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CORNELIA HAHN OBERLANDER

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview conducted August 3-5, 2008

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Cornelia Hahn Oberlander Interview Transcript

This transcript documents a three-day interview August 3-5, 2008, conducted by Charles Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR, with Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, and documented by videographer Tom Fox, at Oberlander's home, her office, and at residential and civic projects in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The interview begins at the Oberlander home, during which Oberlander leads a tour of her garden. She discusses its development, design decisions and the changes which have occurred to its design in the past forty years. A walking tour through the Oberlander's neighborhood leads to insights on current building practices. The day concludes at the Friedman garden, an early residential project in Vancouver.

On day two the interview continues at her office, where Oberlander talks about her design philosophy and reveals the design history of her many projects. A site visit to Robson Square to review the renovation to the three-block roof garden concludes the day.

On the final day the conversation continues in the Oberlander office and finishes on site at the Museum of Anthropology, where Oberlander is joined by her long time friend and colleague architect Arthur Erickson.

Introduction

I am Cornelia Oberlander. I am a landscape architect who has worked for 60 years. I'm married to Peter Oberlander, a classmate of mine at Harvard, who was in planning while I was in landscape architecture; and we have three children, very grown up, Judy, Tim, and Wendy, and their offspring, our grandchildren. For 60 years I've tried to bring the profession to a stage where it is understood and accepted; and accepted, not in terms of designs, but in terms of how you go from concept, to design development, to specifications and implementation. That is for the professional [person] to show to the public what they can do. And I've tried very hard to, in the last decade, to introduce storm water management through green roofs or through wetlands so that we will take care of our environment in a way that it is useful. So that is probably the main thrust.

Childhood and Education

Memories of Family Life in Europe

When my mother married my father, he was an engineer. He worked in the family steel industry in the Rhineland. My great-grandfather founded the first manufacturing industrial works for extruding seamless pipes. And so we had to live in the Rhineland. My mother thought that was very awful, it was dusty and the coal dust hung everywhere, so she asked my father if we could live someplace else. We moved near Düsseldorf to a village, and we had a beautiful garden, the lawn was [full of] daisies. [As a child] I kept picking daisies and amusing myself in the garden. This is my first experience of remembering very clearly what I did in the garden. Soon after that, we moved to Berlin. After my father came back from America, we lived again in a big garden. I had a nice garden bed, which was roughly four by four or three by three. And mother would ask what would you like to grow? So I grew peas and corn. My mother was one of the first people who introduced the Bantam seed from America into the horticulture in Germany.

Now to regress for a bit, you must understand that my family was very socially conscious. My grandfather was a professor at the University of Berlin for Nationalökonomie, which is economics and history. And he was one of the first people to realize how important it was for people to devote themselves to public housing. He did that also with his wife. They did a lot for the community of Berlin. When my grandfather was elected City Councilor of Charlottenburg, he saw that the subway was built from Berlin to Charlottenburg. He also preserved a building which was the technical high school of Berlin, and he was at one point the director of it, so community work, and working for others, thinking of others, is sort of in my bones.

I remember that my father who studied scientific management with Lillian M. Gilbreth in America was very excited about what he learned here. He lived at the Harvard Club in New York, and his first job was a New York Times kitchen with Mrs. Gilbreth, and it is so coincidental then that [later] I work[ed] on the New York Times building in New York. So I learned a lot from my parents. My mother did not like living in America, and so my father had to come back. But in the night between New Year's night of 1932 to 1933, she promised my father [that she would] go back to America, because they saw that Hitler would be coming. However, my father was killed by an avalanche on January the 12th, 1933. So mother was left with three children, Hitler, and

no husband. So I'm one of the people who grew up without a father, and my daughter Wendy reminds me of that quite often.

It was a very interesting marriage, my father was an engineer and my mother was a horticulturist. Mother was very attracted to the Bauhaus people. My father wanted to streamline the Bauhaus ideas of building, and he talked a great deal to Gropius about bricks and things like that. But he died too soon, so it never came about. Then of course, Gropius left Germany in 1934, and everybody left, you know, there was nobody left. And somehow or another, my mother could not get out of Germany because the Nazis took our passports away. The moment we had them, they would be taken away again, and [it was] only with a great bit of effort that we managed to get out. But, in spite of everything, I never felt a loss that I left something; I was always looking forward to what was happening next. I was so excited to come to America. I saw lots of friends of my mother's and relatives from my mother's family who lived in America.

Birnbaum: One of the things that you've said in other stories is from the age of 11 you knew you wanted to be a landscape architect.
Yes, well that was my greatest aspiration. I came upon this because my mother had friends that were landscape architects. However, the clarity with which I expressed it came after I had visited a studio of an artist who was doing a painting of me in oil. I was eleven, and on the north wall was [a painting of] the river Rhein, and the river Rhein was depicted in a curve and the streets of the town met the river at right angles, and they were beige. And the red part of the map was the houses in brick, and then there were green spots all over, ever so often. And I asked exactly what the beige is, what the red is, and what the green is. So when it came to the green, I came home and said, “I want to do parks.” And mother said, “well, that's interesting”, but then you must learn to drive a bulldozer. Why did I have to learn to drive a bulldozer? Because in those days, the profession of landscape architecture and construction were [taught] together in Germany, they did not separate the installation from the design. So when she said, I had to drive a bulldozer, and I said, “oh goodie” and went to sleep.

Coming to America

Birnbaum: I thought it was important for us to begin by you telling us where you come from.
Well, I was born in Germany in 1921 and I came to America in 1939 with my mother and my sister. We landed in New York and settled down in New Rochelle, New York, where I went to

school. And soon after we had settled down, my mother said, “New York is too materialistic, especially for you girls. I bought a farm in New Hampshire”, and so we were whisked up to New Hampshire where she had acquired 200 acres of the Governor Wentworth Farm in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire. During the war, we had a truck farm and I was commissioned to seed the various crops at various times with her. She was a horticulturist and she was very knowledgeable about horticulture and especially market gardening. We practiced according to Rudolf Steiner’s organic farming method of gardening. And I remember very clearly that we had beans, and I would husk the beans and put the beans' husking immediately into the garden again, because that was what you were supposed to do. So I learned organic gardening already years before I became a landscape architect.

So when I came to America, all I could think of is to find a college that would teach landscape architecture and architecture. And lo and behold, in reading the college catalogues, I found that Smith College offered an undergraduate degree in an interdepartmental major called architecture and landscape architecture. And my mother was not so sure that I should go to Smith College, so she said, you have to apply to some schools out west, like Berkeley or Michigan, and Vassar. ... I wanted to stay in New England. And also I was so attracted to the idea that I could go to the Smith School or to Harvard to study landscape architecture where all the people were, there was [Walter] Gropius, there was [Marcel] Breuer, there was, even [Walter] Bogner was okay. So I was lucky I was accepted for the class of 1944. That's when I graduated. But I took so many courses that I left in 1943 to go on to the Graduate School of Design. According to Mr. Hudnut, I could come.

Smith College

Birnbaum: And I was curious from your time there, and even now, what does that landscape, and what did that landscape mean to you?
Landscape meant to me that I could learn the botanical aspects of the plants. I learned the rock-garden plants; I learned the bushes around the library; I loved the pond. When I got there, I had no idea that it was [an] Olmsted [landscape], but I later learned that, through Kate Ries Koch. And what I loved the most was the placing of the buildings around the crest like Chapin House and Dewey. Have you ever been there? You saw Chapin House, that was my house, and then [there is] the Neilson Library. I loved the placement of the buildings around the pond. And only when I did the landscape master plan for Smith College did I realize how conscious Olmsted

was about that. The thing that I loved, of course, was the pond, Paradise Pond. And I loved roaming around, but I was not conscious of any design, and Smith College isn't really a designed landscape. They want [it] to be designed, but within Olmsted's framework, it was not designed, except for the buildings and the relationship of the nature.

Smith Professors Made a Difference

Birnbaum: *Now you just mentioned Kate, and I know that you referred to her being one of your favorite professors, and* [OVERLAPPING VOICES]. . .
Yes, a brilliant professor.

Birnbaum: *So tell us about her.*
She left me alone. [LAUGHTER] She did not force me to continue to make washes for my presentations. She did not force me to do gardens, but she said to me, Cornelia, you would like to learn about Frederick Law Olmsted, and the Regional Planning Association in New York. And so my whole time with her was spent on writing and learning about these two subjects. And then of course, I learned about the gardens of the Renaissance, and I learned about the gardens of the past, Thebes, for instance. And I read Marie-Luise Gothein, which I had seen already in my mother's library. And then the other course was with Carl Putnam, an architect living in Northampton [who] taught us building design with roofs. You didn't do a flat roof in his course. And Talbot Hamlin's wife, Mrs. Hamlin, taught the History of Art, and what I liked the most was the modern art from Picasso onward.

Birnbaum*: Let's go back to Mrs. Hamlin's class, because you spoke very passionately about her last night.*
I loved her.

Birnbaum: *Tell us more about the class, did you go to museums?*
Well, it was Art, in the Hillyer Art Gallery, and there was a course that you had to take, Art 101, I think it was called. She was very precise and she could tell us about each one of the paintings. And that was very good. But then there was another man named Oliver Larkin who taught American art . . .

Birnbaum: *Are there any particular paintings or sculpture that you saw during that time that you remember really having an aha moment about?*

No. Picasso, yes. I loved [his] views of the women where the eyes go this way and that way, and you could visualize the whole face when you looked long enough. But what I liked the most was the period probably around the turn of the century with some of the Cézannes; I loved them because they were landscape paintings, but [also] modern art, abstract art. She showed us Malevich, for instance, from Russia. I mean, who did that in those days? And of course, [she showed us] the war period of the Salon des Refusés, so I learned about all these things. But I had no idea until I got to Harvard that this abstract art could also be applied to the ground, and at the Friedman Garden, [the design] it's really abstract art applied to the ground.

Lessons from Harvard

I think in all that time, at Harvard particularly, in Professor Conant's course, I never heard of Gropius. But Gropius was there, so that was good. And I never heard of Frank Lloyd Wright in his course. No. They didn't talk about that. Gropius did not think history was so important, you know that? Yeah. He thought that we were better [to be] grounded in basic design and [in the] understanding [of] collaboration rather than knowing all what had gone on in the past.

Walter Chambers taught grading, and Walter Chamber was a stickler for precision, for delivering your projects on time, for doing your work so it was very legible in presentation. He had very difficult projects at the time, such as a cloverleaf. It's not an easy thing to grade. At first we did just little roads, and then we had [to consider] the runoff, and the ditches and what-not, but when it became all complicated, that was the cloverleaf. Well, I saw in the cloverleaf immediately that there were possibilities for abstract design in the mounds of the cloverleaf or hillocks. And that needed a different [type of] analysis than just grading out a cloverleaf with a 5% slope down or a 6% up, or whatever. And he liked this very much. And so he said, “Ms. Hahn, just go sculpt the earth”. However, I also had to take [a course in] retaining walls. I took [it] three times, and when I arrived at the third time, he stood in front of the desk, and said, “Oh, Ms. Hahn, I've seen you before”. The whole class knew that I had flunked it. And at the end of the course, he gave me one good recipe, “Cornelia, hire an engineer, don't you do retaining walls”. And today, with the liability, you wouldn't dare do this anyway. So no retaining walls [are] calculated.

Birnbaum: During your time there did [you encounter] people like Fletcher Steele or. . .?
Well no, I did not go there. Fletcher Steele at Naumkeag. I never visited the garden, but I knew there was a Fletcher Steele. But I thought he was old-fashioned, so I didn't do anything. But there was one person of that time that I worked for, and that was Shurcliff. And Arthur Shurcliff, Jr. did a town plan for Dedham [Massachusetts].

Birnbaum: Is this Sidney Shurcliff?
No. His father founded the firm, right? Arthur took over about 1946. And he branched out into doing town plans. He needed somebody over the Easter holidays, and so I worked for him. And at first, he said, "I don't think you have enough experience. I don't think I can take you". But then I said, you check with Mr. Pond, and Mr. Pond probably told him that I could draft. So I worked there, I was drafting the town plan of Dedham, Massachusetts. I did not realize the style; I did not realize anything except my task that was all I could cope with. And the other thing, I had one motto already, which I have still today. When you work for somebody, you go to work, you don't look right, you don't look left. That helped me to survive for many years in Arthur's [Erickson] office, because it was sometimes quite wild. [Projects] in Los Angeles and Toronto and here, it was something. So I would just go to work there, do my work, get out, and not know much about it. And my very oldest friend from Arthur's days I still see today. But both of us, she went to Cornell and studied architecture there, we have a lot in common, we did the same thing, we never got entangled.

Birnbaum: So tell me, what was that like [being at Harvard]?
I just shot it along, I never thought about male or female, I just knew I was going to be a landscape architect of a certain kind and I just went on. Now, there was a very nice person there, Fred Brooke, Phoebe Brooke, does that mean anything to you? Well, she did more for the Boston Chapter of the ASLA than anyone else, and she passed away two years ago. She was married to my old boyfriend, Fred Brooke. I would spend a lot of time with the architects upstairs, and Fred always said to me, Cornelia, I could never have finished designing this building, you taught me grading. So I went upstairs and graded out all these drawings for the architects on my own. I'm sorry Fred is no longer alive, he could have told you.

Birnbaum: Now during this time, were you studying [Christopher] Tunnard?

Yes, Tunnard arrived and he was my professor in my last semester. And he wrote this fantastic book about the landscape and the view [*Gardens in the Modern Landscape*]. And he told me a lot of interesting background; how in Sweden and other countries people understood that the landscape and the building must work together. And then I saw, when I saw the house in Sussex with that long walk and the terrace and the trellis-work where you look through to get the landscape beyond, then I caught on what this was all about. It was Tunnard who really opened up this mind for me. And Lester Collins opened the mind to the small garden, Japanese garden.

But my most wild time was spent talking to architects. Because I realized that unless we collaborate and find or achieve a fit for the building and the site, we would not be able to be successful. And that's really why I have worked mostly with architects. And I can do that so easily without blinking an eyelid.

Birnbaum: Were there other architects as classmates during that time that you were in school that you built a connection to?
Yes, there's Harry Seidler, who never quite got the landscape straight, but is a wonderful architect. And then there was Paul Rudolph, who was not my cup of tea. But Fred Bassetti, who lived here, I liked his work very much. Now you must ask me, how I learned about [Garrett] Eckbo and Dan Kiley? I was an avid reader, and I found [out about] the revolution between Eckbo, [James] Rose, [Dan] Kiley, and the Beaux arts ideas of Harvard. And that's why I wrote to them when I graduated. And that's how I got the job with Rose to build the landscape of the modular garden in Great Neck; I went out there with my bulbs. James Rose to work for was . . . you had to have imagination to be able to survive the day. He smoked terribly, he drank like a fish, but he had ideas, my goodness. And this modular garden just fitted my design, so I worked on that for a while.

Meeting Larry Halprin

Birnbaum: Before we move on from Harvard, you met Larry Halprin at Harvard. Can you tell us about that?
Yes, well when I came to Harvard I had to take first year architecture. And that was taught at the bottom of Robinson Hall in the basement. And landscape architecture was there too, because, they needed all the space for the architects. And so here was Larry Halprin's desk on this side, and my desk was just on the other side, but perpendicular to his, so I could talk to Larry, and

that was always very pleasurable. And he told me about the war, and about this dreadful Navy incident. And that he had been to Harvard before the war, and he was just finishing off. Finishing off? I mean it was mind-boggling, his designs were superb. And he did tell me about a few things. He told me that landscape architecture is really just syncopation in space. [It is] about dancing through space, and when we go to Robson Square tomorrow, [you will see] there is dancing through space. So I learned a great deal which is unforgettable. And then I had a lot of talks with him about the Kibbutz, and about his being there. And then I was very fond of Anna's [Halprin's] dancing and [I] went to the performances. And that was it, because my year finished in 1945 and Larry, too. He graduated then. And so we didn't see each other until I came to California to the Donnell Garden.

Birnbaum: Larry has shown us photographs of him and Anna at the Bauhaus Ball and the –
Oh, those balls were fantastic...

Birnbaum: Well, tell us. Did you dress in costume?
Of course.

Birnbaum: What did you dress as?
A cube. We had four people in a cube. It was such fun. [It was] made out of sheets. Everything was a cube. Yeah.

Harvard Faculty and Friends Make Lasting Impressions

No, you know skiing took a lot of time, and I was very friendly with Fred Coolidge. I skied every weekend, so that was my socializing. And I would leave on Fridays at about four o'clock and I returned by luck by noon on Mondays. And that's where the fun was, at the Harvard ski cabin and Stowe. That's where I had my fun. So the socializing was with the skiers. And there were some fantastic ones. William Halsey was from Dartmouth. I went up with him on Tuckerman's Ravine one year, and it was already Easter time, and the skunk cabbage had come out and all those wonderful things, and up on the mountain it was blowing like mad, and I was skiing up at the top of Mount Washington, it was great. So my socializing was that.

Well, I'd like to regress for a minute. The other reason, why I like skiing is the forest, the woods. The complete relief from the city structure to the freedom of the out-of-doors. And I always came

home very refreshed from it. And people have asked me about where I get my energy from. And I'm absolutely certain that these years of being out of doors and living on my mother's farm are the places where I gathered all the energy. And when I was back there with Tim [my son] when he was at Harvard, and Julie [my daughter], they wanted to see my mother's farm. I walked with them from the farmhouse down to the beach which is about a kilometer. And there were the holes of the turtle, you know the turtle laid the eggs in the road and then covered the eggs up with the sand. And there was a fragrant fern, and the pine, and the sun, and the beach and it dawned on me, that's where I got all the energy from. The love for nature, and the ecology is such a [part of me], that's why I can do this ecology and that ecology and I don't feel strained by it.

Birnbaum: Do you want to say anything more about Gropius?
Well, Gropius was very friendly with Fred Coolidge with whom I skied. So we went there for dinner. Also with Peter [Oberlander] I went quite often to [visit] Gropius, just to come by and have tea or be there, those were unforgettable moments.

Yes, that was, especially in '55 when we came back for the Ph.D. [Peter Oberlander]

Birnbaum: See, I'm intrigued about thinking about the Lincoln property [the Gropius House] and not just the spiral staircase, but also about the orchard. And you mentioned there was an orchard here earlier [at the Oberlander home]. Could you sort of speak a little bit about this sort of melding of vernacular expression and modern buildings?
Well, this is what gave me the idea that you could have a modern building with a meadow and an orchard, and that [it] was very easy to insert. Easier than into a built landscape with azaleas and already growing pines. So that was very influential to me that Mrs. Storrow didn't like modern architecture, well nobody in Lincoln liked it, and she allowed Gropius to insert this building into her orchard. So Gropius, Breuer, and Bogner all lived in this compound which was an orchard and they had a small footprint for their building. And that was it.

Birnbaum: So what was that like the first time you saw it?
Fantastic. Clean. Wonderful. I loved it right away. There was no feeling of being uncomfortable. The building achieved a fit. And the retaining walls were brilliant because they went out into the landscape and touched the landscape slightly, and then they disappeared. In the Miller Garden,

Dan Kiley's walls disappear. So he learned a lot here. So unconsciously we learned from these wonderful outings. We did not consciously look for it, but [learned from] what we saw.

Birnbaum: So did you want to say anything to wrapping up the Harvard years [about] Sasaki or Newton?

Yes, Sasaki was one year below me in 1946. He was the outstanding student. His drawings were superb. His organization of spaces in the garden was absolutely wonderful. I was always very taken by his firm which really is the first office of a collaborative between engineers and architects and landscape architects. And that's [still] being carried on [today] in a beautiful way. So his legacy to me is just remarkable and at the American Society of Landscape Architects [ASLA] meetings I always am happy to see who's carrying on [the tradition].

Birnbaum: And what about {Norman} Newton?

Professor Newton. As a professor, in my days, he was overshadowed by Bremer Pond and hardly allowed to talk. But when Peter [Oberlander] took his Ph.D., I became very friendly with him. And when Elizabeth [Whitelaw] brings his book [*Design on the Land*] to the office and we look up things, there are very many truths in there that we should not forget.

Birnbaum: Is there anything else from this time, in terms of sort of bringing this to a close, the Harvard years, in terms of influence?

The mentors were Eckbo, Rose, and Kiley. Then came Tunnard, who brought me to another level, Lester Collins, who introduced me to the charm and the idea of Japanese landscapes, and that of course I use. It's very easy to use here [Vancouver]. So I was influenced by him to understand it [the Japanese garden], but I've been to Japan since, and so this is easy to promote.

But at Harvard, the energy that you gathered there, and fun, I had fun. I'll be very honest was culminated in a huge roof-garden party at which everyone came. I found a letter saying that even in New York people talked about our roof garden party. In subsequent years, I didn't want to leave Harvard, I didn't want to leave Boston, but my mother said, “You went to Harvard in order to take the ideas that you gathered there into the world. So if you don't, you'll crumble if you stay there.” So my great luck really is that I married Peter, moved out here [Vancouver], and could promote the many ideas in a new place, which I could never have done in any other place. So there's great fortune in coming here.

We graduated on June the 5th, 1947. It was the day that John Marshall announced the Marshall Plan at Harvard. And that was a tremendous moment. So that was the end of Harvard. My mother came to this graduation. I have a photograph of her walking in the yard and she also came to this party and in the morning of the graduation she gave me a watch, a very beautiful watch.

Professional Practice

The Early Years

James Rose

Birnbaum: Tell us a little bit more about what was it like being in that office [James Rose] .How many people were there?
Well yes, [Elizabeth Herd?] She was a superb draftsman, and I was sort of the [new] kid on the block, and the office was in his Greenwich Village place. The corridors were long, so the drafting table was long. And there was Elizabeth Herd, and there was little me, and then James was upstairs and [he] came down sometimes and talked mostly to Elizabeth. But then he, James Rose, was a great friend of Jan de Graaff. And he was a great bulb grower in Oregon, and when the Nazis came to Holland, he fled. He fled to America. He was able to gather in this terrible time several sacks of lily and daffodil bulbs and raise them then in Oregon. So by 1951, he had quite a crop. And he donated his bulbs to the *Ladies Home Journal Experimental Gardens*, and I was the one who went out with the sacks of bulbs, to plant those in the Great Neck Garden. And these gardens could be erected in one day, it was brilliant. And why don't we have things like that today?

Birnbaum: So I'm wondering, the time that you were working in Rose's office again was what period?
1949 to 1950. Or maybe '47. '48 to'49. Then [I went to the] Regional Planning Association.

Birnbaum: What was the design process like?
The design process, he came and gave you what he wanted.

Birnbaum: Did he work on [designs] at your desk? Did he do trace drawings, I mean how did --
No, he came down with a finished thing that you had to put [it] into reproducible things. But I was not involved in the design because it was James Rose. He was very bossy at times. And Elizabeth Herd was able to communicate with him very well. I was more the girl Friday.

Birnbaum: Was there anything that you look back and think that you learned something in particular in that time?
Yes, I did learn the pleasure of a beautiful, modular design. I did. And understood the rhythm, the various layers of it, and that's the only thing that I learned from it.

The Citizen's Council on City Planning

In 1947, Oscar Stonorov organized the *Better Philadelphia Exhibition.* That exhibition was in the Gimbles Department Store, and people went to see what you and your neighborhood could be like. And there was a model called *You and Your Neighborhood* with which I traveled in Philadelphia to community meetings to help them understand what city planning was. The outcome of the *Better Philadelphia Exhibition* is the Citizen's Council on City Planning. And Walter Phillips was one of the people who helped to organize the Citizen's Council on City Planning.

Birnbaum: Was the process open to black and whites both?
Oh yes, I went to *Brush Up Paint Up*, it was called, where we painted the houses and we brushed up the neighborhood, we cleaned it, it was mostly in the black neighborhoods. I had gardening projects for little gardens for the community. That was a time that we hoped that black and white would get together, which unfortunately fell by the wayside in the '70s.

Birnbaum: What was your experience with working with the African American community before this, and what did that experience mean to you?
Well, I had never met people as I did in Philadelphia. So in my work with the Citizen's Council on City Planning I came in touch with people who needed better housing, needed better cleanup, better facilities. I had never met any black people before. But there were some that were really helpful and gung-ho and wanted to help the neighborhood, and so their spirit made me [want to] work there with them.

I think that I've always wanted to be in a larger planning field. And of course Peter [Oberlander] was very influential in guiding me. In our conversations I learned about housing, and then I went to work for Mayer and Wittlesey and drafted window type G. I mean this was the beginning of [my] working on housing projects. I felt that my thrust in those years was to help [build] better environments. I mean just think, Schuylkill Falls, that housing project, had a little vegetable garden and a fruit garden. And so that's what I saw my career developing into.

Oscar Stonorov

Birnbaum: How did you get to know Oscar Stonorov?

Oscar Stonorov I met in the following manner. I worked for the Citizen's Council on City Planning, which meant that you were supposed to bring understanding what city planning was to North Philadelphia. And so you went out to the neighborhoods to make them understand that it could be a better life if they would have certain things. So I met on my travels a drug store owner whose building faced an empty lot, a plot of ground roughly, I would say an acre. And I said "what's all this about?" "Oh, the city someday will make a park." "Oh," I said, "but you need something right away, because it's so crowded in your area." And so I sat down and made a park and drew it. One day Oscar Stonorov was at a Board meeting at the Citizen's Council on City Planning, at 1717 Samson Street, and [he] looked over my shoulder and said, "did you do that?" "Yes, I'm a landscape architect. I decided that they should have a nice park with a sitting area for the parents and a play area for the children and so forth." So he said, "you come to my office, I need help with the Walter Ruther building in Detroit." Detroit, well I knew it was cold. And so he said, "you come this evening and work on it. I need it for tomorrow morning; I'm bringing it to Detroit to Walter Ruther." So ok, I come over there after 5 o'clock, and I get presented a *parti* that Oscar had done of the Walter Ruther building, it was sitting this way on the street here and the street here, and what do you do between the building line and the street? So I decided to be very abstract, and I knew that Aurea Juniper would grow in Detroit because it grew in New England. And so I made an abstract design with Juniper. So he said he needed [the design] in the morning, and that I should be there in the morning to show it to him. And I did, and he liked it, and took it and it was built. So that's how I got to know Oscar Stonorov. He came back from his outing to Detroit and called at the Citizen Council on City Planning. "Would I be interested to work on a housing project for him? " Oh would I love to work on a housing project; public housing was one of the very important goals of my life, to give people a better house to live in. So I came after hours again and learned about the housing

project, which was above Fairmount Park . . . But it became really huge, and that's why he called Dan Kiley to help me. And that's how I got to work at Dan's.

Dan Kiley

Birnbaum: So, and we've talked about Rose. So when did Dan Kiley, when did that happen?
[Daniel Urban] Kiley came into the picture for me with Oscar Stonorov and Lou Kahn's housing projects, which was Schuylkill Falls in Philadelphia. [It was] up from Fairmount Park, its demolished [now]. And Lou Kahn's, Mill Creek [Apartments], is demolished. And those two housing projects came from the Philadelphia Housing Authority and they had to be conforming to all their wishes and specs. I had never read or written a set of specs. I'd never done working drawings for a housing authority. So Oscar Stonorov said we'll get you Dan Kiley [to help] and we'll get this done. So Dan Kiley came down from Charlotte, Vermont, and we showed our *parti.* I obediently drew up what Dan had said and learned from him what we could do. But I felt that we didn't have enough individual gardens for the people, so we added more. I had a fir tree, and an apple tree for everybody in the little courtyard gardens. And then we had to present to the Philadelphia Housing Authority, and we got by. And in order to be able to do all of this, I moved for that year up to Charlotte [Vermont] and lived with Kiley for most of the year. And it was amusing. Dick Haag [Richard Haag] was there and he was very quiet and didn't say much, but he drew beautifully and he did nice execution, but Dan was definitely the one who told us what to do.

Birnbaum: Describe the environment.
The house belonged to the [Wilfred] Grenfell's, you know the architect explorer, and the house was inhabited by all the Kileys and the eight children. Was it eight or nine, I forget? They ranged in age from 2 to 12. And the 12-year-old had a room all by herself, which was very lovely, and that's where my bed was to be. But every night she liked that bed, and slept in that bed. And I would sleep on the floor. And that would go on for night after night. So by Fridays, I would say to Dan, Dan I really have to go home and help my mother on the farm, and all I really wanted was my own bed on the farm. So I would go home on Fridays and return Monday mornings. But Dan wanted us to work from 8 am to 10 pm every day. And we did. We worked all the time and had

hardly any time to breathe. But I said I like to swim in the lake, and so between seven and eight I would go down the many steps to the lake to enjoy myself.

Louis Kahn

At the same time, Mill Creek [Apartments] was given to Lou Kahn. Of course I'd known Lou Kahn from meetings in Philadelphia with Ed Bacon, Hans Blumenfeld, and Aaron Levine. Dan Kiley arrives to teach me at Oscar Stonorov's [office], and Lou Kahn, of course, wanted Dan Kiley, too. So how are we going to do that? You're going to go to work for Oscar Stonorov in the morning from eight to four. And at four you book off and go to Lou, because Lou only worked at night. So I would go and excuse myself from Oscar's at four. One day Dan was in the office, I said "I have to go now to Lou," and Dan said, "No, Cornelia you're going for a cup of coffee." And he taught me that you should never say for whom you are moonlighting. After you've been to the number one, you're supposed to not say a word where you're going. So I was going to coffee, to Lou, no coffee there ever, dinner, maybe.

So at Lou's you only worked from four to midnight because Lou didn't like the daylight. And in the office was Lou here, David there, that was his manager and all of us perpendicular down the road. So there was Ann Tyng, then there was Cornelia, and then there was Robert Venturi.

When Dan [Kiley] was there, we had our private little corner and we worked on the *parti* for the Mill Creek. And Dan would always take a clean piece of paper and say that's the final one, and he stroked that yellow tracing paper, that's the final one. I don't know how many finals we did, but we finally arrived at a very good *parti*, and we saved two Paulownia [trees] which the contractor, when he got to the site, promptly removed. I was so chagrined, I can't tell you, and it [the specs] said; do not touch the Paulownia trees. The specs [were] so clear. Well, it was terrible. And the strife between black and white in West Philadelphia was such you could hardly get to the site to supervise anything. But on the Schuylkill Falls [project], I supervised almost daily and went with Oscar to all the site meetings, and that's when I learned orderly progress on construction.

And Oscar of course engaged me as a landscape architect for Cherokee [Apartments]. So Cherokee was where I preserved all the trees, and made life habitable on a wonderful site of an estate. And that's still going on. And the trees were all analyzed by an arborist, I learned how to do that then, and that, I do that on the jobs whenever [it is] called for. So the life in Lou's office was interesting.

Birnbaum: Was Harriet Patterson in the office then?

I think so, I don't know. No, I don't remember Harriet Patterson. But Robert Venturi was, because he came in late every morning because he had to do the vegetable market at the Jefferson Market for his father. They had the greengrocer business. But Robert was hard to talk to.

Vancouver, BC Beckons

Birnbaum: So let's start to lay the groundwork for coming to Vancouver in 1953. Where's Peter on the scene during the things that we were talking about? Kind of knit that together for me.

How Peter Oberlander settled in Vancouver

Peter had a scholarship from the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation to go to Harvard. They invited him to join a think-tank operation to consider how planning and housing should be practiced in Canada. They also sent Peter on a trip from Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, all across the country in 1949 to interview people who lived in housing, wartime housing projects. Should they be kept, should they be updated, or should they be torn down? So he traveled through this country, and he arrived in May 1949 by train in Vancouver. It was a beautiful day, the air was clear like today, everything was perfect, and he said, “boy that's where I'd like to stay”. But he was at the Central Mortgage and Housing and he had to report to his superior, who was a landscape architect called Humphrey Carver. They got along extremely well, and it was a huge friendship. . .

A Royal Commission set up to investigate whether or not it was feasible to teach City Planning in Canada. There was no school. So Peter was to prepare the brief for the Royal Commission, and on the Royal Commission sat a man called Larry McKenzie, a very famous lawyer who'd worked for the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s in Geneva. He was at that time in the 1940s, 1949, President of the University of British Columbia. He heard Peter present this paper and he said to Peter, “will you come to my University my boy and teach?”

So Peter arrived in 1950 to teach Architecture and City Planning. Now Fred Lasserre was Head of the Department of Architecture. He had taught him [Peter] at McGill [University]. So they knew each other, and that's how Peter came to teach Architecture and City Planning and set up

the first City Planning program in Canada. And then [later] he set up the Center for Human Settlement and you name it, lots of things. That's how it came about. And then, in 1953, he thought that was about time he came to Philadelphia and asked me to move out here too. So I came and we lived just up the street in this illegal suite in Professor Noland's house on the top floor.

Cornelia Oberlander begins her Vancouver Practice

It was a long trip, 18 hours on a plane and no stops. And it was a very noisy trip, very noisy. So here I came, and it was a day of rain when I arrived, January the 5th. Peter said, "You know I have a Regional Planning meeting in New Westminster, and I won't be back early". But he said "there's a grocery store down the street and you can get your groceries there". So that was my beginning of Vancouver. You had to have courage, and you had to have self-confidence that you're going to last this type of life, and my motto was, just keep going.

So Fred Lasserre, I'd met him briefly, had enough courage to engage me for the Friedman house, and soon after that for the Faculty Club. And that was a very successful collaboration. So that's how I got my start in Vancouver.

I think that's a good eye-opener how people lived in the West. They didn't have a clue about what landscape architecture was, everything was English Gardens. And they couldn't believe that a landscape architect would do away with all this. I gave a lecture to the Garden Club, which was an utter flop, because I talked about design and about abstract design, and they didn't want to hear it. So the English perennial border prevailed, and over the years it changed a bit. But there is still a lot to change.

Birnbaum: So when you came how many landscape architects were here? What's the nature of the number of practitioners today, the diversity of work, and speak to the evolution in this ------ [profession].

There was one landscape architect here, and he had a firm called Webb and Justice. He'd gone to [University of California] Berkeley. But the firm was just established at the time, and they had not yet made a footprint or any kind of impression. [Later] they became well-known for residential design, but not the big stuff that I was looking for. There was [also] one other

landscape architect who came from Great Britain called Moorhead, and he was a golf course architect. And so that was the picture.

In 1963, and Landscape Architects' Act was passed and the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects had a subdivision, BCSLA. In total [today] we have 1,000 landscape architects in Canada.

Her Office

Birnbaum: When you opened your office in the '50s and then really up until you started working on these larger projects, what was your office like, describe the office.

My office, when I started working on the Friedman house was a small desk in this attic apartment that we had, and I would design everything there with the yellow tracing paper from Cambridge, Massachusetts. I would go to Fred Lasserre's office that was within an office [of a firm] called Eng and Wright. In that office, I would discuss with Fred and the other people, some of the details, but I would always return to my so-called desk in this attic apartment and do all the designs there including the specifications. And then I would get ready for the meetings to meet the Friedmans, always with Fred. So there was this very close relationship. We were of course to be very careful with money. So I could really only rearrange the garden to be useful, to be low-maintenance, and inexpensive.

So why do I have my office here [in her home]? I noticed that when I worked in Ottawa with the whole team on the National Gallery of Canada, that I really couldn't devote myself to the research this project needed. I did have all the books on Northern Boreal Forest here; I couldn't possible drag everything across the country. Nor was there very nice understanding of what I was trying to do. And so I asked very nicely in 1983 if I could move into this space, which had been before that my children's workroom.

Birnbaum: Was there ever pressure for the firm, for the practice, to get bigger? And did you resist it?

Well, [number one] it's [the office is] very organized [it] has to be very organized. Number two, I have a lot of energy as you noticed, and most nights were spent working. And life suffered a little bit while I had these big projects, but we hurtled through, Peter was so busy with the World Urban Forum and the Human Settlement and he didn't notice it. We managed, didn't we Elizabeth?

And so there was a knock on the door one day, it must have been 1995 about, and Elizabeth opened the door, and there is a gentleman from Germany who wants to see my office. Elizabeth ushered him in, and he stopped just about at the end of the rug and he said, “That’s the office? I thought you would have an office with 18 people on top of the Toronto Dominion Tower.” Now, why don't I have a big office like that? It is as follows. I get very attached to my concepts, I get very attached to my train of thought of how to get from A to Z, and then in the implementation, I have visualized what [the design] might look like on paper, but I want to be there to see that everything is carried out accordingly. And so if I had a big office and let everybody loose and run around, I wouldn't get what I'm aspiring to. So I thought a long time, am I having a big office or am I having this boutique? And I stuck to the boutique. And Arthur's office, we must still talk about Eva and Kiyo Matsuzaki. There was Kiyo who always said, “Cornelia, you could have the biggest office in Canada and still get lots done.” And I always said, “no, I [will] stay [a] boutique.” So that's how it is.

Advancing the Profession of Landscape Architecture

Contributing to the Profession

I think my contribution to the profession throughout the six decades, has been site analysis, coming up with new ideas [on] how to use a site, such as mounds, instead of looking at the street, and then storm water management. I did that early on. [Also] understanding the ecology and I hope good design, based on [the] knowledge that I learned in my Harvard days. My contribution has also been to uplift the profession to new heights and to understand that the profession can't stand still because there are new waves of happenings in the world, such as understanding climate change, scarcity of water, and scarcity of land. Therefore our designs have to change according to that [information]. And then there is also the [problem of] scarcity of money for maintenance.

Birnbaum: You have recently talked about the importance for us to take risks. Can you speak to that in the context of your own career?
Well, I don't shirk from risks, I've always taken risks. I'm raised in the tradition of the Outward-Bound schools and there you learn to take risks. And so I want to instill into this very timid population of today that risk-taking is a challenge and you shouldn't shirk [from] it. And my address at McGill and Dalhousie [Universities] somehow got that across. I think with risk-taking

comes responsibility and the responsibility comes with research. So I'm replacing the three-R's with Risk-Taking, Research, and Responsibility. But more-over, there are five-P's to be considered, and the five-P's are especially important for women who are entering the profession, because in a man's world, things are a little different. So when my daughter Judy was a freshman at Smith College, Thomas Mendenhall gave an address that [said], “if you students have Patience, Persistence, and Politeness, you will get there”. [This] he told [to] the incoming freshman class. And Eva Matsuzaki and I have added to it Professionalism, and Passion. And with these five-P's we sail through every male office. [LAUGHTER]

Advice to Women Entering Landscape Architecture

Birnbaum: Another thing I wanted to ask was, if you are seeing similar patterns in Canada in the way that we are in the U.S. with burgeoning numbers of women in the field, and also your role in championing [them]? --

Whenever I give lectures, I encourage women to accept this profession. I always answer the question, how did you do marriage, children, and your profession. I say that in the years of childrearing, you've got to choose a part of the profession in which you think you're successful. I for myself [chose], during those years, the big projects like housing projects which were socially conscious, satisfying, and also playgrounds for children. And you have to choose something which you're excelling at. And that gives you confidence in later years to do bigger projects.

Collaboration

Arthur Erickson

Now, Arthur is so easy to work with because he understands light, he understands the site, what it can do, and he loves concepts for each site, like for instance the Museum of Anthropology, [he wanted to] show the Haida meadows up North in the Queen Charlottes. For the Waterfall building, [he wanted to] make a very urban garden for the people to enjoy the out-of-doors.

Arthur also has understanding, not knowledge, because he looks at ecology, what plants go together and what textures go together. And that is very helpful. So from a point of view of collaborating and showing him what can be done, it's very easy. I can bring him certain things that go together, and if he likes the textures [then] it's okay. But still, sometimes it was in the

past show-and-tell. But Arthur's understanding, also love of nature, he loves it. He understands the implication of being devoid of nature, of not being close to it.

Kiyoshi & Eva Matsuzaki

Yes, Kiyoshi and Eva were very prominent in Arthur's office. It is Eva who got the glass roof onto the [Robson Square] Courthouse. And Kioyoshi is the one who helped me to get the Museum of Anthropology drawings done in a hurry because we were so busy on Robson Square [that] I couldn't draw every minute. He set me up in the Penthouse of Arthur's office so that I could work in peace. And so Kiyoshi managed the project, but I did all the drawings. And Arthur of course was most interested that we have the Haida houses in the right places and the pool [at the Museum of Anthropology] was the most important part. And now that pool is going to be done.

After Eva and Kiyo left Arthur, they had their own office called Matsuzaki Wright; it was on Hastings Street in a very wonderful building overlooking the harbor. They asked me to do the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly Building in Yellowknife, and soon after that, the C.K. Troy Building. So I've worked with Eva in the '90s for about six years. And to work with Eva is tremendous; she thinks clearly, she knows where to go, she knows how to build and how to get things done. And those, the years were unforgettable. [Robert] Berkebile at that time came to Canada, he was then Head of the Environment Committee of the AIA, and he set the stage in a workshop for us not to connect to the storm sewer, not to connect to the sanitary sewer, recycle material, have lower ASHRAE standards, make the windows open and have no air-conditioning. And this building was built really by three women, namely Eva, Janet Frost from Keene Engineering, and me. And of course, I advocated native plants, and Kiyo wanted the forest next to the Troy building preserved, so we made a study of preservation of the Asian precinct, which is still in place today.

Dan Solomon

Birnbaum: Is there anything else that you want to say about working with architects?
Yes, I would like to say that I've worked really successfully with Dan Solomon [Daniel Solomon Design Partners] of San Francisco, [on a Seattle, Washington project] Holly Park III, which is the last housing project in America under Hope VI. And we tried to bring to the project a new way of looking at paths which let the [rain] water go right into the soil, storm water managed on the

open fields and grounds, and also market gardening. And we do not have many lawns, in spite of the city of Seattle wanting boulevard grass. It set a standard for new street trees and street widths; if the street was narrow, a certain tree was chosen, if the street was wider, another type of tree was chosen. And we made endless charts, and Elizabeth is witness of that, to convince everybody how to do this. So [work with] Dan Solomon [was] very successful.

Elements of Design

The interview continues in the Oberlander home; Charles Birnbaum and Cornelia Oberlander discuss the illustrations and lessons found in garden books written for children by Cornelia Oberlander's mother Beate Hahn. These include the "Garden Primer" [Die Gartenfibel für Kinder, Eltern und Großeltern] and "Kindergarten, a Garden for Children." They also admire quilts saved from Oberlander's childhood. Oberlander shares family photograph albums with pictures of the Hahn family, their home in Germany, and pictures of family life on the farm in New Hampshire. The morning concludes with Oberlander singing songs in German from treasured family song books.

The Importance of Play

Well, first of all, if you have three kids in three and a half years, you have to entertain them. Number two, I believe very strongly in early childhood play, and when you come into the house, you will see the toys that I schlepped, and my mother schlepped from Zurich at the Pestalozzi House, that's where we got wooden toys that I am playing with and the also the grandchildren[play with]. So play is very important. My mother was very interested in play and especially in the education in the garden of Froebel in Tuebingen in Germany. And I learned a lot from her books which she wrote for kindergarten teachers on play and music. I will show them quickly to you today. So play became very important.

And as a mother with three children, what could I do? I could not go out to work in an office every day. I had to think up things that I could do. So I devoted my early career here in Vancouver to public housing projects. There're two of them standing and still used. One is Skeena Terrace and the other one is McLean Park. Into each one of them, I have incorporated play areas. They were completed in 1963 and 1965. And in 1964 I got a telephone call from Polly Hill who was the play lady in Canada, could I come to have a meeting for Expo '67? And

that's how I developed the playground for Expo '67, without teeter totters, without swings. [It] was just hills and dales and tree-house and water for children. And that gave rise to seventy playgrounds that I built across the country. So the years of raising the children and play were combined because I could take them to the playgrounds while they were under construction. And they didn't notice what mother was doing. So it was interesting. And I worked at an office maybe two hours a day or four hours a week, that's all I could do, to verify my drawings and things like that. But otherwise, it was home-industry.

Planning as a Passion

You asked me what I studied at Harvard, what did I look at? I looked at housing, I looked at how people divide the land, and that was much more important than looking at beautiful designs

Birnbaum: What about Stein and Wright were you influenced by them?
Oh yes, Radburn, of course, I l learned about [it] from Peter [Oberlander]. I learned about Radburn, I learned about Sunnyside, I saw Sunnyside, and I saw Radburn. I also had been to Los Angeles to see Baldwin Hills Village. And that made an enormous impression on me. And then, Clarence Stein, laid out Kitimat [BC] in1951. I have a book [*Trees and Shrubs for Pacific Northwest Gardens]* which Dan [Kiley] gave me. Dan went to Kitimat to see what could be done for the vegetation. Dan gave me a book on the Northwest plant material. And he said, “one day when you're in Vancouver, you'll need it.” So I learned through context what these people were doing.

Birnbaum: I'm curious if there were certain principles that really worked, or things that you latched onto at that time?

I totally embraced the layering of the house, where your dwelling is, with facilities for the community. And on top of it, not just a playing field for baseball, but [providing] places for mothers to meet with children and the elderly. Many of my playgrounds around Ottawa were in locations where there was old-age housing. I made it possible that there would be a gate so that the children in a daycare center could interact with the people in the old-age housing. So all this was part of my vocabulary.

Minimalism in the Landscape

Birnbaum: You've used the word several times over the course of the couple of days, minimalist. And I'd like for you to tell us what that means to you.
Minimalism means to express a useful landscape aesthetically designed with a concept, not [to] overload it with plants that can't be maintained. That means mass-planting, which means that the eye is attracted to the various colors that grow and give color, like the Iris. I've thousands of Iris in the Taeger Garden simulating a river, I [also] have huge patches of nikinick, a groundcover.

Birnbaum: Right. So tell me where [did] this whole concept of mass plantings [come from]?--
It comes from my course in abstract design at Harvard, one texture, one color, expressed in the fields of abstract design. Take [Joseph Fernand Henri] Léger for instance, there are in [his paintings] in the carpets, red and black patches. Now, in abstract design, this is magnificent yes? So my *palette* echoes these designs.

Birnbaum: If you were to point to a favorite example [inspiration] of that in one of your projects, what would it be?
It probably would be Moholy Nagy or Josef Albers.

Birnbaum: Can you elaborate on that?
Josef Albers made a tremendous impression on me. I looked at his books. Just think of *Homage to the Square,* which is minimalism. And with that [concept] I could do a garden like nothing. I could have the orange border be a higher shrub, the middle [color] would be another layer of a lower shrub, and the yellow inside would be just the ground cover. So here you have abstract design translated into the third dimension of a garden.

Presenting Plant Material

Research was drilled into me when I arrived at Smith College by a librarian, who told me when I asked for a certain book; “Go to the sources, Ms. Hahn.” And with her hand and finger [she] pointed at the Dewey Decimal [library catalog] boxes in wood standing around in the library. So I learned to look up the books that I needed from that lady in the library. That was very good for a resource. But further, it was Kate Reis Koch who assigned me to do the Olmsted paper and also

the paper on the New York Regional Plan. Her library had wonderful books which I could use for my research.

However, in all my work, I use plant material that relates to the use of the building or the users' viewing, as it was for the [landscape at the] Museum of Anthropology. I went into ethnobotany. Now, ethnobotany was not described here in any way, however, an archeologist, a professor at [the University of British Columbia] UBC pointed me to a book called, *The Ethnobotany of Western Washington.* And that was written by a woman called Erna Gunther in 1943. It described all the plants that were known to the Kwakiutl, or whatever tribe it was, and so the *palette* for the Museum of Anthropology was composed from this book. [*Oberlander holds up one of her plant identification cards]* And here for instance is the card, because I had to show every card to my friend Arthur Erickson, the Mahonia aquifolium, which is Oregon grape. I wrote down the height; the bloom in spring; the color bright yellow; woodland; berries in late-summer, purplish-blue and some red color in the fall. So I went with these cards to Arthur to show what kind of plants we could have. [I did] the same thing for Moshe [Safdie] at the National Gallery, and the same thing for people like the Russells and Bagley-Wrights for whom I did gardens. I showed bachelor buttons for perennial gardens. Some people also like crooked things [plants] which I don't like, but when asked, I had a card ready. So these flash-cards were made to enlighten those who I was to present my work to.

Designing a Green Roof

There are two kinds of green roofs. There is the extensive green roof which you look upon when you are on the thirteenth or fourteenth story of a high-rise and you don't go onto. This is [the kind of green roof] where people use the idea, they know that the waterproofing has been put on, they know how to do the technique, and they plaster it up with sedums. Sedums are disorderly plants that do not make a very nice design.

So when the intensive green roof was rejected on the library roof [Vancouver Public Library] Moshe [Safdie] said “go to it, show me other designs.” We sat down here in this office and [I] made thirty suggestions for Moshe. He chose the design which shows the Fraser River in blue grass, the land in green grass, and the mountains in the groundcover, nikinick. And so a green roof, in my opinion, must be aesthetically pleasing, low-maintenance and answer, above all,

storm water management. And you can only do that if you know the correct ingredients of a green roof.

The discussion continues as Oberlander demonstrates the layers of the green roof with a sample book from [a roof system manufacturer] Hydrotech.

Well, a good green roof is composed of a waterproofing membrane, an absorption mat for extra moisture. And this is a plastic sheet that is like an egg crate which allows for the storage of water during drought. It also allows storage of water so that the absorption of [water] for the plants is gradual and only very little water flows into the storm sewer. This system then has a filter cloth glued on top so that the growing medium will ever clog these little holes. The library roof which you see from your hotel has been monitored by Public Works Canada, and only 28% of rainwater ever enters into the storm sewer. So this is the first green roof that has been analyzed, studied, and built like this. My green roof in Washington at the Chancellery is similar to that, but I didn't have all the materials that were invented afterwards. This is a German system called ZinCo. And the book that Eva Matsuzaki, Elizabeth [Whitelaw] and I wrote, *Handbook for Green Roofs Canada* has been written for Public Works Canada. So it is an official document. The knowledge of growing medium is definitely a landscape architect's work. The knowledge of waterproofing and the system that I showed you is usually [done] in conjunction with engineers because of the liability [issue]. But the landscape architects must be fully aware of the different systems. There are hundreds of systems out now, and the green roof industry has been taken up exponentially to great heights. And everybody thinks they know how to do a green roof, which is doubtful. So the landscape architect is part of a team to do a green roof. That's how I look upon it. In our case, Moshe said, “Go right to it.”

The City and the Future

Birnbaum: What in an ideal world will the city look like in 25 or 50 or 100 years?

I think every city has to have bylaws as they do in Europe to make green roofs mandatory. We have to replace the ground that the building sits on with a useful park, a vegetable park or a sitting area up on top. And we also have to save on electricity and air conditioning and heating. Green roofs cool the building and absorb the heat. And so I'm hoping that the municipalities in North America will follow the European example; and there are plenty of them that have very good [designs]. In Berlin for instance, you get a bonus if you have a green roof. And that's the kind of thing we have to work on.

Inspiration is All Around

[Inspiration comes] from the site, from looking at the land, how it falls, what the sunlight is on it, and the wind. That gives me the initial instinct of what to do. But the inspiration of how I deal with it comes from what is on the site, like the building, and how you relate that site to the landscape beyond. Those are the things that have to be worked out in great care, and you will see that at the Museum [of Anthropology].

Birnbaum: Are there any authors, books that have inspired you?
Well, as I said, my whole thrust of the '90s is towards recycle, reuse, limiting footprints and storm-water management. Of course I'm very influenced by John Lyle at Pomona [Cal Poly Pomona], and David Orr at Oberlin [College]. And then others that have influenced me are Thomas Barry. You know spiritual, because this is very spiritual this work. And right now I'm reading a very interesting book by a different author, David Suzuki on how we should deal with the earth. So these are the most contemporary books.

Birnbaum: Are there particular trips that either for personal or professional reasons that really have been touchstones for you that you think back on?
Yes, the first trip was my first trip to Scandinavia, which is Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. And that was a tremendous inspiration for both of us [Peter and Cornelia Oberlander] as to housing, as to a City Hall plazas, imagine in 1955, in Aarhus [Denmark] they had already a City Hall Plaza, you could dance on it. And it was just completed about that time. So all [these examples of] modern architecture of the North were inspiring for very many years. And more recently, of course I've been a lot to Israel, and given lectures on water recycling in Be'er Sheva at a water conference where I demonstrated how we used water at the C.K. Troy building [to try and show] that you don't have to go around and dig for hours to find a well. So those kinds of trips are very inspirational. Last year, I went to Bilbao [Spain] and saw for the second time the Guggenheim [Museum] and its setting. And if you asked me about sculpture that is placed into the public area, Jeff Koons' *Puppy Dog* is what I just go for, its kitsch, but its good kitsch. So that is tremendous. I am not sure I like the grading, how you go into the museum, I think that it is a little roundabout; but the redevelopment of the whole esplanade along the river is tremendous, the Calatrava bridge, and those kinds of things make me very happy.

Principles for Practice

Embracing New Technologies

Birnbaum: It seems to me that with, what we have with technology today that [the boutique office] is a model that really I think could work.

Well, it's going to be [that way] for the future. Just think I'm doing the New York Times [Building project]. I'm having a microclimatic study done at the University of Dalhousie and another at [the University of] Guelph. So here we have here, Dalhousie and Guelph. Email is perfect. Pictures of what we're thinking can be sent. Then I have Hank White in New York who is very happy to see a microclimatic study for the courtyard at the New York Times or the roof. So we link up. Then we have telephone conversations. It works like a charm. And Hank, luckily, knows like me, hands-on, knows the nurseries, he knows Halka near Princeton, New Jersey. He knows all the places I have explored for the Canadian Chancellery. So we network and this is the future. Because the future is that we can carry on excellent work with all the electronic devices or whatever. However, in the implementation phase, I would like to be present. So I travel to New York and lay the moss.

Landscape Architecture and the Future

Birnbaum: Can you describe what a landscape architect is?

In various papers I have tried to define it. And today, I will tell you that a landscape architect by today's training could be the leader of any team with the knowledge of geology, soils, water management, landscape construction, knowledge of grading, and plant material. That is what the students learn right now at UBC [University of British Columbia]. And for better or for worse and they [will] get there. And they must learn at an early age to collaborate with architects and engineers in order to become leaders of teams. You asked me what is landscape architecture?. It's not trees and bushes. It is all the other things. Planting is last. And if I go to all these big meetings that I attend I'm the only woman at the table.

The future for landscape architecture is immense. And if they [landscape architects] don't take the opportunity at this point, while our governments are waffling on climate change, if they don't learn this climate change inside-out, namely storm-water management, limiting footprints, using plants that don't need much maintenance or water, if they don't seize that opportunity, then the

landscape architects are again asleep under the ground like my classmates. And they [need to] learn to take risks, assume responsibility and do their research, then they'll do OK.

Consulting the Experts

As a landscape architect, you are not trained to know everything about geotechnical matters. You are certainly not an expert in gathering seeds or storing them, so you have to deal with people that are experts in this field. You also know that you need help with arbor care, what the trees needs are. Thus, I believe that the teams with which landscape architects have to work are not just the engineers and the architects and the technical [people], but also the people who understand the plant material or the seeds. And this is a great success between Hank White and me that we both work on that. And we also know the [type of] training that people have for [for tree] root balls in the nurseries, how big they [the root balls] have to be. We pick the best. So that's also a collaborative effort. “And you can't know everything”, that's what Elizabeth just said, and it's so true. And you don't have to be arrogant about that. And you can say in a meeting, I have to think about it. I have to consult the seed expert about it. I'm going to do an enormous amount of research on grasses for the green roof of the VanDusen Garden, before we settle on what we are planting. And [I will do research on] the method of planting; most people plant roofs with little plugs here and there and so forth. Not me. I'm going to find a hydroseeding method that will give cover with mulch on it, and will establish a roof faster. So you have to know what a hydroseeder can do.

Teaching the Next Generation

Birnbaum: Did you want to say a word about teaching?
Yes, teaching. With this crazy boutique office and projects in Toronto, Ottawa, Washington and Berlin, I can't commit myself to teaching. But I promised each year to give one big lecture to the Department of Landscape Architecture here at the UBC and since they are supposed to be collaborating with the Department of Architecture, I address them both. They don't all come, but I want them to know that collaboration is most important. And so in these lectures I speak about past projects that are important for them to know about, or else I take them on a field trip to see the Museum of Anthropology, the C.K. Troy building, and the Institute of Asian Research. I lecture about limiting footprints, and teach hands on what has been actually built. That's better than sitting in a room with a Power Point. They see actually what goes on.

Then I have taught [other] courses at UBC, one of them was on minimalism. Elizabeth [Whitelaw] is smiling already. First of all, they [the students] were given, a long and narrow courtyard that was some place on the campus. I don't remember the exact dimensions, but this courtyard was supposed to be used for entering various buildings and to be a pleasing [place] to sit in. That was the theme of the project. So I said to myself, this courtyard, you've got to dance first before you look at it. So I got a PBS movie [featuring] Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Frank Stella, to show the students. Well, they were blown away. Landscape architecture is dancing through space, its syncopation. And the people that took this course will never forget it. One of them still sees Elizabeth and still sees me; so that is a friendship through this wonderful project

Appreciating the Work of Others

Birnbaum: So finally, whose work you're excited about today, other landscape architects?
Yes, well I'm excited about Shlomo Aronson in Israel. He has managed to provide in Israel walking promenades that relate to the Israeli's wheat fields and the olive orchards, and yet you are going through a landscape that is man-made. He did that also at the Ben Gurion Airport. I think he took his [landscape] training from Penn to great heights in Israel. Then I'm very friendly with Cornelia Müller in Berlin who took me through her really grandiose work at the Bundestag and explained to me the relationships to the river and the canals and how she created the vistas, so picturesque, yet so correct for our century. And then there is Gabriella Kiefer, who does Bauhaus-type landscapes, quite smashing, but a very different personality. I enjoy seeing her things. Then in America, who do I admire? I have to think a little bit. Yes, of course, another man I admire very much, he's working in Portland [Oregon] right now, is Herbert Dreiseit. He is a water-artist. And I can show you [a project in] Berlin where he has [designed] a water body over a garage and you can sit here and you think you are at a lake, and far beyond, he has [created] a wetland. I think he's fabulous. And then there is Anneliese Latz and Peter [Latz] in Munich. I'm sorry that I have to stick to Europe [where] there are fabulous landscape architects. And they just won the competition for the area around Buckingham Palace, I saw a sketch. It's going to be good. Also [Kathryn] Gustafson I admire. I think she did a fantastic job in the Millennium Park [in Chicago] .And probably of all the landscape architects, she is the one. Yes.

LEED is not Enough

Oberlander leads a tour of her neighborhood and comments on the new construction.

The lesson is that there should be bylaws made in all municipalities first of all about site analysis . . . about how much cut and fill you are doing. Then you should be able to demonstrate limiting footprints, which probably would tell you that you can't possible put a house like this on a lot that is 100 feet by 120 feet. Then you should demonstrate that you are not connecting to the storm sewer and you should also show how you [will] finish your roof. Because the storm water runoff from the roofs in this part of the world is so considerable and all our storm sewers are overloaded.

And so we are at a point that the government of the city, the municipality, and the Province, as well as the Federal government should make legislation. LEED is a good guide, but it's not enough. People are aiming for platinum here and gold there and silver or whatever. It's not good enough. There's no enforcement of it. So I'm working here on trying to stimulate the City Council who's up for election, unfortunately, to adopt the Green Roof By-Laws with incentives like [they have] in Germany. And we don't have that. In Germany, I have just finished, as you all know, the Canadian Embassy in Berlin. And it has a roof made out of glass, which is like the Mackenzie River, similar to Mackenzie River, the glass is painted black. When the sky in Berlin is black, the glass is black, but when it's blue, it reflects the Berlin sky in a wonderful way and ties our two countries together. So they're storm-water management, culture, and aesthetics involved. And most roofs are not aesthetically pleasing.

[Looking at a new house under construction Oberlander makes observations]

It should be mandatory that a landscape architect and an architect collaborate to work out the siting of the building, the integration of the building to the land, and this is a demonstration a crass demonstration of how the water, the water will flow into the building because everything is too low. So we have a long way to go. And this is why I have enjoyed so much working with Arthur for some 35 years. He understands the land, he not only understands the land, but he understands the light that comes onto a site, and he understands the colors.

Projects

Friedman Garden

The interview continues at the home and garden of Connie and Sid Friedman. This is Oberlander's earliest residential commission in Vancouver completed in 1953. Still living in the house and enjoying the garden, the Friedmans join Oberlander and Birnbaum for a discussion about its design.

The Friedman garden is a wonderful example of site analysis, restraint of budget, and wanting to express the area where nothing could grow with an abstract shape. And so in three-dimension it became a complete abstract design. I could do now a color design overlay and show you what a wonderful analysis of basic design this is.

So anyway, you had engaged Fred Lasserre [to design the house] And he somehow or other brought me to your little apartment and we collaborated, not knowing each other very well, on building this garden and house. And what was such fun was that Connie and Sid realized that this house had to sit well on the site and not be too big. And you wanted your studies to look out [into the garden], yes, you asked for that.

Mr. Friedman: Yes, I wanted to be able to look out when I was sitting, to look out at the garden.

And now, they called it the garden, but I realized that there were very large Alder trees on the site, And in those days, [the] Alder was to be chopped down by the UAL, and they asked that I chop them down. I had to go to the UAL office to say that I wanted to retain them, but I was going to interplant some pines [with them] so that if they died, there was something [on the site]. However, I also realized by being told by Fred and Connie and Sid that there was bedrock here, and they didn't want to blast, or spend the money on blasting.

[*Cornelia points to the plan]* And so this shape, this butterfly shape of the gravel area came about because of the bedrock. So the site dictated the design. The site also had a slope between Queensland [Road] down to here that is a slope of more than 10 feet. And I knew that if I would be able to do a two-and-a-half to one slope, that's very technical, and planted [it] that they would have a slope to look at the plants of the garden. Because to [be able to] see your

plants on an oblique angle is very satisfying, especially if you are up here. So this is how the heather planting came about. What did I know in 1953 about plants? I knew a few plants. I knew heather, I knew creeping myrtle, or periwinkle, and I also knew juniper. And you were kind enough to allow me to do this with three plants.

Mrs. Friedman: But we weren't exactly anxious to spend a lot of money, which we didn't have. But what is most amazing, is how Sid and Connie have not changed it.

Mrs. Friedman: We haven't changed very much.

And the spirit of the design is here, I congratulate you.

Mrs. Friedman: I hope it is. I think it is, Cornelia, and we certainly are grateful for it, because it's a lovely design to live with. And it's been easy to, that was another thing, that we had to have low-maintenance, you remember?

Birnbaum: So tell us a little bit about how, what it was like, how the relationship has evolved?

Mrs. Friedman: Oh, well we don't see very much of each other anymore because Peter and Cornelia were busy raising a family and we were busy working in a totally different field, doing a lot of traveling and so forth. But we've always sort of kept in touch, and as I said, we're exceedingly grateful, both to Fred and to Cornelia for allowing us the pleasure of living here.

Tick Tack Toe House

The Tick-Tack-Toe house was designed by us [Cornelia and Peter Oberlander] for a Chicago competition. We didn't win but we got a mention. And then we needed a house because there was Julie and I was almost giving birth to Tim. So I cruised around Vancouver to find a piece of ground to build on. Well, down in the flats I found something. But the flats could get flooded because it [the site] was so close to the Fraser River. And so Peter said, we've got to have a house on stilts in case it floods. And so he took a cube of sixty by sixty, 3600 square feet, and so divided into nine squares, and this was a Tick-Tack-Toe house. And we lived in it from 1958 to 1970, and the farm next to us was subdivided with people that had, what Peter called spittoons, they were swimming pools, and we didn't want to look down on them. And just at that

time when we decided, we had to move, the University of British Columbia Endowment Land Office opened this competition for this lot. So that's how we moved.

Children Creative Center- Expo '67

After New Haven, when we came back in 1964, I got the telephone call from Expo '67 to do the Children's Creative Center. And that occupied me day and night. There were deadlines to be met, there were meetings in Ottawa, there were meetings with the Chairman of the Expo, and I had to always be ready. Now, I told them that I needed to do a lot of research because I did not want to do a playground with playground equipment that was available. So this playground featured five things: hills and dales, water and sand, and buildable parts that the children could put together. And the Pan Abode [log home] which you see up at the [Oberlander]pool here was the parts that they could put together themselves. So this playground differed a great deal from the previous playgrounds. And they [the children] had a tree house to climb, 30,000 children played there. It took three years to build this playground. And it was all specified, every tree was marked on the drawings, every hill. All these drawings are [available] to look at the Canadian Center for Architecture [CCA] where my archives are deposited.

Birnbaum: Now, I'm also kind of curious was there any interaction with other projects and teams?
Yes, there was a tremendous interaction with all the other people who were building at the Island of Montreal. In particular I worked with another landscape architect, Don Graham on Île *Sainte-Hélène* which is the island on which the Canadian Federal Pavilion stood, which is called Katimavik. That means welcome from the Inuit. And I interacted with a big committee in these meetings and was able to be a guide for tree selection and so forth.

But Expo '67 was much more than the individual buildings, its [purpose] was to show how a city can grow with a settlement, Habitat by Moshe Safdie as housing, a public transportation component of subway and buses, and water transportation with canals. And so we hoped to bring the city into another realm, not just with the automobile and freeways. That's was Expo '67. The excitement of Expo '67 was tremendous, and everybody came away happy who had visited it. The other thing was that as for myself, it raised the awareness of play for children, and I did 70 playgrounds thereafter between 1967 and 1974 when I got that telephone call from Bing Thom.

Oberlander Garden

The interview opens in the garden forecourt and continues with a tour of the series of garden spaces. Oberlander addresses the design development of the house and reveals the changes that have occurred to the garden over the forty years.

This lot was declared not build able land by the Province of British Columbia who is ruling this enclave called the University Endowment Plan. There were 12 people who had applied for this lot, and Peter and I had lived in an illegal suite up the hill, which I'll show you later, and [we] had always eyed this lot as being the one we would really like. So when the Province of British Columbia got all these applications for the lot, they said there would be a competition and whoever could solve the problem of the steepness of the slope with a building that was suitable for this land would get the land. Peter associated himself with an engineer who was also working in Vancouver. And they found a way [using] geotechnical analysis that if we would build a platform and have the building [be] like a bridge, and sink the columns 20 feet below the grade in hand-dug holes, we could erect a post-and-beam house. And so with that idea and a sketch, we submitted it to the University Endowment Land [committee], and of course we won. Now the land was Crown land,and was not to be sold. And five years after we had done this job here, had built this house, because we got the permit to do so, we got a letter from the Province that if we wanted to, we could buy this lot, and we bought it for 19,000 dollars. [LAUGHTER] Is that not priceless? That's how we got the lot. And the building was standing by that time and we were living in it.

Oberlander begins the garden tour in the front of the house.

And here is the hedge, this hedge was planted in 1970, six feet tall, and it has grown to these tremendous, sacred dimensions. This is a hemlock hedge, and in all of North America we have a disease called woolly adelgid, which eats up the needles and the branches, but this one [the hedge] is kept under control with an oil spray. And this year, it doesn't have any of the disease any more. So it's probably a 20-year cycle. So we saved the hedge, and it will be pruned in September to be very trim.

We are now entering through the hedge to the house. And here is the forecourt. The garden in this area is only 29 feet between the property line and the house door. The house was built in 1970 and the garden was designed at the same time, and the siting of the house was the most important part. Mainly, the elevation between the sidewalk, which is 271 feet and the ascent to the house, is to 272 [feet]. Also, we were not going to take any trees down in the ravine, so this house floats. It does not touch the ground. It's a bridge between two anchor points in the ravine. So there's collaboration between the architect, which was my husband, together with Barry Downs, who did beautiful regional-style houses here, and myself. And the house is situated in such a way that you have a division between living parts, entry parts, and useful parts, like my studio. And upstairs are all the bedrooms for the children who at that time were just teenagers.

Birnbaum: I'm just wondering, in terms of a passageway, what the hedge is besides privacy? Is there anything more to that?

Yes. There is the sacredness of a space that belongs to the garden. And also it draws us to the front door. Nobody ever wonders, where's the front door? They know the direction through the hedge to get to the front door so nobody wanders around. To the left [is] the car [park], that's the utilitarian [space], and further yonder is the secret garden, which you haven't seen yet. That's the grandchildren's garden. And up here, you step down because the elevation is such that we had to have some stairs and then the stairs here lead you to the next level which used to be the vegetable garden and the orchard. And it is still today the orchard, but we have [added] a pool. And would you like to go up there?

Birnbaum: Please.

In 1970, this was lawn. I'll be honest to tell you. However, I built immediately three-foot high mounds to shield us from the street and [I] planted all these trees. And these trees were planted about ten-foot tall and are just majestic. You'd think you were in the forest. They are oak and pines, and this again is a hemlock. I love the tree trunk of the hemlock; it's just very soothing to see. Here we have only azaleas, they bloom at different times, and most of them are white, however this corner is yellow, orange, and purple in deference to Peter, who likes color. The wisteria we planted in 1970, and we keep it under control. It made a wisteria tree all by itself. So we let nature be. And the grasses, we don't mow. I engage a gardener called the silent gardener, he doesn't have a leaf blower and he doesn't have a lawn mower. And when he comes, he's so silent that he forgets what he's to do really. So I struggle with him.

Here [this] used to be the place for the trampoline for all the children and their friends. And then when they went to college, this became a terrace to sit. The flower pots are planted with white flowers, and these are a begonia that doesn't grow on the ground, it makes a stem quite high, so you can see them from far away. And if you look down here, you see how the house floats in the ravine. And the ravine is very steep; the angle is almost 90 degrees. And when we moved here, Tim and his friends always wanted to go down to the ravine. And we told them they could go provided they would have a ladder arrangement and not touch the ground. So he rigged up great garden hoses on which they pulled themselves up. And they played in the river down below that was their playground.

So the ravine is really the inspiration to keep the native groundcover, the native trees. You see the hemlock; you see the big-leaf maple that is a maple that grows all the way to Oregon, all the way down to Oregon. And this oak tree my mother gave to us, so I'm taking care of it, but it isn't native. The rhododendrons here are species rhododendrons from Tibet and Nepal. They are the yakushimanum variety, and they bloom pink, but when they open they are pure white, and that is very wonderful. So the garden is mostly green and white. We shall go up here. *[They climb steps to the upper garden*.] This is a salmonberry, which was gathered by the native people and it's very similar to a raspberry. It's very delicious, and it grows with the ferns, the hemlocks, the maple trees, and also some cedars in the other part of the garden. We're ascending to the pool.

The pool area was designed only about eight years, six years ago. This used to be the vegetable garden when the children were small, and here are the fruit trees for each one of the children. The apple trees and Judy had a pear tree, Tim and Wendy had apple trees, but now we have many more because we have grandchildren and they also have trees. There's one very good tree here, and this is for three granddaughters. They have yellow transparent Jonathan apples and Gravenstein apples, and each one of them comes and picks them, and two of the grandchildren are very good cooks, and they cook applesauce from it.

This tree which is an upright, it's called a spindle tree. In orchards in Europe, especially in Holland, you can plant 6,000 trees of this kind per acre, and you get the same kind of fruit, amount of fruit from these trees as you do from a usual apple tree. So I'm experimenting also [about] what people can have in small gardens. The meadow here is because I like the wilderness. And the grandchildren love the tall grasses, and they play around here.

Oberlander points to the far corner of the garden. This is a playhouse, which we had on our other lot, which I'll show you pictures of later. The house is a Pan Abode, which is a pre-fabricated log house, and it was used in all the parks of Canada for their outhouses and their service buildings, and the man who invented the Pan Abode and marketed it here was a very well-known lumberman from Czechoslovakia who came in 1939 to Canada. This house was given to Tim as a birthday present. [LAUGHTER]

She gestures to an area by the pool. The only thing that we have here in flower is this fantastic black-eyed Susan, and that reminds me of the meadow at my mother's house in New Hampshire. And they don't need any attention. Then the paving here is just on sand, and it allows the water to go through immediately, so we need no catch-basins and there's no connection to the sewer.

Museum of Anthropology Realized

Birnbaum: So let's end by talking a little bit about the Museum of Anthropology before we go out there.

The Museum of Anthropology was constructed and designed by Arthur in 1974. All of a sudden, Kiyo said, “Arthur wants to see you.” And I thought, oh God, he is going to fire me because I don't know the plants. So I, with trepidation followed Kiyo up the stairs to Arthur's office and Arthur shows me the *parti f*or the Museum of Anthropology which is in concrete, [to be] built in concrete, the post-and-beam log house in which the native people have wintered. Oh, it was wonderful to look at, and he had scribbles of shrubs around it, and I thought shrubs? No, the native people don't know shrubs, you know. When they go and want salmon berries, they pick salmon berries. And so I took one look at it and Arthur said, “Cornelia, what would you do”? And so I said “I would simulate the open meadows of the Haidas in the Queen Charlottes and feature the plants that the native people used for medicine, for food, etc.” And Arthur said, “go to it.”

And the meadows, how did I know what grasses grew there? They would not give me a trip up North that cost too much. So I sat there with a magnifying glass trying to identify the grasses from a book. I knew through my children's Childs Study Center a seed expert. He was the great professor of grass seed. So I consulted him, and he said “Angus Richardson has a seed

company. We'll get it all done" And so in 1976 we composed a mix with grasses, sedges, fescues and flowers that simulated the meadows of the Queen Charlottes. And you're going to see that today. And the University had strict instructions not to mow the plants before the seeds dropped. But every year they came and mowed everything. And low and behold, the seeds were [dormant] in the ground and came back when they stopped mowing. Isn't that amazing?

Arthur and I always considered the indoors and the outdoors to be one. This building really achieves the fit that you are looking for. The area is very big, it is eleven acres, and it is a park, and the park is the outdoor museum. So that when you're in the great hall, you see the mound with the totem poles, to the right and the left, all around you and you look at the totem poles in the great hall, you see that all this flows together. That is the museum outdoors.

Museum of Anthropology Revisited

Charles Birnbaum and videographer Tom Fox visit the Museum of Anthropology to continue the interview with Cornelia Oberlander. They are joined by architect, Arthur Erickson and Cheryl Cooper.

I was lucky enough to be called into the office of Stantec and Noel Best. [He] was the chief Architect there, who'd worked with Arthur [Erickson]. Arthur was present in the beginning of this [new] addition. [Noel Best indicated] we would keep on [with] the [same] philosophy of hiding the cars from the parking lot, and hiding the building as much as possible. And this allowed for the mounds to be reshaped, not as massive as they were, because the University has security issues and labor issues regarding mowing slopes that are bigger than three-to-one. Thus the new design changes reflect the mildness of the slopes and the height [restrictions] of it. But it's Okay. And then I decided that it was not good to have the mounds without trees, and I added this forest, so in times to come, this will be much better with higher trees. And the hemlock here is healthy and will be all right. And this old hemlock forest is continued down here, and around here. And this is only finished on May the 15th. So we're doing quite well. There's no irrigation out here, no drainage, no catch basins, but drainage ditches with rocks.

The picturesque is definitely a take-off on the woods that you see right here and the modern is the shapes of the mounds. And the pond and the shingle beach and the shell beach are also part of it. So I combine what I see on the site with the intervention of the modern.

Birnbaum: Well, I can't think of a collaboration that has spanned as many decades in the lower '48. It's extraordinary and we are the beneficiaries, so thank you.

Erickson: Good. [LAUGHTER]

Robson Square

When we came back from Ottawa, it was 1974, we settled back here in the house, my aunt was sitting at the kitchen table and said, “Cornelia what are you doing?” “Oh, I really don't quite know up to now I've just done many playgrounds and a few things here and there.” ” Oh, you should do big things”, she said.

The telephone rings, Bing Thom [who was] on the other line said, “Cornelia could you come to Arthur's office? We'd like you to see the three-block project.” I said, “I'd be glad to come;” I bustled down to the office and arrived at the appointed time. Bing and Arthur talked to me and showed me a *maquette* which was a vague kind of a thing. They said they might like a roof garden there. It was supposed to have been a 55-story high-rise, but Arthur laid it on its side and so it could be a park. Oh, I just looked and said “that would be great. It would be so meaningful to the city”. So Bing says “by tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock, you bring me what you think it should be”. Oh, my goodness, I wrote a two-page memo saying it must be:. if it's a roof garden, it must be accessible to everyone from zero to eighty, it must be fun throughout the seasons, it must have light, lighting to attract people, but most of all, it was important to study the weight on the roof, to introduce not soil but a growing medium, and address drainage, waterproofing, and all these things. And how did I know all this? This is the most peculiar thing. I read the *California Soil's Handbook* in which it spelled out lightweight growing medium and all sorts of things like that. So I brought that to Bing at 10 o'clock as appointed, and an hour later I had a telephone call, “when can you start to work?”

Well, Bing, “I didn't tell you, I can only work from 9:30 to 2:30, because I have all these kids. Judy is pushing off for college only is September and this is now March.” So he said, “well you come at 9:30 and leave at 2:30, we'll get you some added help.” So I entered the Holy Grail by coming at 9:30, and I began learning a lot about the planter boxes and the flying planters and all these things.

And there was even Kiyoshi Matsuzaki, who very patiently walked me through all the details. And I started to talk about the texture of the plants, I started to talk about the massing of the plants, and Arthur would always stand in the office and say, “I want it to be a lineal park.” Now, if you have a lineal park, you repeat on each level the plants. Because then it reads like a lineal park. If you had different vegetation in all these boxes, then it wouldn't do that. And I realized that right away. So they engaged some helpers for me, and the helpers didn't believe in growing medium, they said I needed this and that, and they ordered peat through the office, and I said I don't use peat, peat is something you can't renew. . .

Well, anyway, I go to China, I'm invited to come to China in October 1976, by that time it was '76. And these people [in the office] tried out every three feet another new plant while I was gone when I had told them “one plant per planter box.” The planters, flying planter, [the design called for] one [type] for the hanging gardens and one assemblage of plants for the big planter boxes, namely maple, pine, and magnolia. That was such a good idea. I come back, [they had done] every three feet another plant. So I said to Arthur, “Arthur that's not what we want. Come and sit down with me and we will do the planting.” So in October 1976, Arthur and I sat down, and we did the planter boxes, what you see today, and everything is fine. The growing medium is good, everything. I used at the time, we used W.R. Grace, Terra 200, which was a mix which they offered, but W.R. Grace doesn't offer anything anymore. . .

Arthur had definite ideas and every day everything was changed, the glass roof was changed, the light level in the courthouse was changed [by and by], they changed the rink, the bubble over the rink. I just kept going on my planter boxes and tried to find the right plant material for them in good sizes. So then I had an idea that I would plant architectural plants at one time, which meant just taxus. So Arthur comes to my desk and says “Cornelia, there are many greens”. Oh, what does Arthur mean, [I said] I better learn the plants. So I took a crash course in plant material at UBC in order to be able to deliver different greens. But the Rosa wichuraiana that is in the hanging planters at the courthouse, very nicely blooming right now, is very beautiful. I was introduced to it by Dan Kiley who used it on a stretch of the Ohio turnpike.

Birnbaum and Oberlander travel into Vancouver and visit Robson Square. The discussion of its design continues.

Yes, as you stand at the Art Gallery, you will have seen that this is a truly lineal park. You have no idea when you stand at that elevation that there are several layers of surprises as you go up to the courthouse, which we will do afterwards. You are here, now, on the top of the mound, 30 feet above the street level, and this is a path with rhododendrons that leads you to an open space. And it is secluded so that people will feel the seclusion and the openness as they come to the piazza.

Birnbaum: Tell us a little bit about the rhythm of this space and your ideas of syncopation.
You ascend the space by a staircase, and you leave the noisy Robson Street and the stairs are made in such a way that you are ascending through space, and I call it always syncopation through space, and I learned that from Larry Halprin, whose wife is such a famous dancer.

Birnbaum: And one of the things that I always find interesting . . . is this sort of melding of these ideas from both the modern and the picturesque.
Yes. The modern is certainly in the hard-paved areas, but the picturesque [is in] the re-importing of nature into the city, which was one of the most important points from the picturesque. And so what is exciting is to design something that is an oasis in the city that gives nature to the people, and yet has this modern influence.

Yes, to incorporate nature in the city is based on many readings that I have done to study the effect of greenery on people. And my guiding spirit in all of this has been E.O. Wilson, whose biophilia theory of telling us that nature, the longing for nature, is built into our cities, into our genes, [and it] is most important. And I think that is the driving force behind my work here. I also wanted to make it comfortable for people from zero to ninety or maybe one hundred. It's important to have greenery to relieve people from the stresses of their lives. After all, we are longing for healthy people and healthy cities, and so we have to have greenery.

Birnbaum: . . . one of the things that's also interesting is the stramps . . . was this an early project for you in terms of accessibility issues?

Yes, the accessibility issues in Canada came about in 1968 with a study for Ottawa. This was a very early attempt to incorporate accessibility. Now, the stramps came about that one morning, we were ninety people in Arthur's office, and Alberto from Italy had made these beautiful stairs. And I said, "Alberto, how do people get up on the stairs if they are in a wheelchair or with a

pram?" So he looked at me, and I said, "you know you've got to incorporate a goat path", and so I drew him a goat path over his stairs. And this is how the stramps came about. And then unfortunately the city demanded these stupid railings, and now we fight to keep the stramps as a historic statement, but they [the city] want us to put more railings. And you will see it's ugly. [LAUGHTER]

Birnbaum: . . .If I want to see Cornelia's hand in terms of the plant ideas, what do you tell them to look at?
You look at the planter boxes over there, with one pine, one magnolia, one maple, a Japanese, maple, and under-planting with low rhododendrons. That's [the design] for the planter boxes which you see there. For this jungle here, we have these huge rhododendrons, they were already sixty years old, and so they just need taking care of. The Photinia, one of my helpers liked [it] very much for the redness of the leaf. I could have done without [it]. And then in the quiet area which is further up, there are 'Mugo' pines, pines, Japanese maples, and gorgeous rhododendrons, white ones, gorgeous. But since they were replanted, they're not so good. *[Many plants were removed and replanted when renovations were made to Robson Square]* So in general, all my plants that I had on the plant list in 1976 are still here.

In general, I look for architectural shapes or shapes that attract the eye to be different, like a Mugo pine that grows into all directions. However, in general I choose plants that need little pruning and that bonsai themselves into the correct shapes. I will show you some of them. And I choose plants that are well-behaved, as I call them, well-behaved plants.

Birnbaum: Please speak about the blurring of the lines between the building and the landscape and your use of pendulous and hanging and climbing plants.
Yes, the plants here are hanging and also in hedge form. The hanging plants are to give you the idea that this really is Babylon. The hanging gardens of Babylon. And they inspired us to be very voluptuous. However, Semiramis, the queen [of Babylon] at the time, had lots of plants but we did one plant per hanging planter, and one plant per planter-box. So we defined these two types of planting areas very early at Robson Square, the planter boxes are filled with laurel, and the hanging planters with Rosa wichuraiana, called the memorial rose.

Birnbaum: . . . I'd like to ask you about, obviously the water is not on today, but we have seen great images . . . share, tell us about [the water].

Well, the water is to drown out the noise of the city. It would be heavenly if we had that on today. Right now it's not working because there's some repair needed, and also we [Vancouver] are very short of water, and I think they don't want to experiment with it right now. But I have photographs of it gushing. We studied the Oakland Museum. Arthur always wants water in all his projects. And the water starts where the courthouse is over there and falls down over level 170 and 150 and so forth, so it's continuous, and it's recycled. And I'm sorry it's not going today. [Water] It's one of the basics, earth, water, and fire; the three basics of human existence. And water draws you to think about where we all came from. And I think Arthur thinks that way too.

Birnbaum: Now, let's also talk about the public art that's here.
Yes, public art is, in this case, what I call plunk art. It was brought here through the wishes of the city and the Provincial Government to buy art. And it is mostly by donations. And these donated pieces were plunked onto the various levels without my sanction and I didn't like it.

Birnbaum: The thing I love about coming here is all of the site furnishings were clearly designed specifically for this place. Tell us about that.
Yes. You cannot [just] put benches or lighting fixtures into a place. In the 1974 or '76, what catalogue showed you good benches? None. So in the office was Willy Brueger, he was very capable. And one day he told me we had to have big wooden benches with big backs. I said, "Willy, it looks a little clumsy." "Oh no, Cornelia, it's not clumsy, it's good. You can sit, you can turn around, you can have your plate of food on the back of the bench, and you have a luncheon table". And so this is how this came about. And here they are. We are reconditioning them and will replace them in the same place where we had them before. So collaboration plus.

Restoring Robson Square

The interview continues at Robson Square.

Birnbaum: Why don't you tell us about the work here in terms of restoring and rehabilitating this incredible space?
This being my favorite area, I insisted that it be restored as much to the original design as possible. I had designed this area in five minutes in the office, and I can show you the little scrap of tracing paper. It's called the quiet area. People love to come out from the offices, which

are here, and sit for lunch under the trees or just look through them and enjoy the ambiance of the many trees. These trees were indexed [inventoried], this one for instance is a huge one, and they were indexed as to the structure, the health of the tree, and the possibility of lifting it out and storing it in a holding area for one year. We brought this tree back in the fall of 2006. So they have been in here not quite two years. And it was a tremendous job to get them out and get them back. When they were in the holding area, they were fed with very special fertilizer, and now they're being fed with very special fertilizer to re-establish themselves. So this area is going to be as nice in a few years as it was, and I hope people will continue to enjoy it.

Birnbaum: Tell us about the guy wires.
The guy wires are there because of storms. We don't want the tree to topple over, nor do we want [the] root ball to shift. We want the roots to be able to be quiet to establish themselves. And the arborist is very competent, and we had a team of arborists, myself, Arthur Erickson, and another landscape architect firm called Press Phillips. And in that office is a magnificent younger landscape architect called Ross Dickson with whom I worked all this out. So here I really had very competent help.

A landscape must be attractive throughout all seasons. And not just with green, but there must be punctuations with plants that have white or maybe even yellowish-white flowers. So the selection of the rhododendrons is all about that. *[Oberlander points to a particular plant]* Except these here, these are colorful, because they came from an estate, they're mauve and purple. But the purple is very strong, and it's facing towards the street, so we don't have to look at it too much. White in the landscape is absolutely delightful.

Oberlander reflects on the Robson Square project:
I think it's one of my most important projects. First of all, it is on a roof. Who in 1974 wanted a park on the roof? Nobody, in this city particularly. And it is [extends] for three blocks, and you don't feel that this is three blocks. And only because of Arthur and the whole team's collaboration could we create intimate spaces in a lineal park. I think that is absolutely phenomenal. And more over, it is attractive throughout the seasons and people come here to sit, to contemplate, to walk through, have lunch on these benches, and that, I think will be forever. And I'm hoping that the Historic Places Committee will get a Landmark designation. And as you know, I've given lots of lectures on it already, but the City Council has not yet said yes.

However, with the newly rehabilitated skating rink and what they want to do, which I'll show you later, I think that will be a change of attitude in City Hall to preserving this.

National Gallery of Canada

The [call about the] National Gallery of Canada was in 1983. I was serving on the National Capitol Commission. I was in Ottawa, and I got a telephone call, please see Mr. [Moshe] Safdie. So I went over to Safdie's office on Sussex Drive where he was working on the National Gallery. He showed me an idea. He wanted this natural landscape, and he also wanted to incorporate a *voyeur* to walk between the War Museum and the administration wing. He told me a little bit about what his ideas were, and so I wrote down what I could do for him, and the next day I had the job.

He had interviewed about forty other landscape architects, but since I was able to talk about the Taeger, which is the Northern Canadian landscape that was featured in the paintings of the Group of Seven, [a group of Canadian landscape painters] that concept appealed to him. And so I went to work to do that. I commuted between here [Vancouver] and Ottawa; there were monthly meetings if not bi-monthly meetings on it. And somehow or other, the research that I did here suited everyone. And finally in 1987 with the help of Moshe, I passed the inspection of the National Capitol Commission, because they didn't believe that Northern pines could grow in Ottawa. I had to prove that.

So then I sailed along merrily but the implementation of this job became very difficult. I was given $600,000 to do the landscape and by the time it actually came to be built, I had $375,000 left because Moshe needed this and that for the building, and so my landscape was reduced to what I call almost zilch. But I had a fantastic Project Manager; his name was Phillip Matthews, with whom I got along very, very well. And so Phillip helped me find money here and there; because I had to move rocks, I had to dig out areas where planting could take place, and it all cost a lot of labor and bulldozer time, so that needed extra funding.

To assemble the plants for this job was not easy. However, I heard of a nursery in Hope Nursery that was discontinuing their pine trees. So I got the pine trees for the Taeger garden for $40.00 apiece. And I selected each one of them perfectly because they had to look windswept. So there are the windswept pines and all the plants of the Canadian North in the Taeger

Garden. Moreover, there is a minimalist Crabapple Garden, and then there is the Winter Garden with oaks, stately pin oaks.

New York Times Building

In New York, at the New York Times, there was the Board of the New York Times, there was Forest City Radnor the renting agency, there was Renzo [Piano] and his crew, and there was Hank [White] and little Cornelia. And we were presenting the courtyard, not like Mr. Piano wanted with birch trees nine foot on center; we just had seven birches in one corner and that was possible because of the shadow and microclimatic study. That might have been a great disappointment to an architect who had commandeered birches nine foot on center. Well, we had set up in the anteroom to the board room at the New York Times a quasi-hills and dales landscape by draping moss over the chairs and then setting up quasi sticks which were the birches. And when we had finished our presentation, Renzo Piano gets up and congratulates us for the scientifically-based courtyard. Well, we were in seventh heaven.

The *palette* for the New York Times building is the true birch of the Hudson Valley, the white paper birch. They are fifty feet tall; they were picked by Hank White four years ago, root-pruned in the nursery and tagged. And the nursery took good care of them. They were delivered to the site in November 2006. And the *palette* is just nothing but hills and dales covered with moss. The birches and moss and the moss is the fern-leaf moss from my garden here, the hair-cap moss, and that was grown in Moss Acres in New Jersey.

Now [at installation] we were 500 square feet short of moss. And we needed that for the opening. So the contractor somehow found us 500 square feet, he delivered it on November 19th at 7:00 am, but we weren't there. He dumped the boxes, and when we got to the job site at nine o'clock, there was nobody to help us, so Aaron Booher and Hank White and I laid the moss ourselves. We laid the moss which is chartreuse and dark green in an abstract pattern à la Jean Arp, and it is a Jean Arp. The same curves, remember the blue and white [painting by] Jean Arp. That's what it is. So the green, the light green flows down in to a darker green at one point, and returns again. So the Jean Arp is the *palette* and the idea of this minimalist moss garden.

There are doors at both ends [of the courtyard], [at] the south end and [at] the north end. Renzo wanted very much the connection between the two. They showed us what they thought they'd like. Nobody said how [the path] would be made. So we suggested that we make it out of Ipe wood. It cuts a very beautifully a path, a floating path through the mounds. And had we been smart, we could have had a storm water management [plan] for the whole garden in that courtyard. But we weren't smart enough.

The height of the birches had to be between forty and fifty feet, because there's no photosynthesis possible further down because of the shaded quality of this courtyard. So the light that hits at forty and fifty feet is enough for the birches to grow and live. So here we were working on the courtyard with all the equipment and everything, and what do we see? A finch [was] hopping around, in November. He was beautiful. And he was eating the falling little catkins of the birches. He was so happy. And I hear there are many more birds now. So bird life is included. He was also eating the hair-cap moss; there is a seed in there.

Birnbaum: So let's talk about the roof.
We are now moving to the roof on the fifty second or fifty third floor. And the winds off the Hudson River and the East River are considerable. They sort of converge up there, and so we are using the first microclimatic study for analysis. However, there are openings in the design and they would let the wind whistle through. So we are analyzing the wind.

It [the roof] is not finished, and what are we planting? The office of Renzo Piano has a book of 1,000 trees from around the world, and [they] send us what they think they want. They wanted Cryptomeria. They wanted it, [to look] like the Baha'i Temple Haifa, [with] Cypress. My first run on this roof was to echo the Hudson Valley landscape. [To] take the maples from there, whether they are the same variety or not, but the red leafed variety, and plant just that. And you wouldn't believe it, two weeks ago, ten days ago, I got a notice from Hank that we're investigating the maples for the roof. So now the groundcover, we haven't quite decided yet. I thought of maybe wintergreen or something dark green with some berries, but we don't know yet if we're going to have a platform for the receptions, because this is a rentable space. So we are in the infancy of the roof. But ready to roll at any time.

The Waterfall Building

And then in the 1990s I finished some very wonderful buildings for Arthur, one of them is called the Waterfall building, which is the, on West 2nd, 1470 West 2nd. If you happen to drive to Granville Island, you'll see it. It has a roof garden with moss and roses, just so the tenants can have fresh air. That's another thing; the thrust is on fresh air and the green roof. If a building has a footprint, let's say of 80 {feet] by 80 [feet], and you're going up 50 stories, you must have a roof garden of the same size as your ground floor foot print, because you have to replace the [building's] biomass. I'm trying to have the City Council understand this, and all this takes an enormous amount of time.

The VanDusen Botanical Garden - Looking Forward

Birnbaum: Is there any type of landscape that you haven't gotten to design yet, or any kind of project, is there anything that you would love to do that you haven't been afforded the opportunity yet?

Well, right now I'm on something that I think is going to be fantastic, provided the government of the City and the Province and fundraisers will allow us to do it. It's a Botanic Garden for the twenty first century. I've submitted for the proposal call for the Queens Botanic Garden, and [I] did not make it because they wanted local people, and I'm here and they're there. But I had influence on that garden with my proposal, namely to make it sustainable and storm-water manageable, and allow multicultural groups to grow what they wanted to do.

I am excited about the latest project, which is the VanDusen Botanic Garden.
[I am doing it] together with an architect that is very, very socially conscious as well as environmental responsible. He in fact founded the Canada Green Council. We have [designed] this wonderful building; and the roofs will all be accessible with foot-ramps. It is my task right now to see what we will grow [on it] so that people will be able to wander on the roofs and see the whole garden at a birds-eye view. This is not easy to do because some [of the roof] is in shade, some is in the sun, and [also] we don't want people to walk to the edge of the roof. We want to concentrate them to be on the inside [spaces]. So that is what is being worked on right now. And then the big question is what do you plant? And there are new grasses that don't need mowing. [They] grow maybe this tall [Oberlander demonstrates] and only need clipping in the fall. They belong to the variety of sheep fescue. So that is a research that I'm involved in right now.

And so this garden here will feature areas where multicultural groups can learn how they can transform their lot into a garden that is edible. Also it will have Show Gardens for teaching children, and Show Gardens of water features. It [the garden] should be an environment that is therapeutic because we are entering into a densification in the city of unknown proportions, so that the thirty seven acre VanDusen Garden will be the lungs of the city.

Birnbaum: What elements would you say of your mother is in that concept?

The concept of children's education and proper education by learned educators who are trained to work with children. And what I find [is] so often is that people are not trained enough.

And the building that we have arrived at is absolutely smashing. I don't know if you are familiar with a German photographer called Blossfeldt. In 1928 he published *Basic Forms of Nature,* and I thought that if you are having a new botanic garden, you should look into that. So one night, I rummaged around this house to find my copy of *Basic Forms of Nature*, but I couldn't find it. The next morning, I emailed the idea to the office of Busby, in the office was a young architect who had rummaged through his little house the night before and found the same picture. And so we're using the picture from Blossfeldt of the orchids, the elongated one, as the [design of the] building and the structure of the roofs. So that is very exciting and I will have many green roofs, and the team is excellent, and we will march forward, and every Tuesday we have these huge conferences with everybody, but they postponed it kindly to Thursday. So Thursday, my great wish is to make the lake part of this wonderful Blossfeldt picture. But I haven't gotten there yet. So that is the future.

The End

