *Cities* in which I examined all the places that I had been, not just in theory, and tried to say what it seemed to me was wonderful about some of the places that I had seen and what made them wonderful. And that's what *Cities*, this book is about. And though it's somewhat philosophical it is [also] very practical. It says that on a riverfront instead of being a dismal place where the rivers burn, you know that old thing about the rivers burn, it could be like the Seine where people walk down off the main street just to get down along the river, that it isn't dangerous to be along the river. There are places to sit and read a book and things like. Or, and in contrast, for example, here is along at that time, along the Embarcadero in San Francisco, we had jammed up this hundred-foot-high freeway that was terrifying. As a matter of fact, as a result, perhaps partly because of this book, [it] was taken down. And it [*Cities*] also talked a little bit about the social problems, about roof gardens that are great scenic places where people can live and enjoy seeing the skyline that Ted Osmundson specialized in [*Roof Gardens: History, Design and Construction*] . . .



Birnbaum: *I mean, one of things I remember about the book, Larry, it was sort of the, I mentioned earlier in the way it describes you as the author and freeways where it calls you both a landscaper, a sociologist and one of the things about the book, not just sort of looking at these things as these static designed expressions, but you referred, I think the term was the kaleidoscope of life –*

. . . Yes, and also I had a section here called choreography, if I remember. Which I notice, that nowadays architects use that term a lot, probably as a result of this, because it was a term that comes from dance. And I through Anna's influence of movement, I applied that to movement of people in space and then here I applied it to a city. And I had a whole section here on the choreography of movement in cities, which seemed like a very important thing to think about. And then we did something about trees and pruning and how trees would live. And little eddies of places, which are very important in cities where you get away from a straight line of sidewalk and building and get a little place for people to sit. I loved doing this book. And I think it's all still very valid. I think a lot of it has crept into the vernacular of everybody and there are now newer examples. I'm not always sure that they're as good.

#### **FITNESS – HOW A DESIGN AND SITE EVOLVE - [MARCH, 2008]**

Birnbaum: *But I mean, I'd like to know a little bit more about what that landscape means to you and what it's come to mean to you over time.*

Well, I still feel that way about it. That's part of the reason why I was so available to do Yosemite, you know, after all these years. And particularly the idea that I didn't want what I did to seem designed. I wanted it to feel right. I think that you're talking about nature then and what it means. The thing that I basically learned up in the High Sierra is that the energy that was involved in the high country was what really created the forms of the lakes and everything else. I mean, rock fallings, earthquakes, melting snow, all kinds of things that nature does all the time. It does it itself. It not only grows but it also disintegrates. And as a

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result of this, all nature has created forms and they are inevitable. And I always, then as a result of that, I thought to myself that I want to do designs that are the result of energies that are happening in society or whatever. And I want them to feel inevitable.

**[DECEMBER, 2008]**

Birnbaum: *I mean, it seems to me that in all of these projects, and obviously there's a choreography component, there's a sequence. . . .*

I have never, I think it's almost true, is that I have never designed anything without going out and looking at the site. And it's very interesting because many times both landscape architects and architects particularly, say well, I've got this project to do. I've seen a photograph of it, so I don't need to have to go out to the site. But from my point of view that's absolutely wrong. It's not organic. It doesn't come close, anywhere close to talking about what needs to be done in that site. So I always say that you have to go out there and walk around in the site, sleep in the site, jump around in the site, learn about the site and what the site is trying to do. And use that as a constraint. In fact all the workshops that we do always start with that, that's the R in the [RSVP?] cycles, and that the R of working in a site is to discover what the site is. And it's like talking to a person. You don't want to say to them, oh, you're a horse's ass, although I very often do say that. But you don't want to say to them oh, your hair is too long. You come to them and say my God, the women usually know much more about this than the men do. My God, you're beautiful and you have some wonderful clothes, and I wish I could know how to get those clothes. Have you ever noticed that that's how women talk? All the time, and they're much wiser than we are, because that's exactly the way you ought to talk to a site. Oh boy, goddamn it, you're beautiful. I want to do some more with you and work with you and arrive at something that will articulate what you have shown me. It's regional planning, I guess, but whatever it's called, that's the way I would say that you have to deal with a constraint.



It seems to me that following that idea that we're trying to make an experience here, and that, by the way, as far as I'm concerned, that's the importance of self-enjoyment is, what is it that you're doing in order that you or your friends will really experience something that's unique and that is wonderful and speaks to you about the site? In other words, the constraints that I look for are things that have to do with what people are going to feel when they come into a place or feel when they sleep in a place. All those things are things that are pointed towards the people who are going to be visitors and people who are going to live in it or whatever. It's not visual.

*Birnbaum: You know, when you think back to working in these National and State Parks, and knowing about, again, you've mentioned the CCC and WPA earlier today. Are there certain elements from those earlier design programs, that the principles that might have come out of?*

Let me think about that, because I think on some level I'm single-minded. Because the parks and things that have been built before me that really talk to me are ones that stay with the idea of the site itself, and that makes comments, not verbal comments, but makes comments about what that area ought to be and why it ought to be. And I think that's the thing, like what the, what's the name of the park in New York? [OVERLAPPING VOICES] It's Central Park. That's what's so remarkable about Central Park, for example. Just to take it, it's not a National Park, or is it a National Park? I don't think so. Anyway, it's a remarkable park, because what he [Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and Calvert Vaux] did was he took this area, which was surrounded by confusion and ugliness and all kinds of things, and somehow he must have talked to it privately. Because he determined that he was going to make it so that all the people around on Fifth Avenue and so forth would want to spend days there all the time quietly and make it over into something that is unique and quiet and philosophically sound, if you want to put it that way. And that it may have little places in it that are humorous or have a little something in it that's unique and that is obviously manmade, but that's not the essence of that park.



## WHAT IS MOTATION? [MARCH, 2008]

Anna and Larry describe **the design stenography**

Birnbaum: *The last question that I have about movement, and I don't know if this is something that you'd like to talk about, but it's referenced a lot early on, is motation, and how did motation come to be?*

I really started it. It was a form, because of Anna and so forth I always think of my designing as being for people who are going to be moving through space over time and then coming to some place and sitting down and then doing something else. And so I was looking for a way of being able, and since I'm a designer and make drawings all the time, in order to accomplish things, I decided I would develop stenography of movement calligraphy. In other words, I would make a drawing that would show how things were moving around and how they occurred, and then I would be able to give it to either a dancer or an architect or somebody who was going to build a house. As a result, they could do all this and how it was particularly induced by the fact that we were hired to do, oh, what is that? . . . the configuration of movement through space of the BART [system]. Because I had to think in a different way, I couldn't make a drawing that would just be piece on a piece of paper, just static. So I designed this movement notation so that I could signify it like scores . . . so this BART motation system is for that purpose. Now it's very useful. Anna can use it or anybody [can] in which movement is important.

ANNA: I think the way that that relates to my work is that in the tradition of dance, dance ordinarily takes place in a site. And when he developed motation, you're seeing movement through space rather than a static site. I did a piece called *City Dance*. And it started Twin Peaks and it went all day from Twin Peaks and it went through the Fillmore area and then it went into the Mission area and then it went into Golden Gate Park. And finally at the end of the day it went to Justin Herman Plaza. So that was not a traditional way to experience or

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even think about dance. And yet it was its own kind of mutation in which you became aware of how you move through vast sites, one site after another after another. And then it swung around and ended up at the beach for a closure. So I think that mutation certainly coincides with the idea of liberating yourself from a closed, static site to something that goes over time.

**WHAT ARE SCORES? – [MARCH, 2008]**

*Birnbaum talks to Anna and Larry at their home in Kentfield.*

LARRY: OK, I'll go first this time. My idea, again, as a way for people to be involved in something that, in design or dance or whatever it is that is really going to really modify their lives both individually and as groups of people. And therefore my idea as a designer is to include them, involving their description of what they'd like this place not so much how to design it, but what they would like its quality to be and how it's going to affect their lives. Now as a result, I developed the idea of scores, which in my words are ways that a designer or whoever is developing ideas that are going to affect people, allowed people not to tell them what to do or how to do it, but what the idea of what's going to happen is going to happen... . [Larry turns to Anna] as Anna did this morning, would you give me a good score from this morning?

ANNA: I asked them to use three elements, up, out and down.

LARRY: There you go. That's an open score, what I call an open score, because it tells how to start the process, but not what the process is and how to go about it. It's, or what the solution's going to be.

ANNA: Couldn't you more or less say, Larry, it's telling them what to do. I'm a performer. I have to know what to do. I'm not worried about –



LARRY: That's right.

ANNA: -- process. I'm just saying, what am I supposed to do? Well, this is what I'm supposed to do, but he's not telling me how I can do it.

LARRY: How you can do it, that's right. That's a better way of explaining it. And it's an open score. That's what I meant. And that is here's what you're supposed to do, but we're not going to tell you how to do it or what you're going to do really. And the RSVP cycles include scores as a major way of telling people on very large levels how to be creative and what they need to do.

ANNA: I think what always fascinates me is how quickly you can generate creativity, just like that. And so it depends on what the situation was. In this particular case, we had a half an hour. Well, how can we as a group of 20 people have a creative experience and learn something about the art of dance and learn something about how we can relate the environment. So this is my intention. How am I going to do this? Well, let's see, what's the most elemental aspects when you first come outside? You're aware that the space has suddenly changed, that the boundaries of the space have been erased. So if the boundaries are erased, what's left? ...

So then the first thing we did was now explore those elements so you can gather resources, right. So that's part of, that's one of the first processes that I use is how to, how to generate resources. So they generated a lot of resources. And then time is now getting close, we only have now 15 minutes left. So how could we suddenly get? Well, now everybody select certain movements that you can repeat. So that was now, that was a score. Select movements that you can repeat. That's a score, simple as that. And you have this much time to do it. And then you do that and then you perform it.

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So then well, to do a performance you want to have a witness. So then we divide the group, you witness, so you're performing for these witnesses. So then you have the P. . . . So scores have to do with your intention, where you're going to perform them, what you're trying to achieve. But they can happen, you know, in five minutes or five years.

### **THE RSVP CYCLES [MARCH, 2008]**

*[Birnbaum speaking to Anna and Larry]*

Well, I think our common language is the RSVP cycles. Because it allows you to be non-critical, to be free about what you're going to do and it allows for a democracy of all kinds of people and making creativity occur. But it also allows you to utilize RSVP, as the basis for it, as the basis for the process. The R is the resources. It's, for example, if I'm going to in my own terms, if I'm going to design a place like this courtyard here, I have to understand that there's a hillside here that's important, that there are some trees, that I have to take care of the drainage, that people are going to be moving through it and movement is going to, it needs to allow it to happen. And all of those are the resources that I face. And then the scores, the scores that I use are not verbal scores. They are scores that I draw.

I make a drawing of a plan that shows what I am going to accomplish. Or, if there are a lot of other people involved, we allow all of them to make scores of how to design this, do you see that? The V makes us, gives us the option of deciding for all of us that are involved in this creativity, how well is it working? Is it accomplishing what you want to accomplish? That's a value action, a term that I invented. And then finally, the P, RSVP, the P is the performance, that is, once it's accomplished, how is the performance working out? Is it doing what it wanted to do?

ANNA: Isn't the performance the implementation of your score?



LARRY: Yes. It's the implementation.

ANNA: Well, in relationship to working, collaborating with Larry? The common language, there's two different ways of approaching that. One is for me to find a common language with participants, I need to establish the way I work with movement. So it's different than with his field. But in working with Larry, our common language is using a common process, which is the RSVP cycle. So it's more process-oriented when we together.

LARRY: Yeah.

ANNA: Although of course having been trained by Larry to develop an awareness about the shape of space and its impact on movement, that also has become a common language I've learned from him. So I think he may not having the same experience working with another dancer who hasn't had a husband for 67 years who's constantly teaching me just through being in his spaces how space speaks to you. So that I think is unique.

[TEXT BELOW FROM THE 2003 INTERVIEW]

*Birnbaum: Now I'm intrigued by something you've just said. The park accepts the nature of where it is as part of the solution. Would you say that that's something that is sort of a guiding philosophy in your work?*

Yes. It is. Because as you know . . . its part of the RSVP Cycles, which is a guiding principle of my philosophy on how you do you design. The RSVP cycles, deals exactly with that, and that is [that] you're dealing with the resources that are there. They're not only geographical, but they're biological, they're ecological, they're human. All of those are [part



of] the culture and the site. They're all parts of the resources that you have to deal with on a creative level. You constantly use them as part of the creative part of the design.

The RSVP cycles originated because originally I became very aware of the fact that as I designed if I didn't include people somehow they became angry, literally. I remember one time I was designing something for a park in Harlem in New York City. A park needed to be saved. And I made some beautiful drawings and I asked some friends of mine who also, as a matter of fact, included Native Americans and African Americans.

And I invited them to see what I had drawn. They walked around and they kind of grumped at me. And I said, well, why are you so angry? They said well, look, if you're going to show this to people there, these are such beautiful drawings that they're going to put everybody off. They're going to say well, they're so beautiful, what do you need us for? You haven't indicated any way that we can participate. And I thought a lot about that. And I thought of ways at that moment where I would try to get a system going which would allow people to feel a creative, who are going to be shareholders and occupants of an environment, that would allow them to participate in not only the dialogue as clients but also as participants of the solution. Now [today], that doesn't seem so odd. I think it's gotten written into the books now [that] you have to do that sort of thing as a result. But at that time, it was a new idea.

And very soon thereafter Anna was, my wife, was going to Stockholm to perform. And the same thing happened. She had some people that she was bringing in to help her with a performance, and she couldn't teach. She couldn't get them to understand what we wanted from them. She asked me to help. And so I used the system called scoring, which is like musical scoring but instead of musical notes that a composer makes to give to a musician to perform, you know, Isaac Stern playing the violin, he has to have a score that somebody has given him. [To make] a score for activities where you do the same [kind of] thing, you give people an activity that they need to perform. I wrote a series of scores for

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the people who were going to perform in that with Anna, teaching them how to take the following steps and how to move from one side of the stage to another, and it worked perfectly. And so that helped also, and that was, the first one was R, that with scores. And then it took me a while because I didn't know how to deal with feedback and the issue of criteria and excellence.

And finally I decided that I'd use a word that I made up called value action, which has to do with the value of things and what you're going to do with it. That you do when you interact with people and, you know, you say to somebody I agree with you in general, but on the other hand, that's not going to work very well arriving at consensus is the valuation. In architecture we call them crits, but they're not quite crits, because they're not critical. They're always accepting of the other guy, but commenting and interacting. So that's V. And then I realized that what I had done was RSVP, which is a communication feedback system. Now that just came by chance, I'll admit. But it was very helpful, because that's what I was trying to do, and that's what the RSVP cycles is about. I use it all the time in design, in doing workshops with people, in helping people participate with me in design, in communities, up at the Sea Ranch. Very often from time to time, the people at the Sea Ranch want to examine their lives up there and see how they're operating as a community and we have workshops together. And so it's an ongoing process that has been very, very helpful and has influenced a lot of people in the sense that now it's almost a law, I believe, that in some, most community design project for the government you have to do some workshops of that kind. So it's gotten to be in the mainstream in a sense.

#### COMMENTS ON ENDANGERED PROJECTS

*Birnbaum: Let me repeat something that you said to me in a conversation we had in 1994, so it's almost a decade ago. You said, you know, it takes us 10 to 20 years to get our projects built. And then we spend the next 10 to 20 years trying to make sure they don't get knocked down.*



Well, I think what I meant was that they're more vulnerable than pieces of architecture. After all, architecture is also subject [to that] we recently lost a [Richard] Neutra house and people liked that. But particularly places which are either park-like or ephemeral, that is to say some plantings, are very vulnerable to people's ability to not get rid of them, knock them down. Particularly developers who seize every open space that you can imagine, whenever you can get to it, because they always seem to, especially if they're wonderful places that you've made, they then want to grasp them and make some place there that's going return on an investment. And on that level they're terribly vulnerable, much more vulnerable than buildings or structures or pieces of engineering. Like great bridges that you can't easily get rid of.

#### **SKYLINE PARK**

*Birnbaum: I'm going to ask you a question that may be a little bit difficult and so you can answer it if you want. But, you know, the Skyline Park issue recently is something that quite a number of people were very passionate about and threw themselves into and to hear of its demise, how does that make you feel?*

Well, your question [about] Skyline Park and how I feel about that. I empathize a lot with the people who have been supporting the park and I think it's wonderful that if it generated so much sentiment and passion about it. One of the things that interests me, by the way, was that they referred to all the mistakes that they've made in the city. They've lost an I.M. Pei building in downtown. They've lost several others. And it angers them that they're now going to make the same mistake over again. And it's one of the strong [reasons] I think why they should have survived. I must say this, that unlike this place, for example, where I live, where our office is, the Levi's Plaza. I have not spent a great deal of personal time in Skyline Park in the recent past. So it seems more distant to me. I think that makes some difference. But the other thing that I think bemuses me and that's going to be the right word that I'm going to use instead of annoys me, let's say bemuses me, is the attitude of the profession in

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Denver about the Skyline Park. We went to an awful lot of effort to have a workshop, as you know, with a number of people, who they chose, that is the city chose, to dialogue with me about my feeling about the park and what should be done about it.

By the way, I should mention that that was my idea. They asked me if they could send somebody here just to talk to me a little bit. And I said now that wouldn't help very much and wouldn't be a creative way of thinking about it, that the most interesting thing would be to do what I usually do about the problems of all kinds, let's have a workshop about it and have a dialogue and use the RSVP cycles. And we did it for a whole day, and it was very, very thoughtful and very interesting.

It also bemused me because we came up with a consensus which was that there were two options. One was to demolish the park, which we all said, I think, together was not a good reason because everybody admitted that just because it was being poorly maintained and that there were a lot of homeless people using it, it seemed like an incredibly poor reason to demolish the work. That is a social problem, and that should be taken care of first rather than saying we'll get rid of the park. Because if they, they all agreed that if we got rid of the park and they built another park that homeless people would still come anyway. Now that was all agreed.

And then several brought up in the context of things, that is, that some new plant material needed to be put in. And that it was a good idea to get a shoulder with a sidewalk on Arapahoe Street. And there were a number of other things like that, all of which seemed to be well, that sounded sort of simple. That's like saying that I would take a shave every morning or something. And, you know, sure, you ought to take a shave every morning. And if you're taking care of a park you ought to prune the trees and maintain it and fix the pumps and all of that was agreed upon. And then we had an agreement that therefore it seemed wise to say that rather than take the park out, which also was going to be costly, that it

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would be better to isolate the things that really needed to be done that could improve the park for now and that that would be the way to go. And we wrote down the things that needed to be done. And we all agreed upon that. I don't remember how many points there were. I wrote them down. Then they left. I felt that it was agreed upon that that was the way we were going to do, and that is not what was done.

I am, as I say, bemused, because we had two groups of professionals in landscape architecture who I thought were dignified, delicate and creative, and I thought that they were going to see to it that what we had agreed upon would be carried out. But it didn't seem to go that way.

#### **MANHATTAN SQUARE PARK AND THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF ART**

Now there is another thing that is happening in a couple of other places where it seems to me that one of the responsibilities that the profession could take on for itself, which I think is really what you're getting at too, and that is championing some of these places and finding ways to either modify them or bring them up to date or treasure them, but particularly treasure them if they're worth treasuring and do something about it. And that didn't happen. The people who were treasuring it were citizens who were yelling at everybody, don't do what you're now about to do. As I say, that bemuses me.

. . . In the case of Manhattan Square Park, Ken Smith, who was working on it got so upset that he quit the job, because he felt that strongly, now that seemed to me like a responsible thing to do. I can't always ask people to quit, particularly in this economic status.

At the museum in Virginia, as I understand it, the architects and landscape architects seemed to be supporting the idea of getting rid of the garden, which I don't think the word anger is the right word, it saddens me.



But at the Virginia Museum nobody has even talked to me about it or asked me about it. And I cannot imagine that architects and landscape architects couldn't devise some way of expanding the museum, which of course is a valid thing to have to do. I can't imagine that they can't expand the museum without occupying that little courtyard which is so heavily used and everybody loves. So I speak also not only to the people at large in these places, which often are more vocal than the professionals, but also to the professionals and our profession to have debates about each one of these things. And it would seem to me at the museum, if I was a professor somewhere I would say give a student class [the problem] and say, why don't you work out how to work this out and expand the museum without damaging the [courtyard]? That would be a reasonable sort of thing to do or have a conference about it. That's how I feel about it in a nutshell.

#### **WHAT A NATIONAL PARK SHOULD BE - [DECEMBER,2008]**

*Birnbaum: Let me ask you, because you've been talking about really being sensitive to sort of the wilderness. And you also alluded to automobiles and buses. What are your thoughts on visitor centers and other types of development that's coming into parks today?*

I think in general that parks, National Parks, ought to be pure, pristine, beautiful, not fancy or imposed upon. Because I think in all these cases, if you can make them to follow those kinds of words or those kinds of principles, the Park itself will be far better and do more for people than if you start fussing around with buses and trucks and this, that and the other thing. In Yosemite, by the way, we took out a whole area and it was for parking, and we got rid of the parking. And immediately it became much more interesting and enjoyable for people as they come in. You know, Dee and I had a talk about this the other day and she pointed out correctly that after all, if you're going to have a park up on a High Sierra, say, and you start in San Francisco, how are you going to get there if you don't have a car? Or you would be forced to find some way to get there. And I think that's a problem

[LAUGHTER].



Because every time that we go up there we get in the car and go up there and find ourselves there, and on the way we find it very enjoyable on the way there. But when we get there, we occupy a space that's been devoted to parking. Now I'm a little unclear about what to do. My own feeling is that Europe has solved this a little better than we have. Because the Europeans have trains that start here and go there, and when they get there, all you do is you hop out. On the way you've had food in the train and you've had friends in the train with you and you've had your children in the train. So as far as I'm concerned, the automobile is a nonsensical vehicle that doesn't, isn't appropriate to get anywhere. Now somebody's liable to say well, trains are, you know, you can imagine all the lists of reasons why trains are not as good as cars. But I don't agree with those. And I think as much as we can, our environment would benefit from either using trains or bicycles or other vehicles, types, that allows people in some way, to get from one place to another. I voted for the train that we're going to put in here, and I'm very proud of that. And I think that once we get into that kind of a mode, it seems to me that we'd be better off.

Yeah, the other thing in parks, the only other thing I have talked about and like a lot is that I think that the idea that parks also have a lot of other things going on -inside them. It's like Walt Disney and Disneyland, which they also think is so wonderful. Well, it's nice. But for the same reason I think a thing like that is not the right thing in a National Park. And there are need for other things like restaurants and photography centers, all kinds of things that are manmade. And I understand that once you determine that you're going to basically wilderness, that people coming into it even so like to have some things in the park that they can enjoy.

In Yosemite, what's the wonderful place?

DEE: The Ahwahnee?



HALPRIN: The Ahwahnee Hotel, which is knockout. And it's so wonderful for people that there's no way of saying that it doesn't accomplish something. And then some places where there are little stores that you can buy something for your children or your wife and bring them home when you go home. [LAUGHTER] I think some of those things need to be accepted somehow. But I think they're wrong, because, they're wrong because very often they become the major characteristic of a park. And that's what's wrong, I think, when they get to be so involved and so big and the restaurant is so big and wonderful that when you go to Yosemite you don't say that it's got this wonderful waterfall and so forth, but you say oh boy, it's got a wonderful restaurant. I think, in other words, that what I call constraints can [be] set up so that being able to say this is not the kind of restaurant we want to have, or that sort of thing, and yet have a restaurant, and the same with shops. I think the major thing probably is to say that the National Park is basically a wilderness. And that it allows some things in it that are manmade, but that's not the essence of what the park is. That's the only way I would think about doing it.

. . . But National Parks ought to cherish the quality of nature and what nature does to the country and what it does to the environment itself. Because as far as I'm concerned, that's the essence of what design ought to be about, taking the qualities of the natural energies that you see when you get up in the high country, you know, when you see a piece of landscape [that] falls down for example, and then you start to learn what nature is really about. It's not about oh my God, that's such a beautiful girl. It's something that comes to people and then eventually informs them internally as to what this is all about in terms that I think mostly it ought to be about wildness.

Birnbaum: *So how would you define wildness? What is wildness to you?*



But wildness is about something that exists in the planet that essentially we all agree is beautiful, like the way plants grow or animals live. But it is not manmade. I promised the Yosemite people that I would design it so that it felt like wildness and I didn't want them to know that Lawrence Halprin designed it. But that meant that I had to design it in such a way that was organic, had its essential qualities of inspiration and vision and that people would enjoy being in it, you see, and that was hard to do without letting people know that I had done it. And we somehow, we spent a lot of time talking about how to do that.

HALPRIN: [19:30] Wildness is something that exists in the world, in this planet and we're having more and more, we're having more and [UNINTELLIGIBLE] about the difficulty with it nowadays because of the what do you call it?

Birnbaum: *So what was your palette?*

My palette there was to take people into the quality of Yosemite and to be able to walk through it and climb in it and not either touch it very hard or make fires in it, or make places for children to play, you know, even though children ought to be in it, but to make it the essential thing that it's not a playground. And then when we finally got the trails worked out, I went on the trails myself and at each point, I felt that it would be important to stop and have the experience of that place itself. And I remember that Gary [Roth], who was my assistant, one of my staff people, a very nice person working on my staff, He had a difficulty about stopping in a place and making it available, because he always kept on saying well, we ought to go on and on and on. But the on and on and on is not the right thing to do. It's the stopping where you experience things, that is important. And that's one of the things that I spent an awful lot of time, and it took a lot of time.

#### **NATURAL DESIGN/OR MAN-MADE- YOSEMITE FALLS AND STERN GROVE**



DEE: Well, in the biography, Larry, at one point in the biography you talk about the difference, the design difference, in what you did in Yosemite and what you did in Stern Grove.

Ah, aha, aha. Yes, that's interesting. What she's getting at is that Yosemite I said before I started that I was going to do something that was natural, not because I am, you know, just, what's the word? An environmentalist. But because I think that's what people benefit from when they go to these kinds of places. And therefore I wanted to do, go back to that whole idea of nature being the greatest designer that I ever met. And that's up at Yosemite, and the -- Stern Grove. I designed it in such a way that everybody would come in, and I now can admit this, and that is that I've been a little surprised because my wife the other day, who was asking me to do a dance program with her in Stern Grove said, boy, that is a beautiful thing that you designed. That was the first time and forever that she's ever said anything like that. [LAUGHTER] And I accepted it, you see.

And then also I had to admit that we've brought in boulders from China. But I accept that, I want to admit that after all, there are some areas that, the fact that it's manmade is valid. And you ought to start out by saying that we're going to do something that's manmade, but not change all the *constraints*.

Here's some constraints that go along with it. And that's perfectly all right as far as I'm concerned. And I see nothing wrong. And I said that when I started on Stern Grove. But the manmade implies that it ought to be done by very talented people who would have an understanding of what simplicity is. That the architecture needs to be carefully designed so it doesn't overcome the quality of the park, you know, all of those kinds of things. And those are determinations.

### **Summing up Halprin's Philosophy**

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Birnbaum: *In one sentence, what's your philosophy?*

I guess I have only one philosophy, and that is that to combine as much as possible, life with work, and by work I mean creative, creativity. And that if you can combine the two, it seems to me that that would end up being my philosophy, particularly if you could include within the work that you do, a remarkable contact with people of all types of creativity to help your life along.

## Elements of Design

### WORKING WITH PLANT MATERIAL

We didn't talk a lot about plants or planting. I don't think, it's fair enough to say it was an afterthought. But it wasn't part, in a sense as we were making like the Donnell Garden, we never talked about what plants we were going to use after we did the plants. Now it may be that that has influenced me some. But what I was saying before is more like it, and that is that I love plants so much that I think of them as living beings that I'm asking to help us make a wonderful place. And I don't care how you do it. I don't care about planting plans, although I know by now that you need them. It was also true then in my big office, you know, at one time I had 80 people help me, but one of the wonderful people was Jean Walton, who was a plant expert. And she and I, fair enough to say, at the end of the project would sit down and say well, we know we have to a group of trees, and what will they be? And how far apart do want to plant them? And even here in the office now we're in the throes in Presidio and a planting plan, and we're attacking it just the same way. Although we're here, we're doing a planting plan with a CAD machine and identifying each one and how many there are and it bugs the hell out of me, to be perfectly honest about it. They



always complain about the fact that I complain about that sort of thing. They say, Paul always says that's the way things are now.

*Birnbaum: How does the preexisting plant materials and integrate it into the design?*

Well, in general I think it's very important to keep what's there if, I mean there are two ways of looking at it, at the Donnell, not the Donnell, but right now we're working in the Presidio. There is an enormous hedge row of eucalyptus that exists. They are historical. They're over about a hundred feet or more. And the design that we made accepts the fact utilizing these trees as a given, just as you would accept a certain kind of soil or a wall that existed before, because I think even if we are forced, we weren't forced to do it, except these days that kind of history is required to keep the trees.

But I would definitely accept that. And in Israel the same thing. These trees, for example, that you see in that picture over there. They were planted at the time I was in Israel as a young kid. In fact I may have, they are nowhere at that time when I was 12 years old we were there for a few months, my parents and I.

. . . First, they're living things and I hate to take living things out. When we take them out I always apologize to the tree. But in addition to that they add a sense of scale and a sense of well-being and a sense of security and on-going-ness that always helps a landscape project. When you start out with a project and a piece of architecture gets built, right? It's like that, whatever it is. At that point a person is this high and if you can possibly buying a big tree to give it scale, the tree would be about that high, right? This thing dominates, and so looking at it that way, as time goes on, this guy gets that big and this, like that. And usually at about 25 or 30 years, it gets to a point where this fellow and the trees are the same scale and you've reached a sense of harmony or what the Navaho would call harmony or equilibrium between the manmade things and the biological things. And at that point you get a feeling of having achieved what you really set out for at the beginning, now right where we are now

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here at Levi's we've just reached that point. You see, now here, it's the same thing, the buildings are like that here. It's a little stodgy and like that, but quite beautiful. Here are these things. And the same thing happened and by now some of the trees, especially the cottonwoods out there, are now like that. And that usually takes about 30 years. It's one of the reasons that I'm very happy that I've lived this long. I'm serious about that. As long as I can keep my health I'm happy to be able to work, but this is an added incentive.

### **THE ART OF DRAWING**

*[Halprin and Birnbaum in the Halprin office looking at a wall of drawings of the Yosemite Falls Project.]*

Birnbaum: *Let's talk about drawing.*

The question of drawing is a process. I have drawn all my life. And for me it's a language like writing, which in a sense is a form of drawing. If you think about it that way, it becomes much easier to forget about how it's complicated and needs a lot of talent. We often run into that in workshops or [in] teaching that when people are asked to make a drawing, they all immediately say well, I can't draw very well. That's like saying write a word and they say oh, I can't write very well, which [LAUGHTER], nobody does.

I've always drawn in the sense that it's a secondary language. I find it much easier to make a drawing about something than to describe it or to talk about it. And usually when somebody asks me well, what do you think about something, I draw it. And on that level, it's always worked for me as a way of describing what I not only how I feel or what I feel, but also to communicate to somebody.



And so, for example, here's one about Yosemite that I drew. And it describes how we were going to design the new trail from the lodge to the foot of the falls. And this is a drawing of the upper mountain from which the snow melts and comes down this chasm and cascades down. And these trees are there, and the trail that we're now, I'm going there tomorrow. I'm going to see some of these new boulders that we're placing around to do certain things. And it's all described with the people in it to give it scale. And I think it's fair to say that if I had to describe it by words, it would be much more difficult than for people to understand it if I showed them this ...

Now on a professional level therefore this helps me a lot, but it isn't the reason I really draw. The reason I really draw is that for me it's a way of expressing myself, in a sense telling who I am. And I wish everybody would think about it that way, because it's even not a matter of, I think some people draw better than other people, just like some people can hit a hammer better than other people, can swing a hammer. But the intention is really more important. When people are motivated to draw, they soon enough after a little trial, they really can draw very well, like children. You know, you see children draw before they've had any training at all. And you can immediately see what they're trying to talk about. They draw a mountain or a house or a person, and that's my mommy and she's sitting there with her hair. And no matter if it's a beautiful *painting*, *it's still as good as you can do. So that's how we use it.*

*[Looking at a different drawing]* This is my cabin up in the Sea Ranch. And this is my way down to the cove. And that's what we see down in the cove.

Now what I'd like to say is most of these drawings don't take me an awful long time, because I just draw. I don't sit around thinking well, is this good or it's bad or is it indifferent. I just draw. I think this took me about half an hour or less, maybe less. And this is a stream, for example, I tried to explain to George Lucas the other day why we were going

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to do a certain thing along a streambed running down through his new place. And I started talking, but then I just took the piece of paper and I made this drawing and showed him how it was going to look. Yeah, sure. He said fine.

*[Looking at the dioramas in the Halprin Office]*

Birnbaum: *How did you come to [build this] sort of [thing]? We look around the office, we see these wonderful dioramas.*

At some point a few years ago I realized that if you showed people this [a drawing] it would be enhanced by showing the one step further and showing them the perspective. And so this [the diorama] is also showing them one step further in showing them the perspective that happens or the depth. And it shows some existing rocks here, but now all of a sudden you start to be able to see in depth, the depth of things. And this is a way of making drawings in three dimensions. I don't actually go beyond the drawing itself, but some of the guys in the office have learned, after I experimented with it, how to cut up drawings and make them in planes, one stacked against the other. So you end up with one drawing that then now is many, many dimensions.

*[Looking at a portrait]* But I draw all the time. I mean, I draw people when I'm having lunch. This is an architect [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE] that I drew the other day. It's Ed Berger. Do you know Ed? A very good architect friend.

*[Looking at another drawing]* And this was a sketch that I did a few, well, this was last year when we were redesigning our new house after the old house burned down. It helps visualize what the new house was going to look like. It's not, in other words, just a professional tool. I draw all the time. It doesn't matter what I'm drawing as long as it touches me or excites me or informs me or something, I tend to draw it.

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## DESIGNING WITH NATURE

Birnbaum: *We've kind of danced around this issue of nature a little bit this morning and not really spoken specifically to it in a way that we've spoken specifically to art.*

Well, I'm a great nature lover, but I think of it more as an experience, not as a form or shape to be copied. Therefore, and that has to do completely with even all of my designs, and it's a source of most of my designs, it's the process of nature that I have absorbed and used a lot. A good deal of it from my experience up at the High Sierras where you get above timberline and you can see nature and its real manifestations not covered over by romantic undertones. And so when I think about nature I think about the effect it has on people. And if I can in the city develop it the same way, to deal with the effect of what you do, to be similar to the effect of nature has upon you, then I'm happy about it. And that's how I try to design. Therefore I may bring a tree in or something. But it's more to try to emulate the quality of the experience in nature that I'm after.

. . . What I would just say to the young people is this. In order to think about the effects of nature and how lovely that is and how important it is, I would go into nature and think about the effect that it has upon you. What is it that you really get out of being in nature? Because it has a lot to do with the relationship of people to the great unknown around us that we don't understand but are given. Sometimes you might want to close your eyes so that you can focus more on the sounds. And if you close your eyes you can hear the birds singing and insects doing little noises. And then if you can go in with a friend, have him blindfold you, or him or her, and walk them around and then they'll understand the feeling of walking in nature, the feet tell you, the rocks and the various feelings of the textures[ tell you]. And then you begin to understand really what nature is about and how it affects you. And then remember also that in some places things change a lot. Sometimes leaves drop.



Sometimes bark drops. Sometimes flowers occur. Sometimes smells happen in the springtime. Once you really then understand what nature is because of how it affects you, then you'll understand how you can use it as an art form. Because then you can say well, I want to achieve the same feeling for people as nature's given me.

#### **DESIGNING WITH WATER**

*Birnbaum: We haven't talked about water and fountains and what as a landscape feature they mean to you.*

Well, it means a lot. First of all, it means a lot for bringing nature into downtown, a fountain because the sound and the water, and water is after all, one of the essential qualities of an environment because it talks to the life of a place. [It is} something that is constantly moving and doing all kinds of things. I love to put fountains in because the sounds of the voices of the imagery that keeps on coming around all the time. And people love to sit around a fountain because of the sound of the water, and with children [because] they love to go into the water. And that's another thing that I always do and that is, I urge people to allow children to walk into the fountain. Don't have somebody go and say "get out of the fountain, you're not supposed to be in it". And you'd be surprised. Every time I do a fountain, the first thing I have to do is, the next week or so after I put it in, is tell the security people, get your asses out of here, they're allowed to be in the water.

At Letterman, which is what I did for George [Lucas]. Have you ever seen that? I did a fountain there in a lake, and I modified the hillsides that you walk around because I always want to make these things so that people will come to them and walk through them and enjoy them and sit in them, and so on. And that goes back to the medieval times I think, or back to the Roman times, or not so much the biblical times, in Egypt.



## DESIGNING STREET FURNITURE AND PLACES FOR ART

Birnbaum: *This concept of designing all the street furnishings, tell us a little bit about how that started.*

Well, at that time I remember, if we think of Ghirardelli, that I worked there with Wurster and for Bill Roth. . . . And the fact is that nobody at that time knew very much about street furniture and so I said to Don Emmons, I'm going to do the lighting in some of the street furniture, and he said go ahead. And so I did. And then ever since then, I've enjoyed doing the street furniture a lot. It's like thinking about important pieces of sculpture and all kinds of [ways] to make the place so that it was an environment that people would enjoy. Not just to be fancy and jolly, but that they would enjoy. And when it came to the thing in Minneapolis {Nicollet Mall, the clients were very interesting. I'm trying to think who they were. They were one of those kinds of people in a city, again, who are living in the city, rich people, and having a shopping center they finally want to make it nice. So they turned me loose and said the one thing we think might be of interest [in] here is . . . instead of a straight street, [to] have it move around. And I said oh boy, that's exactly what I'd like to do. So that things that would happen along here. . . and that also the sidewalks would be very important. And in the sidewalks, if we leave it up to me to make them wide, we could have sculpture in it and other things on the way. And they were very, very sympathetic to that. And that's how I did it. . . .

I was involved with the art groups at the time, I also thought of. . . doing major art pieces in downtowns. Just as are done usually in Europe. And so I always thought of it in terms of as you go along and various things that I was designing at the time and making points where pieces of art would become important.

Since then, and of course, we had what's his name, the Japanese architect, the Japanese sculptor? Noguchi, yeah, because he was also involved in dance and so forth, a lot of it. I



asked Noguchi to do some of those things. The danger of course, is how you make sure that the piece of sculpture is going to have some reference to the rest of the environment. And the sculptor on an equal level wants to be sure that people will see what he did, but also that he can worry about the environment that it is in, and [tries to] make it that it's all part of the [project]. Now I ran into that a lot when I was doing the FDR memorial, because I had a lot of trouble at the beginning with each one, you know, George Segal and Leonard Baskin and Bob Graham, all of whom said Larry, look, I'm not accustomed to working with other sculptors or having somebody like you tell me what to do. At the very end, they all, it was a remarkable experience for all of us because they all finally said oh, boy, you're absolutely right.

## Projects

### THE DONNELL GARDEN

*AS THE INTERVIEW CONTINUES SLIDE IMAGES OF THE DONNELL GARDEN ARE PROJECTED ON A SCREEN.*

Birnbaum: How did the Donnell Garden come about?

Both of the Donnells were just as excited as could be about doing this garden to the extent that Dewey did an awful lot of the construction also of the garden itself. My memory was that he was constantly there and he would jump on the tractor as soon as we got there and particularly move rocks around for us and ask where we wanted to put them or ask me where, and which ones and where they should go. They were extraordinarily nice people and it was kind of, it emerged as a kind of friendship as well as a client relationship. Now that's as far back as I can remember. Their children were just starting to grow up, my kids were too. And once twice after the place got built, we had parties and our girls went swimming with theirs. Dewey seemed awfully young, I remember. I don't know whether he was much older than I was, but he seemed not to be. And yet they had this vast piece of



what seemed like a vast piece of ground. And it was interesting; I remember that they were building the garden before they built the house.

People ask me what I did. And I want to be very clear about something here. When people are in an office and have worked on something, they get to the point that they want to say that they owned that project. And I've run into a lot of that. And so I don't want to say anything about ownership of this project at all. What I can say is that basically I think it's fair enough to say that my pencil drew it. The big difference in what you see here is that I originally thought that one of these rocks would be in the pool. And Tommy, I think, absolutely correctly said no, Larry, that won't work, because people will get hurt trying to get on it. And why don't we get Adeline Kent to do [it], Adeline was a friend of his. And I said of course, that is a much better idea. And I spent a lot of time there.

*Birnbaum: One of the things that comes out in the publications are, you know, how was the pool shape created? And there are stories about laying down a garden hose. There's a story of tidal marshland. And then of course there are scholars that talk about people like Arp and Miro and others. I was curious if you had a sense of where that form came from?*

As usual and most of my work, and I'm suspecting most of everybody's work, hindsight is always easier than, the answer to that is I don't have any specific reference to anything when I was making this drawing. I did have the idea basically that the pool should be L-shaped, because it's a much more interesting swimming experience. And that the sculpture should be at the hinge point and that we make it possible to actually swim through the shape. Now I was very influenced of course by Arp and all of those artists. Whether this was directly related to what, if it was, it was absolutely subconscious. Anything that anybody says about it would be wrong in the sense that it was not a conscious thing other than what I've just told you.



I was very interested then as I have been all my life in use of innate natural stone as not only sculpture but a thematic material to bring back everything to the earth symbolically. And some of that I think came from my experiences in Israel where I had worked in a lot of things where Jerusalem stone was very important. And I have always felt that that had a profound effect on me and so my, and here too we had a lot of this natural stone on the site of the ranch. And we moved it around. Dewey Donnell drove the cat with the tractor and moved it to where I told him to, including the ones in the island.

I think that everything else here as in any work that I ever do, and I think he would corroborate this, is just art. My art, from my point of view is intuitive. It's not particularly intellectual. It depends a lot on myths and symbols and basic primitive ideas of what human beings are like. And the rest of it's bullshit [LAUGHTER]. That's a nice picture and I was very proud of this part of it. And as you might imagine, I was consciously making a comparison for a tension between the natural stone and the power of the stone and the softness of the pool. And so even though I didn't get the stone in the pool, I got it outside the pool. And this contrast between the two was very important to me.

*Birnbaum: And so one of the things I'm kind of curious about when I look at a slide like this with the sort of plant selections, I don't have a sense of what Tommy's office was like in terms of planting plans, how these decisions were made.*

While I was there, most of the feeling about plant material was very simple, non-exotic. And mostly what I remember, by the way, is that we never did working drawings of anything. I didn't know how to do a working drawing. The only way I ever became informed about working drawings is that we hired George Rockrise because we had a hotel in Panama that we were working on the garden for. And we were told, I remember, that we couldn't just do pencil drawings and give it to a contractor there. We had to make a working drawing. And George had been an architect a long time and had worked for, Ed Stone. And he mentored

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me on how to do a working drawing. Having said that, we never did big complex planting plans. We on the whole just got a bunch of plants together from the nursery and then took them out to the site and put them where we thought they ought to go. That's not an exaggeration. Tommy knew a lot about plants just as I did. But he never stretched to get complex plant plants, planting plans. Most clients that I ever knew at that time said be sure not to make the garden complex, because we'll have trouble maintaining it. Nothing ever got irrigated mechanically in those days. The drip irrigation idea came later on. Therefore anything that we planted had to be watered by hand, and therefore most of the material that we planted was a kind of a desert-like material or material that was evergreen, like Pfitzer's juniper or ivy or this, I was very fond of this liriopie here.

#### **THE DONNELL GARDEN AS A MODERN SPACE**

Birnbaum: *What makes the Donnell Garden modern?*

The thing that makes the Donnell Garden modern is that it abandoned all classical ways of design. It left out completely the idea of axial relationships. It left out the idea of preconceived baggage of here is how to design something, which usually affects design incredibly. It's a form of baggage that you carry with you. Here is the way you would design a swimming pool. It would be straight. It would be long and narrow. It would have some paving around it. And it would have some trees and flowers around it. And preferably in the background there would be some Victorian kind of building that would be a glass house or something. Now that's the kind of baggage that you usually carry into a design. And it's a bunch of rules that even self-consciously exist, but not only self-consciously in the Beaux Arts, which was still being handed down to a certain extent when I was at Harvard. We were pushing away from it a lot, but there was still some of that. Everything was very axial, beautifully rendered. The rendition was almost more important than the actual design. And



everything fit in a certain way. There was no concern about the site in the classical and old-fashioned way of designing things.

They say that the pool was usually an introverted situation where there was a house, and then you put the pool next to it and you didn't pay much attention to anything around it. Even in San Simeon there was no effort there which was after all a time when they were moving towards modernism. Julia Morgan, who was a wonderful designer and did an interesting kind of pool, but it had nothing to do with the site at all. So I wouldn't really consider it a modern design of a pool.

### **THE DONNELL POOL AS A PLACE**

The Donnell pool is a place as well as a swimming place. It goes way beyond that. It's a place that you would come down to that you would have barbecues around that the children would play in. It was adult as well as a child's playground. It had a magnificent view which it takes advantage of. It isn't rectilinear, which in the classical sense is the way to do a pool. And the reason for that was that when you have a rectilinear pool there's only one way to swim, up and down, up and down. I wanted to make this a place that you could swim not only up and down but like up in the mountain pool, you know, in a mountain lake that you would swim around. And so that, I said well, let's make the thing go like that so that you would then swim around. And then up in the High Sierra, you know, there's always some boulders in a lake or a tar. And you swim and you get up on the boulder, which is a lot of fun. And so I thought we would put in the crook of the angle going like that in the crook there, right there, I thought we would put a boulder. Tommy said the boulder's going to hurt people. And I absolutely agreed. I was very glad that he did say that, because then we had the opportunity to ask Adeline Kent to design an piece of sculpture which would be like a boulder and would have a hole through it and that people could climb up on it or swim through it, just like a mountain lake.



So there we have then, it is modern also in doing all those things. It increased the kind of swimming that people could do, not only up and down in laps, but around like a natural lake. You could climb up on the boulder, only this time it's a modern piece of sculpture and you could swim through it. And finally instead of doing a lot of decorative planting and flowers and pretty this and pretty that, we used the natural elements of the site, which were, it was a heavily stoned hillside. And we brought a lot of boulders into the composition, which then, had the feeling that when all was said and done that this wonderful swimming experience was in a natural setting. All that made it instead of following classical ways of doing things with all the baggage and the instructions that everybody had, these were rethinking the whole idea of swimming. And I think that made it modern.

*Birnbaum: And so again just thinking about what makes this in terms of the use of native plants versus other modern gardens that are more formal, for example. If you wanted to maybe just elaborate a little bit more on that.*

I think that the word native is less applicable actually. I think that what we tried to do was to use plants that would not require a lot of maintenance. That like rock plants, after all most of the environment there around the pool is a rock garden really. When you get down to the big rock, large rocks, and there's a rock garden when you get right down to it. And so we used a lot of material that is like appropriate for rock situations. And that also means that if you plant refined plants in a rocky situation, they'd have a certain kind of character. And they also usually don't need maintenance, because they wouldn't have survived in nature the way that they are in a rocky situation if they needed a lot of care or a lot of water. So that's a more appropriate way and I would say ecologically appropriate plants, rather than native plants, because we did use some plants that were not exactly native to that area.



Birnbaum: *I'm curious, what was the sense of this garden historically when it started getting published in Sunset[magazine] and elsewhere? Was this something that people were talking about? And if so, who? And what was the impact of this, historically?*

I don't know that I have any feeling about that. I don't think there was a great cry about the fact that this was an important major piece of work if that's what you mean. It wasn't. I don't know why, but maybe that's an honorific thing to say because on that level it was at the cutting edge, you might say. And people didn't object to it, but they weren't standing around applauding it, either.

#### **REVISITING DONNELL AFTER ALL THESE YEARS**

Birnbaum: *Now, you went back to the garden in the eighties, you told me, with George. What was your sense when you went back after not seeing it for many years?*

I was very happy to see it again because I hadn't seen it and it was a long-ago memory. I knew myself that this piece of work was very important. And it was in very good condition. And I think that was my major memory about it. It was a strange, on the level that all of a sudden there were a lot of people there, and I walked into a garden that I remembered, I was about to say when I was a kid, but that's fair enough to say too. And here are all these people standing around and asking me questions and applauding. And I said, oh, what the hell is going on? What's all the fuss about? That's also my memory of it.

Birnbaum: *We tend to look at modern design as the sort of disconnect with the picturesque and the earlier traditions. And it seemed that in this project there were a number of those earlier traditions that were being employed.*

I know that everybody fusses about the difference between Modernism and the Picturesque. In fact I think Charles Moore wrote a book, wrote an article about that issue.



Well, first of all, you have to understand that at Harvard we were taught that Modernism was equal to God and that there was no way of veering away from it. That history was not important. In fact, I don't remember having any courses in history when I was there. And the idea of starkness, stark I think is the correct word, and letting form emerge. Somehow they always say function, but that really wasn't it. It was to be that form was a pure thing like a person's body or the bark of a tree, that you didn't add anything to it. Now that in a sense left the picturesque out. I think I was influenced by that. I think I still am, except that I have a different way of arriving at form, which I suppose I'll somewhere talk about; because it's very important to me. There was no question for me in all events that the pool and the constructed part should be pure, but that when we added natural things that they couldn't be pure. And why should they be pure? And therefore, you see subconsciously, I suppose, that the picturesque, which I'm very interested in . . . , was represented by the stones and plantings and the Bauhaus was represented by the shape of everything else. It is not true that the Bauhaus insisted that all shapes should be rectilinear. That isn't true at all.

*Birnbaum: Is there anything else that you'd want to, I mean, I think we're sort of done with Donnell. I don't know if you want to say anything about when you went back there with George in the eighties.*

. . . I think I mentioned a little bit, I felt strange about [it] not because it was strange to go back to it, but because I went back to it with an overload of expectations on the part of all the people who were standing around there. I almost felt when I stepped into it finally like I was getting on stage. And that people expected me to say something profound. They almost started clapping and maybe they did. But there was that kind of, if they didn't, it was almost like that kind of a thing, oh, here, he's performed this wonderful thing. So I didn't have a sense of interacting very easily with the garden itself. There was this kind of pressure of expectation that surrounded me. [LAUGHTER] I was extremely pleased to see that it was being well kept. There was no feeling, as very often happens, that the trees have grown too

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big or the plant material is out of scale all of a sudden. Or that the place isn't being maintained well. Quite the reverse, because very often, as you know, one of the problems that I run into these days going back to some of these important places that I go to see, something is wrong. The pumps aren't working right or the trees have grown too big or the people aren't pleased because something's gone wrong or something like that. But that wasn't the case here at all.

#### **OLD ORCHARD SHOPPING CENTER - [MARCH, 2008]**

*Birnbaum: Larry, maybe if you'd like we could talk a little bit about Nicollet and sort of outdoor shopping malls. Nicollet is the same time as Sea Ranch actually... but this really is the first one in America's heartland. Old Orchard?*

The Old Orchard was the first real one that I worked on. There was an architect friend from Chicago who came here and met with Ed Sulkins, . . . . And then a year later, he called up from Chicago and said, Larry, we've got this shopping center that is very large, we've never done one, I'd like you to come and help with the site planning. And that was Old Orchard. And I remember thinking it was a wonderful thing to work at. I have since gotten a little annoyed at most of the shopping centers [LAUGHTER], but because they took the place of downtown in a way. But if they're well done now, they treat them like a town hall. And it's OK with me. There are some around here that are very nice and others that are awful. But I enjoyed very much working for Old Orchard, and we developed a whole range of things there, including the main thing in a way was something that nobody else had thought about, . . . how you take parking around a shopping mall and make it so that it doesn't destroy the environment. And so we put in trees in the parking lot which everybody, including the architects, thought what the hell are you doing that for [LAUGHTER]. And then we had places that you walk to get to the downtown. In other words, it became like a little town center, and then here a plaza and there a plaza. In those days, also, the trick was always to make a major store like Macy's here, and then you'd do another one down there, that pulls people through. I hated that idea, so I broke it up and put them in different ways.

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## GHIRARADELLI SQUARE

*Halprin and Birnbaum looking at a plan of Ghirardelli*

Birnbaum: *Ghirardelli. It was a year before the Preservation Act of 1966, and you talked about this being the first example of recycling, the terms that you used then were the modification and the molecular rearrangement, and therefore you said it was desirable to recycle. I am curious about again looking back on that, which is now nearly 40 years ago. And, you know, I look at the photographs in Process [Architecture] and with the exception of the clothes on the people the place has really stood the test of time.*

Bill Roth asked various people to submit ideas about what to do. And I made a drawing and sent it to him. And I think it's this one. And so he said look, gee, why don't you work with Mr. [William] Wurster, who would be the architect? And that's how I got involved. And the thing that interested me was not only the idea of preservation, but that it was an opportunity from my point of view to do something in an urban setting that could be a role model for streets or neighborhoods or other places in American cities, which up till that time neither I nor many other people had a chance to do.

And so I set out, I did all the street furniture outside, including the light fixtures and all that. And most of them I never had done before. And I did the benches, which, you know, that special which now is all over the place. And at the time there was no street furniture that anybody could deal with. And that's what it meant. And there was some, Mr. Wurster was a little disabled by that time. And so I put a ramp in so that he could come up. Now I never had thought about a ramp before. There was a lot of things in other words that happened there that were far sighted. And I suppose that because it was small enough that we could do what we wanted to do as a model. Instead of having to deal with a big, big street that



then you'd have trouble getting anybody to agree to. And he had a wonderful client too. Bill Roth was there cheering us on. As a result, the only problem there was the neighborhood because it's at the foot of the Pacific Heights. And they were a little concerned about it because it was going to introduce something vibrant. They were not sure about it. The main thing I had to do, which I agreed to do, they wanted me to take down the sign that said Ghirardelli. . . . It's a lovely old sign. And I refused. And they said, well, what are we going to do? And I said, 'well, I'll just turn it backwards'. So instead of it shining in your eyes it'll just be there, but it won't be lit at night. So, oh then, fine. So we kept that too.

It was also for the first time I remembered the idea of putting a garage underground. And that wasn't easy. I remember it was Don Evans who was the one who was fussing with that, it was very difficult, it was very tight. And we made all the stalls too tight. But they work anyway, but if you drive in there now you'll notice that they're very tight.

And also the idea was, I notice that it says so here. There was some, a lot of good ideas in this sketch. We had the idea of instead of having the garage come down like this to the sidewalk that we would put some shops down there, which would enliven the street, which was a new idea also. And then at the corner, that was another thing, I put a staircase in that would get people off of the street along with beachfront that brings you up. And I remember that was the only argument I had with Bill Wurster because he said, Larry, what are you doing that for? Nobody is ever going to use that. And I said well, I was much his junior, I said well, Bill, I'd like to do it anyway.

## SEA RANCH

Birnbaum: *So what would you say during that period is the first project that really brings national recognition to the office?*



I would guess that Sea Ranch is the one, and the reason that it makes me think that it was the Sea Ranch was that it was published in the national magazines. Not the architectural magazine, but House and Garden and other magazines like that. And it was absolutely unique as an idea and so it got a lot of publicity. And it still remains that way.

*In the interview [March, 2008] Halprin continues talking about Sea Ranch - Larry speaking on a bluff overlooking the cove at his house in The Sea Ranch.*

Birnbaum: *You were going to tell us how you landed here.*

I landed here in this wonderful place, which is really remarkable, was that the client after I did the master plan, said he really would like our architects and planners to have some space here in the Sea Ranch, because at that time, it seemed so far away that people aren't weren't sure that anybody would come up here. So it was very interesting because there was Joe Esherick, he decided to buy and own one of the houses that the cluster, you know, the cluster of houses that showed what kind of housing we wanted to do here. So he did that. And then Charles Moore decided he wanted to have a piece of the thing that he had designed- the oh boy - Yeah, the condominium.

And that left me to decide what I wanted. And I decided that really, what I wanted to have is five acres of land. So I asked for this five acres of land and here we are. And they [do not] have any longer any of their houses [LAUGHTER]. But I have this land. But it was a very interesting description of their personalities and of my personality and my interest and their interest. So that's how we happened to be here. And it was a meadow at the time, and I planted most of these trees. Now that means that for 50 years, these trees have been growing and growing and growing, and look what a wonderful forest they made for themselves. And it's been a wonderful place. And there, out there in the cove, there are seals all the time. In fact, what's interesting about that is that there are . . . no more than 20

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seals out there. And apparently when the young guys get ready to become adults, they kick them away. And so there's always about 20 seals. I was about to say 20 people, but there are 20 seals. And then there are also a lot of birds. We even have eagles here on the trees from time to time. So it's been a wonderful feeling of being out in the wilderness here, and also the feeling of being along at the ocean's edge is wonderful for me because it reminds me of my wonderful destroyer that I was on during the war. And the sound of the ocean is like music all the time. So it's a wonderful place to be in.

*Birnbaum: Now you've been painting here for a long time, haven't you, and drawing? Tell us about that.*

Yeah, I, as you know, I've been drawing and painting ever since I was a little kid, and it always, everywhere I go, I paint and draw and make sketches. But this is so beautiful as a painting in a sense, I just set up an easel and every day I come out here and look and paint a little bit more of this environment. And maybe later on in the day, we'll go and look at some of them. So I paint here all the time. And over at my studio, we don't have a telephone, so when I paint over there, nothing interrupts me, whereas here every now and then, somebody calls on the phone. So [LAUGHTER] I sometimes paint here, but I sometimes paint over at the studio.

*Birnbaum: When did you build the studio?*

Yeah, it was 20, 25 years ago, I built the studio. Mother left me enough money in her will, so that I was able to build a studio, and she knew by that time that this place was here, and every time I paint over there, I think of her.

*Birnbaum: Anything else you want to talk about here? . . . in terms of Sea Ranch? Coming here?*



Well, we come as often as we can, and the oftenness has to do with the work that we still do, both Anna and I, down in the Bay area. And very often, we come up here on weekends and then during the summer months, we come up for several weeks at a time. Often, we wish we had a little more time here, but since we're still, both of us, involved creatively in our professions, we have to be down in the Bay area to solve some of the problems that people give us. Otherwise, we'd be up here all the time. You know, the other interesting thing about Sea Ranch is that when we first started master planning it, it was as if this was always going to be a second home, and that people would come up here from time to time. What's happened of course, is that a lot of people have now settled in here and live here. And that's partly because they found that this is a wonderful place to live in and want to stay here, but also [because of] the high tech things that you can use [to] say what you have to say, is another reason why people can come up here and live here and also continue with the professional lives.

*The interview continues at the Halprin's studio at Sea Ranch. They are looking at a large mural of Sea Ranch.*

. . . And really, what I was doing, I walked along from the southern end of the property all the way here. And I made little sketches on the way, and then I put it all together on a large scale, into this. So this is an elevation of the Sea Ranch, looking south.

#### **CHANGES AT SEA RANCH: THE LODGE EXPANDS - [MARCH, 2003]**

. . . . Last week a group came to talk to me about The Sea Ranch. The lodge wants to expand. And they are a group who has done some places in different parts of the world.

And the owner of the Lodge brought him here instead of to the [Sea Ranch] Association, or

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anybody there, to talk to me about what should happen with Sea Ranch. Well, that in itself illustrates some of what we were talking about. Dee just said that they decided that what they would like to do is to have a workshop with me. I don't know who put that in their heads, to spend a couple of days with all the players. They're bringing in an architect. And have a dialogue through workshop form of what we should do to work on this site and then develop a basic plan out of that form. That's just exactly the right request from a client.

*[Birnbaum asks about the workshop]*

We had 300 people from The Sea Ranch. The workshop was very interesting. The pioneers at the Sea Ranch, they talk about themselves that way, all the old timers. It [Sea Ranch] came in the early sixties, which is over 40 years ago, when they were all in their late thirties or early forties. And now a lot of them, not so many have died, but a lot of them are now having to move away because they have to go to care, which is a very bad thing. Some people, we had a long dialogue about it the other day, feel that this is a natural cycle and that we instead of being worried about it just accept it and then do something about it. So they asked to have a workshop for the newer people who were coming in to talk about the value system, which is the essential part of The Sea Ranch. And what it means and how younger people, the younger people now are in the mid-forties or fifty, were all excited, but they want to have this workshop too to make sure that they agree on the basic principles [of the Association's Convents], or do they want to modify them? That was what it was all about, which was fascinating. And we're right in the throes of doing a report about it. The main thing is they all accepted, the basic value system they all agreed with, which was I think surprising to a lot of people. Because it includes a lot of no you "can'ts", like no, you can't have a lawn or something. But, boy, that bugs the hell out of people. No, you can't have lights that shine on other people's lives. No, you can't have a lot of noise in your house. Yes, this is not a resort. Yes, we are not an elitist community. That was very hard for most people. Yes, we want diversity. Not everybody lives up to all of this, but these were all

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accepted. What were some of the other ones that were I thought was going to be very tough for people. Yes, the houses are getting too big. We need to keep them smaller. You know, that sort of thing.

#### **PORTLAND'S CHAIN OF OPEN SPACES - [MARCH, 2008]**

*Birnbaum: What I'm trying to understand is how do you transition from doing gardens to suddenly having not just the responsibility of the size of the office, but the ambition of saying let's take three blocks of a city, where you're dealing with much greater numbers of people and resources and the scale and the ambition of what was built there. Where did that come from? What prepared you for that?*

Ada Louise Huxtable calls the Portland spaces one of the greatest spaces since the Italian Renaissance. And so it seems to me that Portland is the thing that I start to see in a lot of places, which is of course, that's the late '60s isn't it, when it opens . . . what prepared me for it was I suppose Christopher Tunnard's book, for one thing, because he dealt with public gardens and more so than private gardens. But he never talked about the detailing or the architecture of those places. But I think on some level, the grand tour, because I was aware, I became aware while I was going through all those towns and cities in Europe, that they were so different than the cities that we have here, because there, people lived in, even rich people lived in apartment houses where their public life or where they had parties were out in the streets. And that the street with all kinds of things in them were the kind of places that you wanted to spend your life in in a city . . . it's a place where people are making places slowly and over time that go way back to medieval times, but they're wonderful. And they're exciting and they're places that you like to live in. That stuck with me. And so, a place like Portland for example, after all, from Italy, I remember all the fountains in the towns. And I did some three or four nice fountains. And not just to do a fountain but it was arranged so that people could live around it and enjoy it. Now that's how I thought about Portland. And that the difference between parking in a downtown area or walking on a

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pedestrian zone all the way through these kinds of places in the downtown area was the way to do that, too. In other words, what I was designing is not as a place for cars or big high buildings. I still feel that way pretty much about downtowns. But there are places where you want to go to because it's an enjoyable place to sit, talk, meet friends, so forth.

**[MARCH,2003]**

Birnbaum: *Well, on a more positive note then, what about, I know that you've been in contact with the folks in Portland.*

Yes. We're going to talk about a happier example, which is what's happening in Portland, where I have three, a sequence of three major open spaces linked by passageways that were when we first started at the edge of downtown Portland and now are a major part of downtown Portland. And we also did a transit mall, which is not under consideration for concern. But these other [spaces] do, they were at the edge of downtown and now since they are surrounded by new development, there is some concern that they may be in the “way”. That hasn't yet happened, but there is concern about it, particularly on the part of people who own buildings around these open spaces who are desperately anxious to keep them and the open space that we designed for them. And with the help of one of the owners around of one of the buildings around who is sponsoring some of the studies, they're developing a conservancy. I guess they're calling it a Halprin Conservancy, dedicated to preserving these examples of early pieces of work that I did in the late, in the sixties, which many people think are some of the important things I did, because they were role models for a lot of other things, including the idea that parks and fountains were to be used and enjoyed rather than just viewed.

Birnbaum: *Well, on that note maybe tell us a little bit about the day that the park was opened. What was it like?*



Well, the day it was opened was hysterically exciting, because what happened was that it was in the sixties. All the young people from miles around appeared on the scene and started jumping in to the fountains. As I say, they were designed to be used in that way, participated in. If I remember correctly, it was the Mayor who got very upset and tried to shoo them away. And I therefore decided that the best thing to do was not argue with the mayor, so I jumped in also [LAUGHTER]. And it was all very successful and very, very jolly actually. And there was a lot of fun about it. And it really did establish the notion that this was a different kind of a park than the usual kind of a park. The Mayor subsided. And the rest of the city became very attuned to it. They used to bring their children, they still do bring all their children there and people love it.

#### **PRESERVING THE INTEGRITY- THE HALPRIN CONSERVANCY**

Birnbaum: *Now I know that in 1992, I believe, if I'm not mistaken, you went back to Portland. You produced a report, it was called Recapturing the Magic. Could speak a little bit about it now?*

I was called back to Portland about 10 years ago; some 20 years after the project had been built. The parks department had some concerns about the growth of the trees and again, there had been some problems, some of the pumps needed fixing. There was a feeling that the park had become too introverted because some of the trees in the berms had all grown up. And instead of then saying well, we're going to take the parks out, they did what I think was, I think there are two terms that I would use there. One, it was extremely polite on a simple level to ask me to come and talk to them about it. In addition to being extremely polite it was creative and it seemed to me to be a wonderful role model about in general how you would treat this sort of thing.

So I was delighted. I went up [to Portland] and we did a study about the park. I talked to the parks department. I talked to the people who owned the buildings around. And we



came up with some very simple really ideas, essentially thinning out some of the trees. I say that and smile because that's so obvious, but for most people it becomes a big issue, you know. What shall we do about these trees? Well, you might think about thinning them out. Oh, you wouldn't mind that? No, I wouldn't mind that. Thin them out. [LAUGHTER] It's like saying my hair is growing very long, shall I chop off my head or could I go and take a haircut? You know? [LAUGHTER] My solution for that is get a haircut [LAUGHTER]. So I developed a report which basically identified the trees which should be changed. We decided to modify the berms a little bit. And some of the trees that had been brought in from the high country, from the cascades, as sort of gnarled bonsai trees. We wanted them to grow into very picturesque form about 12 feet high. They grew beyond that, as very often happens. And we thought that those could be both trimmed in, but also that we would get some new ones. And we talked a little bit about the pumps.

It all seemed so obvious and so simple and therefore we didn't lose part of the parks. Now that's a simple [way], so easy and elegant, dignified and polite and economically sound, as well. And now following through with that, this Conservancy has been set up in perpetuity, I gather, to do the same thing for that series of parks constantly without having to constantly ask me about what to do and to fend off the answer, which is cut off his head instead of giving him a haircut. And I think that's a wonderful solution to it. Easy. Easy. Inexpensive. On every level. Socially sound, because the parks are very much art. And I don't see any reason why that couldn't be a role model for almost everybody on how to handle a thing like that especially, especially the idea that they called me up and asked me, why don't you come up instead of holding you at arm's length? It was much cheaper than the other ways of doing it.

#### **FREEWAY PARK- THE PARK ACCEPTS NATURE AS PART OF THE SOLUTION**

*Birnbaum: How did Freeway Park come to be?*



The reason for the park and the whole exercise was that the city of Seattle where the Freeway Park is, had hosted, you know, a World's Fair. I cannot remember the date, but it was --the early sixties. It was very nice. I was asked to participate as a member of a design committee which supervised the aesthetics of the park, of the World's Fair. But, which included Paul Thierry and Minoru Yamasaki, myself and some of us, [ was a ] very nice group. And we did some things that were quite good. We decided to put a monorail from the downtown area to the park that people could use. It was the first example in the United States of how to use a monorail in a creative way. And it was very useful. It was very jolly. People loved to use it instead of driving a car. We're so pleased. One of the major things I helped with, I said let's plant all the streets with street trees, which we did and I think that's helped Seattle a lot.

One of the things that did happen, which Paul Thierry particularly was annoyed by, and I was too, that there was a freeway from the airport designed that would bring people to the downtown area which cut the two pieces of Seattle asunder. It was a chasm. I made a drawing, which is in a book called *Freeways*, which showed how this could be healed. There is a drawing of a freeway doing exactly what happened and instead of accepting the cutting of the two pieces asunder, I showed how you could build a development on top of the freeway which would knit back the two pieces. The people up in Seattle saw that and they asked me to come and design something that would accomplish, accomplish something that would be like that. And so I started with that and did a whole series of studies which showed that it would be possible and how it would be possible, but that instead of building buildings on top of it, it would put a park. And that was the origin of Freeway Park, which then did exactly that and [it] was a lid that had some wonderful qualities about it. It accepted the idea of the chasm by including wonderful waterfalls that fell down into the chasm where you could see the cars go by. And then within the area enclosed by the freeway we did some wonderful stepped Babylonian-type gardens full of plants and lovely

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things. And everybody has loved it ever since. That seems to me one of the good things about that park too, and that is that it accepts the nature of where it is and uses it as part of the solution. Now the two pieces of the city are connected. The healing occurred easily. And Perry Johansson was, by the way, was the name of the architect who worked with me on the parking garage part of the, we added a parking garage as part of this. And it functions very well in the downtown area. I'm delighted with it.

## LEVI'S PLAZA

*Halprin, Dee Mullen, Tom Fox and Charles Birnbaum visit Levi's Plaza*

The theme here when we first started, it's not as visible now was to say that this, in the park was like the High Sierra during the Gold Rush because that's [OVERLAPPING VOICES] when Levi's were invented. Did you know that? Mr. Levi went up there and found that they were wearing out their pants during the Gold sitting on the granite and working. And so he bought this sailcloth up and made them pants, which they were able to survive. And that's why Levi's. So since this is Levi's headquarters, we decided to do all the things that, the stream, all the stones and the granite from the High Sierra. And that was the theme. And in addition to that, in the beginning particularly a lot of the plant material was the kind that was up at the higher levels.

Dee Mullen: . . . *rugged like the kind of trees that are up there and they're stunted and twisted and windblown. This is a melaleuca [tree].*



Birnbaum: *When you come out and see a space like this and everyone's taking full advantage of it . . . How does that make you feel?*

It just makes me feel wonderful. It makes me feel that what I'm doing is worthwhile, that my life has been worthwhile. That's simple like that. And I hope that it's true that, also that the quality of what their experience is is a quality of nature, not the outward form, though, which I feel it is. I mean, they all seem to experience it a lot. What's also happening is that there aren't a lot of kids around here, but people come here a lot with their children. And the kids go down. And [UNINTELLIGIBLE PHRASE] up front you'll probably see a lot of kids in the fountain here. Yeah, it's wonderful. I suppose that's why we have the office here.

*They walk by the stream and people sitting on the wall.*

I think for me this wall. Because what it does is it defines the inside, but more importantly it's a transition zone, because people can sit on it. The height that allows them to participate without going inside. [NOISE OBSCURES] I think it's very important. Well, actually the homeless do try to come in here and they keep them out. No, I think that's exactly right, and the people here who have this place actually, the owner is a good friend of mine. He's very particular. It's like it's his place. The scene here of course is, again, not to copy nature. But the quality of these waters have a lot to do with what happens up in the Sierra, the way the water runs and especially the sound. When we walked through this, which we'll do later, you'll hear that there's a musical quality, there's a point counterpoint to the sound in different areas as we go around here. And that's actually a part of it. And I did one copy, I took the same kind of stone that we used at the Roosevelt Memorial and found this great slab up in the quarry and brought it here for the source of the water. And there it is up there in its own space, because as I look at it I can feel it at the Roosevelt Memorial at all times.

**FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT MEMORIAL [DECEMBER, 2008]**

*Halprin, Dee Mullen and Birnbaum talk about the FDR Memorial in the Halprin Office.*

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, you know. And in Brooklyn, we had flag waving school things in Brooklyn when FDR drove through. They let all the kids out of the school and it was really one of those wonderful things that used to be done. And I remember listening to him say hello as he went by. And then, related to that, he was the first President I ever voted for. And so if you combine all of that stuff and then add to it the fact that he started talking about the New Deal when I was in prep school. And it was so important and it was so interesting and so evocative to have this guy talking at night. At home I could remember sitting next to the piano to where my mother was playing the piano, and he was talking to us over the radio, and he talked and talked and talked about what he was going to do and the New Deal and how this country needed some new ideas and blah. And I was so pleased to think that I was going to do a memorial to him. And then I must confess that the end of it, which took about what was it, 25, 30 years? At the end of it, I was on my destroyer. He died while we were still fighting, at the very end when kamikaze plane had hit us already. And so, you know, I had a very long experience with him.

*Birnbaum: So what were the factors? . . . What was your criteria for a place like that?*

I was trying to get an essence of what he lived for and what he attempted to accomplish. And in that sense, I wanted to keep it very reasonable and very oriented towards a person. I felt myself most limited and enjoying the limitation. And I started out by realizing that one of the things that I should do is to take and use his words that he talked with, because his words were probably far more important than almost anything he did. You know, all the time people all over the world listened to his words. I hate war. You know, and then everybody well, we're in the middle of a war so what are we going to do about it? And I



remember also my father, who was very influenced by him as well, but also the fact was that this was a period when we really were in a bad recession, more than what we're in now. And my father, who had started out during that period as quite a well-off man, we were on a ship coming back from the [Grand Tour] and my father, when we first got on the ship, was a very well-off man and when we got off, he was a pauper. And he seemed to work his way out of it somehow. All these times now, I keep on thinking my dad, damn it, I wish I could talk to you about it because these guys that are doing things now don't know what they're doing.

**[MARCH, 2008]**

[It was] 25 years before it was finally finished. It went on and on and on, largely because the Congress had to constantly adapt funding for it. And that always took a lot out of them. And the most interesting thing, of course, was that the group of people who were in charge of the FDR from the Congress, Mark Hatfield, for example, was a Republican. And not only don't Republicans like Democrats, but also they hated FDR because they felt that he was a socialist. And you have to remember that he was the first president that I ever voted for, and I was so enamored of him and I felt like he was my friend all the way through, because of the lectures that he gave almost every night or every once in a while, so that people felt that he was part of them. It was very important, his fireside chats. And that was a remarkable influence on what was going on, much more so than almost any other president I ever dealt with. . . .

I want to point out that I finally decided that the concept should be not just an object of who Franklin Roosevelt was, like a piece of sculpture or even a display of what he was about, but I wanted to make it that his words and what he stood for were going to be a major part of the concept of the memorial. And I wanted it to be also that like all of my projects that people would walk into and then find something that they wanted to make themselves part of. So there ought to be places to sit. There ought to be nice places to bring their children.

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There ought to be pedestrian zones where they stopped every now and then and then also, there was an interesting thing about the airplanes [which] were always flying over to the airport. And so that was a distraction and I wanted to do something that, to modify the sound of the airplanes going over.

In addition to that, I wanted it to appeal to people of all ages, so that there would be nice things for children to do, nice things for adults, for their parents and for seniors. . . . And so therefore, I wanted to have some granite stones that could be carved in that would [convey] meaning from the time that he was president to the end of his presidency, [so] that you would always understand what he stood for and what he was saying during that period. And that meant also, that I decided that I wanted the memorial to be one of those places that people walked into, one, two, three, four of his terms in office, and that each one would be somewhat different and would be what he was saying or doing at that time during his four terms in office.

With all that [LAUGHTER], that took a long time figuring out, but I was determined to do it. And so, with all that, we decided to go and get some granite and I figured that the best kind of granite would be ones that would be similar to the kind of, the color of the granite that was in Manhattan, in Central Park, that had been done by Olmsted.

*Halprin and Birnbaum look at a sample of the granite used in the memorial*

Cold Spring carnelian granite is what we used. And that's in Minneapolis, in Minnesota. So we went to the granite quarry there, and this was very similar to the [granite] . . . in Central Park. And that made me feel good because it felt like both Olmsted was included, and also Franklin Roosevelt. And then we had to find a really great carver in granite. Granite's very difficult to carve in. And. And it was ...



Birnbaum: *John Parsons.*

Yeah. He recommended this. And we tried to work with him and we finally came to the conclusion of a format, I mean the, what do you call it? The kind of shape [style] of the writings, were to be more like the WPA, that age. So that it would incorporate within it a quality of what was happening when he was doing most of his work.

Birnbaum: *OK. Well, let's talk about the creative process, working with the various sculptors that you worked with.*

Well, that was one of the joys of doing it. Partly because they all agreed that they had never worked together with each other, or with any group, as a team. And particularly, George Segal kept on saying, Larry, what do you want from me? Don't you realize that sculptors and artists are always trained to be independent and to be egocentric, and not to try to work with anybody? And I said yes, but this is a special kind of a thing. And then Graham, who was much younger than the other guys, was the only one who sort of said, gee, this is going to be kind of fun to be working with you seniors [LAUGHTER] who have always been people that I've admired. Let's see, who were the other sculptors?

Mullen: *Segal, Leonard Baskin. Neil Estern.*

Neil Estern. This was a very interesting experience because when I finished with selecting the sculptors, I had to go to the commission, the congressional commission. And when I came to them with my four sculptors, Baskin, Segal, Graham, and that was all that I selected at the very beginning. And they said, one of them from Brooklyn said, oh, well, I have a very good sculptor [LAUGHTER]. You can have three of them, and I'm going to give you one more, and his name is - Neil Estern. Whom I had never heard of. But it shows you a little bit the kind of politics that comes about in this sort of situation because I was told, we'll give

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you three and we're going to give you one [LAUGHTER]. And at that moment, I was mature enough by then to realize that this was politics talking. And I said to myself, oh, well, that's fine, I can use Estern. I don't know whether he's any good, but he gave me that piece of sculpture of our friend, the landscape architect.

Birnbaum: *Olmsted.*

Olmsted. And it turns out that when he did things like that, he was pretty good [LAUGHTER]. And as long as I told him how to do things, he was damn good. And he was even better when he had to come up against the other sculptors who were great sculptors. They all acted as mentors for him, and so he outdid himself. So we had four, as it turned out, four pretty good sculptors.

Birnbaum: *So what was the opening like?*

The opening of it was 25 years later. It was incredible. I almost wish that you could talk to Dee about that, because I was up on the stage which included President Clinton, Mark Hatfield, the Senator, the Princess of the Netherlands, because Mr. Roosevelt of course, his family had come from a Dutch family and a lot of other --

Mullen: *Al Gore.*

Al Gore. And it was just amazing to have all those people up on the stage. And I was sitting amongst them. And then, what's his name the --Mike Wallace was the sort of director of the -- Master of Ceremonies. Then the first thing we knew, the Air Force came flying over, the fighter planes, which was very appropriate for me at the time. And it was both noisy and exciting and there were wonderful speeches, and some music.

. . . It was my memorial [LAUGHTER] . . . It was Franklin's memorial . . . [LAUGHTER]. It was just wonderful. Everybody had a great time.



Oh, I forgot Tom Hardy. Yes.

Mullen: *He was added later.*

He was added on at the end because he was more graphically; we didn't want a piece of sculpture from him. We wanted a piece of sculpture that was simplified and read on the granite, which he did.

Now as a result of all this, the thing opened up 25 years later and people immediately started to come in. Now what I want to say is that, I've gone back several times of course, but even at the very beginning, the thing that just made me feel very, both sad and happy at the same time, was sadness about the fact that he had died when he did. That he died while I was in the Navy and all the guys on my ship were weeping about it. I've never seen tough guys like that.

*[Halprin experiences the memorial]*

There was a young father whom I followed, and he had his son, a little guy about seven or eight years old and he walked slowly and at each point, he read what it said on the wall, and he said whatever his name was, Junior, I want you to remember these remarks because they are very important to you as a person who's going to grow up pretty soon. And you want to remember all the things that this president, this great president said. That made me feel like I had accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. And then later that same day, in some of the areas, there were a lot of kids going around in the water. Have you been at? Yeah. There were older people standing in the bread line with the pieces of sculpture that George had done. Some people standing and listening to the radio with one of those sculptures that George Segal had done. So ultimately, it really was like a piece of theatre all the way

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through, and that made me feel like I had accomplished what I wanted to do. And now, I feel like I really accomplished it more because when you consider the guy who thinks and he's president of the United States, and then you go to the Roosevelt memorial and everything that Roosevelt said was directly opposite to what this guy is doing. And that makes me feel even better.

**[DECEMBER, 2008]**

In the FDR Memorial, the people who were disabled insisted that we show as a disabled person. This was a very unique kind of example of what we've been talking about. They were forcing a decision on us to suit themselves to what their interest was. Whereas that was violating what FDR was about all the time, every single moment, because he didn't want anybody to realize that he had been disabled. And so we didn't want to show him very much, I mean, we did a little bit, enough to say to people as they walked around, boy, he was a wonderful President but he also had the disability problem. But they wanted it to be more active and instructive and they wanted it to be known that he was disabled, so that it would not be because they wanted him to be seen as disabled, but because they wanted to say see, anybody can become President of the United States even though he's disabled. So that was one of the problems that we ran into there, for example, and that's the kind of thing that I think it ought to say, and I was forced actually, I was forced to accept that... . What you're trying to say to them is here is an experience that we think is important because of the situation here. And we are going to modify our design to make that possible so that everybody will have the same experience. It's experiential equivalency is what I call it.

*[They continue to talk about other projects]*

### **3 CAPSTONE PROJECTS: YOSEMITE FALLS, LUCAS STUDIOS AND STERN GROVE**

**[MARCH, 2008]**



Birnbaum: *You had that project [Yosemite Falls]. You had the work at Presidio. And you had Stern. I mean, what was it like, I think about when all of those projects opened within a short period of time of each other, what was that like at that point in your career? You were on the cover of Landscape Architecture Magazine. There was this kind of Renaissance, if you will, for Larry Halprin landscape, and very different [projects], all three incredibly different.*

It was extremely interesting and very difficult partly because they all overlapped each other, and I had to be there with a lot of those [projects] because I couldn't, I had help, but I had to be there. We used to go, Dee and I and Gary Roth, used to go up to Yosemite almost every week to make sure, because in those trails I couldn't do just a score of stop here, do this. I had to be there because it had to be organized with the existing trees and everything like that.

Now I think because of that it, was also a very exciting time, because all three of those, three, yeah, all three of them were very important pieces of work. I had the help of a stone mason, who had worked with me and for me for 20 years. And I got him to help build a lot of the walls and a lot of the stone work in Yosemite. And that was remarkable because he did it so that you would never know that it had been built. And then he also did all the work on, his name is Ed Westbrook, very good, and he also did the stone work on Stern Grove, which was remarkably different and very complex.

#### **YOSEMITE FALLS - [MARCH,2008]**

Birnbaum: *We could talk about Yosemite. We could talk about Stern.*

Well, Well, Yosemite is something that I remember very warmly, because right at the beginning I had joined the Sierra Club, and I had gone with my kids every summer up in Yosemite, and we all slept [out] and this was for about a month every summer, that gave Anna little bit of recreation to be able to do what she needed to do, without worrying about

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the kids. And the kids were just alive and loved being up in the High Sierra. And I learned more and more each time about this theory that nature makes itself into forms that nobody would have been able to think about. And that I needed to think about form making through energy in my designs. And the kids also made a lot of drawings. I have drawing after drawing after drawing from up in the Sierra, and that was just wonderful. Now, after this, now my girls are 55, I think, and 60, if you can imagine that. So we have grown up. But when we were building and designing Yosemite, we had the largest waterfall in the United States, to start with, and some interesting ways, in that I remembered from our times up there, and what we decided to do was somehow to carry some of the qualities that I think about all the time, and that is that people should feel shifts in hiking, to sometimes sit, sometimes modify, sometimes see sun, sometimes see shade, sometimes walk around, and walk through a meadow, and to make this an experiential equivalency of what you really want to feel in a design. And so, all the way through, we took this not as one jammed walkway or hiking trail, but a trail which was almost like a symphony, stopping, moving, looking, listening, so on. And I think there, too, it was an unusual way to design things, and then the other thing that I decided to do was never to make people think that this had been designed.

And so, I started out by saying that I wanted to make this, to achieve what I just described, but not to make it clear that there was a designer here, much less that it was designed by Larry Halprin. And I think on that level, we were very successful, haven't we, Dee? And that wasn't easy. It's too easy to make things look nice, you know, make decorations, blah blah blah. But we made new trails, some of which had not been existed at all and led people around through back country and around and back to the lodge, and then on through. And all the way there were views. And we used some of the great rocks that had fallen down from the cliffs, and made them as pieces of sculpture.



Birnbaum: *Was there a sense of . . ., I think about [Fredrick Law] Olmsted [Sr.] and the Mariposa [Grove] and then Olmsted, Junior working on the park plan. Was there a sense of connection to Olmsted in that project at all?*

Well, I wasn't trying to deal with history at all, whereas in the Central Park with FDR, I was. But here, I wanted to leave it alone. But you know I've always been a little conscious of Olmsted because I think a lot of what he did was very significant and very wonderful. So I don't know, but I didn't think of it consciously. Although he [Olmsted, Sr.] had of course been there and had used it before it became a National Park. In fact, it was [John] Muir that made it into a National Park. And Teddy Roosevelt who had come out from Washington and camped out there at night with Muir.

I was aware of all that, and that was one of the reasons why I didn't want it to seem as if it had been designed, because I wanted to leave it to the point that people would just assume that it had always been that way. . . .

**[DECEMBER, 2008]**

Birnbaum: Was it something like that? Is that what you're, in terms of the workshop?

The Yosemite Falls Corridor workshop. Yeah. . . . This is one of those areas where the boulders are. One of the things that I make a big point of how design should be, how designers should get at things and that is, to do workshops with the people who are going to inhabit these kinds of places. And a workshop is not a way of having people learn how to design. It's how to learn how to do things that are going to be accomplished . . . but it's their voice, because all of us are in charge of the environment, every single one of us in this world. And it isn't anything that some special group of people are involved in.



And these workshops that we do, we ask people of importance to join us and that's what we did at Yosemite. We asked the rangers, we asked the police, I think, how many people did we have in the workshop there?

Mullen: *Over 100.*

And we learned through them of what they felt we should accomplish. . . And then we decided, and we designed how these trails should be, not what they would look like, but how it would feel to walk on them, and climb in them or in some of the various areas. And then we took the results of the workshop and we announced the consensus to the people who had participated. And then we said OK, we're going to design this for you and we're going to show you what we're going to do and the design will, we hope, articulate exactly what you had meant to achieve and on the whole, if you do a good workshop like that, you could achieve an awful lot and one that everybody agrees with and enjoys because after all, the personal enjoyment of life is what counts. We also in Yosemite, we had to use, not had, it was one of the constraints, one of the [things], we wanted to use [was] the big boulders because they were so important in Yosemite, and they were in various place that they had fallen into actually over time. We were working at Stern Grove where we were also using big boulders because they had an essential quality of what the environment, of nature stands for itself, not some guy doing it. But the one in Stern Grove, we had to find, because of the CCC, we had to find the boulders in China and get them sent over here. And they were boulders that were very selected in terms of what nature would have done itself, you see. But in Yosemite, they asked us not to bring in any boulders in from some other places. They felt, and I agree with them, they felt it was important to have the boulders selected from boulders in the park. And that was not easy, but it was very possible. And it was very important because it made the park finally appear like something organic, that no person had designed, and that it was a result of nature making its own statement about things. And that I think is a very important thing about the design of parks. They don't want to be

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something that some person designed, even though they're good designers. They want to be . . . they ought to feel like it had not been designed. That's my idea of designing everywhere.

Birnbaum : *What did that feel like, to work in Yosemite?*

Oh, it was just a delight. It was a delight because what it allowed me to do is to spend a time walking around and up in the high country, climbing up to some of the 10,000-foot high highlands, mountains, and then to look at what nature had done. And up that high, for example, it's very different that what nature do down on the flat, I have some drawings of that kind of experience . . .

**STERN GROVE [MARCH,2008]**

Let me just talk about Stern Grove for a minute. Because there he had to go to China and get all his stones there from China, because I wanted it to look the same as if it had been built as it had started in the [Works Progress Administration] WPA. And so we brought over stones that looked like the WPA work. And the hardest one I think, most difficult one on a design level, because it was in the City, City Council members and this Board of Directors and that Board of Directors, all telling us what to do, especially the historians who refused to budge about anything.

**THE GEORGE LUCAS STUDIOS [MARCH,2008]**

George Lucas was a really remarkable client. I didn't think I was going to be able to get along with him because he was famous for telling designers what to do. He never said a word to me about what to do. He was remarkable.

And what we had to do is make something that had some reminiscent quality to the . . . the World's Fair of 1916, I think it was. And so it ought to relate to something that had some

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relationship to that. And that gave us a certain amount of leeway because we could say to the historians; this is how we're doing it that is similar to that. Otherwise, every time I wanted to do something, they'd say oh, well, that's not in the history.

But we wanted to get for George a place with a remarkable; I don't like to use the word garden, - environment, that all his people would be able to use as a park. Not only that, but it also had to be like a park because it is a National Park [The Presidio].

. . . I had to help site the new buildings that were going to be there. I didn't design them, but I helped site them, so that they would from one edge of the composition so that people would be able to come in, bearing in mind that they couldn't go into the buildings, because these were buildings that were being used, but that they could move around them and feel comfortable moving around them. And then we decided, there had been a drainage canal that ran through this land and went on down into the [San Francisco] Bay. So we decided to form that into a streambed that would ape the same feeling. Again, try to get it so that it looked like a National Park, not like I had designed it. And another point was - where were we going to get the stones to make this streambed? Because they needed to be strong and as if they had come from the High Sierra. So we went up to . . . a ranch up near Mt. Shasta. This was a very important story because everybody now says oh, we know all about that. You went up to Mt. Shasta and you took all this stuff off the ranch and you brought it all down and plopped it down in the park [LAUGHTER]. Just the way it was up there [LAUGHTER]. And that's a myth that is so strong these days that I can't overcome it. I don't want to [LAUGHTER]. And so we got this to run water instead of a fountain, in other words, since I always want to have running water and the sound of running water, we hear the water running. And it allows children to go into it and leads it all the way down and makes the whole place so that you can walk around it and feel like it's a wonderful place to be in.

*Birnbaum: Well, what about the grading there? I mean, obviously to absorb, those buildings are pretty big for that site. And so your challenge was to help absorb those structures.*

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In order to absorb the impact of those buildings, I then mounded up, it was a very constant slope from the top, where the buildings are, all the way down to the Bay. And so I changed that and brought in a lot of earth and built these hillocks that you walk around amongst. And that was an important thing to do. We also wanted to get some views from the buildings so that you could look out around it.

And then one of the things that I did that I enjoyed most almost, and that is the underground parking [garage]. And the reason I'm saying that is when I first got on the job, I thought to myself, my, I better talk to George Lucas, that is, about this problem of parking because there are going to be thousands of cars. And I said to him, finally I said, George, you know, I think we ought to put all these cars underground. And he said oh. He said really, how much is it going to cost? And he said, I said, I think it was oh, I think it won't cost much more than \$4 million, something like that. I hadn't the foggiest notion of what it was going to cost, but it cost pretty much like that. And good for George, because he immediately said boy, that's the right thing to do. We got to put all those cars underground, goddamn it, go ahead. That was a wonderful experience. And so as a result of that, I was able to design the entrance to the garage. I don't know whether you've noticed it. It was a piece of sculpture that I did actually. And it's one of the things I'm proud of, that entrance to the garage.

So these last projects have been a great joy for me mostly. Partly because by then it wasn't only that I knew what I was doing, but we had a staff that was able to handle it and it needed a staff for those purposes. Now we're into books and things like that mostly because I can't personally spend a lot of time designing things. I can design them, but we don't want to be involved in heavy-duty stuff like that anymore. But if we need it, we have people who used to be in the office [from] whom we've gotten a lot of work to do and they can help us.



**The End**