The Cultural Landscape Foundation®

Pioneers of American Landscape Design®

JAMES VAN SWEDEN

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviews Conducted

August, 2009

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Introduction

This transcript spans a four day interview, August 5-9, 2009, with James van Sweden conducted by Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR and documented by videographer, James Sheldon. The video begins at Halcyon House, one of the Oehme van Sweden firm's seminal projects on the Eastern Shore. This is followed by an all day interview with Mr. van Sweden at his home, Ferry Cove in Sherwood, Maryland.

Returning to Washington D.C for the third day additional interviews are conducted at the Oehme van Sweden offices. Here Mr. van Sweden is joined by Wolfgang Oehme, Lisa Delplace, Sheila Brady and Eric Groft who talk about growing the business and developing great projects with wonderful clients over the decades. On site interviews with Mr. van Sweden at several of his Washington D.C. projects complete the last day of this interview.

Childhood

Growing Up in Michigan

I'm James van Sweden. I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1935. And I lived in Michigan until I was 18 years old. I went to grade school and junior high school and high school in Michigan. My life in Grand Rapids was that of a very narrow Christian boy who could not do anything on Sunday and could do very little on other days. We couldn't dance, we couldn't play cards. We could barely listen to music. Certainly not pop music or popular music. I studied piano, and went to school and that was pretty much it. I went to church three times on Sunday; morning service, Sunday school and then the evening service. That was every single Sunday and then on Wednesday there was youth meeting and prayer meeting. And I remember once Mrs. Bultima was asked to pray in the prayer service and she turned to her husband and said to the preacher, I do the cooking, he does the praying. And that's a really Dutch statement. I mean that is so Dutch. And I never forgot it.

I went to a very nice elementary school and could walk to school. It was just a couple of blocks. And I remember walking to school in the morning and coming home for lunch. And after elementary school, I went to junior high school at Burton, which was farther away.

Grand Rapids, of course, is in the Middle West. It's just 30 miles from Lake Michigan, and what I loved to do when I was a kid was walk out the railroad tracks. It was very, very beautiful because it was agricultural land, and much of it also was meadow. The other thing was walking over the dunes of Lake Michigan which were beautiful; there were walking paths for miles. I enjoyed all the plant life in the dunes, and in the forest on the dunes and walking along the lake. My grandparents had a cottage on Lake Michigan, so I spent a lot of time in the summer at the cottage and we swam of course, and had a rowboat. Also we walked down to the pier, the Grand Rapids Pier. I did a lot of painting there. From the time I was about 15, I painted with oil, and I did an awful lot of painting at the beach, at Lake Michigan.

And then high school, I could have a car. I had a 1947 Chevy and that was a big deal, and I actually ran a taxi service. I would charge neighborhood kids that were friends of mine and earn money for gas that way, and drove to school and back.

Memories of Wintering in Florida

In the winter, we went to Florida. Actually we saw winter until about the first of January and then we didn't see it anymore for the year, because we wanted to get away. My father couldn't stand winter. He was a building contractor and he would get the houses ready for finishing and then he would leave and let his men do the finishing work on the house. Of course, by then the house was heated, so they were working inside.

My parents had a small house in Fort Myers, Florida. And we went there for as many as three months. In order to go to school, I was not good at transferring schools, I had a tutor. I remember sitting under a banyan tree with my tutor in Fort Myers; she taught me and kept me up with the class in Grand Rapids. In Florida, we fished. I didn't like to fish. I hated it, but I had to go out with my family and pretend I liked it. We also went to this beautiful garden where my grandfather was sort of the maintenance man for it. The Schaddelee Garden, which was a big estate garden, just at the edge of Fort Myers. Unfortunately, it's been destroyed, and it's now a subdivision. But it was a great influence on me. It had a beautiful arbor, beautiful pots and urns flanking the boat basin and a wonderful fish pond. The Schaddelees had actually come from Grand Rapids. They were Dutch and they came from Grand Rapids and so, they hired people from Grand Rapids, craftsmen from Grand Rapids. That's why my grandfather and sometimes my father worked for them.

In Florida we would take the mail boat that went to Captiva Island. This was before they built the bridge to Sanibel Island. And that was a wonderful adventure; sitting on the top of the mail boat. We'd pack our lunch and it took all day. We'd stop at Sanibel and Captiva Islands and just deliver the mail. And that was a great adventure. going to Florida then was like going to Africa now. It was dangerous. My mother wouldn't let us step on the floor of motels, and we'd get diarrhea [LAUGHTER] from the food. It was really very primitive. And I remember terrible living conditions for blacks, African-Americans. They lived in shacks, and I remember the women cooking the laundry in huge black pots on open fires; just unbelievable squalor. And that bothered me. My parents just looked over it or through it. They didn't acknowledge it at all. But I noticed it and it had an effect on me.

Developing a Business Sense

I guess I was always interested in business. My father was a builder, and my parents talked business a lot over the dinner table. And I myself was interested in making

money. I had, I turned my first car into a kind of bus that bussed my neighbor friends to school, and I also made money cutting lawn and shoveling snow. I had this sense, I guess it's a Dutch thing about getting to work.

Working for His Father and Grandfather

When I was 13, I started working. My parents decided I should work; my father did not like to see me sitting around. You could never get up and just sit around in your pajamas. You had to get dressed immediately. And the first thing I did for him was on Saturdays, I'd go out and sweep out the houses. He built a lot of big estate houses around Grand Rapids. And being Dutch, he wanted them to very clean on Monday morning. The worksite had to be cleaned up. So I would gather all the kindling that had been cut during the week and make huge piles of it and light it on fire and have great bonfires. And he paid me, I suppose, a dollar and a half an hour. In the summer, I would work full days with him. I'd go out with my father and my uncle. My uncle was in business with my father and we'd get in these big Chryslers and drive to the jobsite and I would cut studs. I was very bad with wood, and I hate wood to this day. I certainly hate working with wood. I was never good at it. I also did a lot of shoveling of sand and gravel and carrying shingles up to the roof in very hot weather. Hard work, from 7:00 to 5:00 every day with a half an hour for lunch, 10 minutes for coffee at 10:00 and 10 minutes for tea at 3:00. At the end of the day, what was very interesting was my father and my uncle would sit in the car smoking big cigars and they would look at the work they had done during the day. And there was this great feeling of satisfaction. They'd say things like well, the roof will be done in two days, we've got it closed in now, isn't that great. You know, we'll put the windows in next and so on. They had this great feeling of satisfaction that they'd really done something, accomplished something during the day. And I always remembered that.

I would see the architect arrive in a beautiful car and all dressed up in a suit and tie, Mr. Demon. And I thought, you know, I think this what I'd like to be. I want to get dressed

up and go to building sites like the architect. I don't want to be here shoveling sand while I could be drawing and coming in a wonderful car. And Mr. Demon would meet with my father and they would go over the details. Some of the cornices I remember had 16 pieces, very complex, and very decorative and lavish. And the houses were all custom designed and big mansions, beautiful libraries. And it took a lot of work to get them together. I remember, you know, sort of belittling my father, like most people, most sons do, and then realizing later, recently, for instance, that he and my uncle would go out with their transom and lay out an enormous house on the land, and then the house would start coming up. But I think of the talent it took to lay out a huge building like that on the land. I couldn't do it. I've never done it. And I just wonder how I could learn to do that. My father retired early at age 53.

Remembering Childhood Gardens

We had a very small garden behind our house, which I kept expanding. They were just borders around the edge. My mother hung the laundry out to dry there, so you couldn't have it all a garden. I think our garden in Grand Rapids was very simple, but one thing that impressed me very much were the lily of the valleys, we would pick a big bouquet every spring and put it in the house. Of course, they are terribly fragrant. The other thing I remember were the yellow roses. We had several yellow roses; they were beautiful and I loved taking care of them. The other plant was iris, bearded iris, which I don't particularly like now, but I know then it was impressive to me.

But our neighbor across the street, Mrs. Smith, Margaret Smith, had a beautiful perennial garden, which we admired very much. She would give me plants when she thinned things out. People traded plants all the time then. My other close friend was Margaret Holmes. Margaret Holmes was a teacher. She was a great mentor to me growing up. She was as liberal as my parents were conservative. She had a beautiful garden and her garden was a great inspiration. She had a wonderful Styrax japonica and a Kousa dogwood in front of her house. It bloomed later and was covered with flowers

and very unusual in Grand Rapids. Nobody else had a Kousa dogwood. I think that greatly impressed me. She really used her garden, and she actually worked in the garden. Her family always had coffee in the garden after dinner. My parents would never think of doing that. The other neighbor who had a wonderful garden was Maribel, Maribel Pratt. She had fabulous Clematis, beautiful Clematis, henrii Clematis, jackmanii and nellie stevens, and I remember being really impressed with those huge flowers like plates. And I love them to this day.

Appreciating the Arts

During my high school days, I played the cello, and I played it in the orchestra at South High. I'm not a musician. The piano and the cello taught me that I should not consider myself a musician. I'm a visual person and music, although I love music, and I have always gone to the symphony and opera and so on, I can't do it myself. And so I decided I had to just limit myself to the visual world and visual arts, and so that's what I've done. I love the human voice. My mother was a singer and I think that probably influenced me. My mother would sing for funerals and weddings. She'd practice in the living room before walking down the street to the funeral, or would be singing *I Love You Truly*, practicing it for some wedding on a Saturday night.

Education

Wheaton College

I graduated from South High School in 1953, and went to Wheaton College, which is a very Christian narrow place. The sign in the front of Wheaton College says “For Christ and His Kingdom”. And that's sort of pretty much it in 1950, no dancing there, banquets, but no dancing, no movies. We'd go into Chicago just with our Bibles to save the people living in the public housing projects. About two years of that and I wanted to get out of Wheaton College. I had changed. At Wheaton, I took a course in civilization, History of Civilization and I remember professor, Professor Carnes. He based the whole

history of civilization on the development of architecture through the ages. And for the first time I saw architecture as an art form and a very important historic form, and I started getting interested in architecture. My father was a building contractor, so I'd been around architects and around construction all my life, but I was trying not to be an architect because I knew that everybody around me wanted me to be one. But I couldn't help myself. The other course I took at Wheaton College was an art appreciation course, and that course taught me about art in general and also wove architecture into art appreciation. During the two years at Wheaton, I really developed my way of thinking. And I did discover who I was and what I had to do. I think that's pretty good, just in two years.

University of Michigan

I decided by the second year that I wanted to go to the School of Architecture at the University of Michigan. Of course, my parents were very happy about this and were very willing to pay for my education. I remember my parents drove me to Ann Arbor. It was a big day, a huge school, very intimidating, but I was up for the job and moved into the dorm, and had a very nice roommate. I was there for five years, and I loved it. Ann Arbor was a beautiful place. While I was at Michigan, Walter Chambers and Charlie Cares and Bill Johnson arrived from Harvard. And that was really something because the landscape program had been very, very meager and really was nothing up until that point. But once they arrived, they put together a really great program and we as architecture students started to take notice. When I decided in my fourth year that I would like to be an urban designer, my professors, Professor Sherman and Professor Sanders said “oh, you should study landscape architecture, that's a way to get a handle on urban design.” And so I applied to do my graduate work after graduating with my degree in architecture and landscape architecture.

I studied with Bill Johnson, who was a wonderful man and he's not that much older than I am, but he became a very important mentor to me. Of course, his drawing technique

is fabulous. I loved his class, and I loved learning how to draw as he drew in landscape. He was very good. Walt Chambers was teaching more technical courses, very funny, very droll and humorous. And Chuck Cares was the plants person, plants professor. We studied sort of the necessary plants, nothing special. But we did learn to identify trees. One thing I remember we thought was very funny, he was always pointing out cherry-like bark, the way to identify a cherry tree is cherry-like bark. And it became a kind of joke among the students. I remember it to this day oddly enough.

I lectured at Michigan several times in the last 30 years and Chuck Cares was always in the audience; and that was really, really a very nice tribute. I loved seeing him and remembering his classes and his dedication to his students.

Well, the University of Michigan was greatly influenced by Mies van der Rohe and Minoru Yamasaki. Gunnar Birkerts was also a professor at that time. But especially Mies van der Rohe was a big influence; a couple of the professors had worked with Mies van der Rohe's office, so they were sort of teaching the van der Rohe aesthetic of architecture.

My work was more flowery and more decorative. I used a lot of anodized aluminum. I think I was more influenced by Yamasaki unfortunately [LAUGHTER] than Mies van der Rohe. I was also influenced by Frei Otto the designer of those wonderful tent structures. I designed a theatre with Frei Otto tents. But I did a lot of gold anodized columns, which thinking back made me shudder. But that was considered really chic at that time. I had gold pencils unfortunately. [LAUGHTER]

The University of Delft

Well, my professors suggested that to get a handle on urban design, I should go to the Netherlands. I was dying to go to Europe and study, and they said well, since you're of Dutch heritage, you probably want to look for your roots. And a couple of them, I think

Bill Johnson and Stan Sherman had recently come back from Holland and they thought that I should go to the Netherlands. It was perfect place. It was central to all of Europe, and they'd been planning and doing urban design since the Middle Ages, and there were great professors there I could study with. The University of Delft was certainly one of the great universities in the world. It is considered the MIT of the Netherlands. And of course, it's in a fabulous, historic city, beautiful. And so, that's where I went. I was married just before to a fellow student, Linda Nordyke and so off we went. Her father, after the wedding, we were sitting in their living room in Ames, Iowa, and her father said to me, "I want you back here in a year, that's awfully close to Russia, you know." [LAUGHTER] We stayed three and a half years.

Linda got a job in a very large architecture firm in Delft. She was an architect. And I went to school every day and studied with Professor Cor van Eestern and Professor Froger, and Professor Jan Bijhouwer. Bijhouwer was the landscape architecture professor. He loved America, and he loved Americans. And he taught at Brown and at Harvard and at Cooper Union in his career. He's considered the most important landscape architect of the century, of the 20th century, in the Netherlands. His theory was that you just planted a garden solid with plants, like a meadow, and then wherever people walked you created paths. But you didn't design the paths until they walked and showed you where the paths should be.

He had a wonderful garden at his house, which was all American native plants that he had brought over to Holland, from the United States. We would visit him and his wife very often because they wanted to be friends with Americans even though we were students. We would go there and spend the weekend in their beautiful house. They were incredibly up-to-date people. And he became, as I say, a mentor and suggested when it was time to go back that I definitely had to go back because he thought the Netherlands was very bourgeois, small place, and that it was much better to go back to

a big country like the United States, with many climates and many kinds of people and cultures. And he was right.

Practice

Planning Work in Holland

After a year of studying with Professor Cor van Eesteren he said, "now you must have practical experience. I will get you a job at the Amsterdam planning office." And so he did. It was amazing. He had been the director of the planning office for many years and he was director emeritus. So he got me a job at the planning office and so I commuted, by then we were living in The Hague. I worked with another important man in my life, Siegfried Nassuth who was an engineer in the office. I worked very closely with him for two and a half years. I was very lucky to work with, very interesting people in my career. He and I designed the world exhibition train on the Amstel River, which goes through Amsterdam. And that drawing, is the best drawing I've ever done, I think. It's loose, it's very expressive, and it tells the whole story. It was done very quickly in pastel. And I made stamps out of erasers. We didn't have stamps then, but I made tree stamps out of erasers, just to expedite the plan. And that was pretty revolutionary at the time.

The planning office was a wonderful place. It was headed by a woman, who was an engineer, and she was very formal. She always had a big bouquet of flowers on her desk, beautiful. It was a huge office. And I remember thinking if I ever have an office, I want fresh flowers on the desk every Monday. She had designed the Amsterdam Woods, [Amsterdamse Bos] a kind of Central Park of Amsterdam. It is not central, it's more central now, but it's more on the edge of Amsterdam. I also did a project in Osdorp, which is a kind of satellite city. It was the Central Square of the satellite city, and I did three fountains and a central area that is a couple steps down. She added a sculpture of sheep sort of running along the top of the wall. And it's still there. It was quite a success.

Working for Marcou O'Leary

In 1963, February, I came back to the United States and I was looking for a job. I interviewed in five cities, in Boston, Philadelphia, New Haven, Baltimore and Washington. And the best job was in Washington and I was hired by Marcou, O'Leary. George Marcou founded the firm and he was a friend of Stan Sherman, who was my professor and who influenced me greatly at the University of Michigan. Stan at that time was at the Redevelopment Land Authority, RLA, in Washington. And he suggested that I go talk to George Marcou, that he might have a job for me. So I did and I was hired.

I really learned about dealing with people in the office from Jerry O'Leary at Marcou, O'Leary and Associates. Jerry O'Leary is a genius. I've been very fortunate in my life. I've been influenced by really great men and I'm trying to think, then there weren't that many women in the profession. But I was really, really impressed and inspired by great men, including Wolfgang Oehme. It's just been that way all the way through. I had Professor Cairns at Wheaton and Professor Steel, Bill Johnson, Stan Sherman, and then Jerry O'Leary. And then there is Wolfgang. A lot of it is just who you hook up with and a lot of it is luck.

I learned everything I know about business from Jerry O'Leary. He was very good and he included me in everything. You had to present everything that you drew. And I learned that early on from him, and I've always applied that, because I think it's important that the people who are involved in the project be involved in the presentation, too, and face a client.

I remember I was working on the West Side Highway project in New York, and I had a big team. I was 35 years old. I had a big team of 30 people, and some of them were

from the city and didn't know how to work. And they weren't producing and I suddenly decided, well, you're going to present everything that you design and next Wednesday, you're going to be in front of 500 people because these neighborhood meetings were huge. That scared them to death. So they really got to work because they would be fools in front of all these people if they didn't get the work done or if they didn't get it done beautifully and it was legible from a distance. And that was the trick. [LAUGHTER] Also, Jerry O'Leary thought that whoever was designing a project had to go to all the meetings. We were traveling all over the country, to Chicago and to St. Louis and to New York, and I went every single time and did my presentation. And so I decided when I had an office that's what we should do.

I stayed there for about 13 years. I became a partner in that firm after only a year. And we sold to Westinghouse in 1970, about six years later, which was fabulous because it gave me the money to start another business.

Meeting Wolfgang Leads to a Partnership

In 1964, at the same time as starting to work for Marcou, O'Leary, I met Wolfgang Oehme, my Professor Bijhouwer in the Netherlands told me to look up Wolfgang Oehme near Baltimore. And of course I settled very close to Baltimore. So I called up Wolfgang and we agreed to meet and he would show me some gardens he was doing, in Baltimore. He worked almost exclusively in Baltimore. And so I went over to Baltimore and we had a wonderful day of looking at gardens. And I saw how he was just scribbling plans on any old piece of paper and going out, loading up his car, a square back VW with plants, and putting them in the ground in a very artistic way. I couldn't believe it. And I remember that Pauline Vollmer, who has one of his great early gardens, said she never saw a worse plan. She didn't recognize any of the plants. And she said I can't believe I trusted him. I don't know what it was that made me trust him. Because of course she put in the garden, and it was a huge success. It's been published endlessly. And it's beautiful today. She's in her nineties and still keeping the garden going. So that was

one garden we looked at. I remember we had a very nice lunch. Then we went to see other gardens, the Adler Garden, and Shirley Rice's garden and so on. The gardens I became very familiar with over time.

And it just put a seed in the back of my head that maybe Wolfgang and I could work together someday because I really wasn't satisfied with city planning and urban design. City planning and urban design are a political process. If you ever see anything done, it's rare and it takes forever. So I thought wouldn't it be great to have a square back VW and load it up with plants and go out and actually plant them. And like my father, then at the end of the day I could look at the job and realize that I had really accomplished something during that day. So I continued until 1972.

In 1971 I bought my house in Georgetown, and I asked Wolfgang to do the garden with me. And that garden became quite famous very quickly. It was published right away. And nobody had ever seen a garden that looked quite like it. One of our principles was to use big plants in little gardens, not pretty pretty, but very dramatic. And so the garden's really dramatic and very interesting. I did a lot of entertaining. Landscape architecture is a very social profession, and you've got to entertain all the time. I had parties after concerts. I had parties after art openings. And people came to my house. They were stunned. They found the garden absolutely stunning. I had five clients in no time. The minute I announced that I was going to practice landscape architecture, which was in 1975, I had five clients right away because everybody was ready to have a garden like mine. And that's how it started. So we formed a partnership first and then incorporated in 1977. In 1977 the Federal Reserve called. We had a ten-page spread in the Washington Star, including the cover of the magazine. And the next day the Federal Reserve called.

The Launch of Oehme van Sweden

The interview continues with Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden in the Washington D.C. offices.

van Sweden: [We] hired Sunny Scully. She was our first employee. Now she's judging competitions for the ASLA. But she was our first employee. She got us to really do drawings, you know, real drawings, working drawings, and to detail very carefully on the drawing brick patterns and so on. But I answered the phone. I wrote the contracts. Wolfgang did most of the design of planting at home. And we didn't have computers then of course, we did all the drawings ourselves. And we had Sunny, but otherwise we didn't have any employees until we hired a draftsperson. Mary Villeray.

van Sweden: Well, first we were over a dress shop.

Oehme: You could buy dresses. . . .

van Sweden: That was at 3109 M Street. We were there. We could have five people there. So we were there for about four years and then we bought this building in 1987. The bank.

van Sweden: We had done the Federal Reserve garden and we were doing major residential gardens.

Developing a Design /Build business

Design/build came from Wolfgang because he was doing it way back in the 50s when he first arrived from Germany. Nobody wanted to pay for a plan, but they would pay for plants. So he found that the best way to do that was to actually put in the gardens himself. Well, it turns out I think that this is great way to control the design. And I think of landscape architects as sculptors. Certainly I think of us as sculptors. And I've always enjoyed putting the garden in after drawing it. It's much more immediate and it gives you control of the design. And obviously things don't go in like they are on the drawing.

When you're on the site you see things that inspire you and you change the drawing, change the design.

If you design a garden, you want to be involved in its planting and building. Now we don't build the hardscape. We contract that. But we do supervise it very carefully and make sure it's done exactly as we want it to be done.

The New American Garden

The New American Garden concept came into play in about 1980 when Marc Cathey, who was the Director of the National Arboretum, named it the New American Garden. We did the New American Garden at the Arboretum in 1981, that's when it started. Of course, our gardens were called many things like the laissez-faire garden, the low-maintenance garden, gardening for all seasons. There are all kinds of titles. But the one that stuck was the New American Garden because no one had ever seen anything quite like it, and we were using perennials in a kind of meadow-like way that was very different from what anybody else was doing. Wolfgang would take off his glasses or not consider the scale of the drawing. And I'd said, for instance, at the Federal Reserve I said, Wolfgang, that's 5,000 Rudbeckia goldsterm. Good he says. [LAUGHTER] He'd taken off his glasses and totally forgot the scale. And so when it was put in, he put in 5,000 Rudbeckia goldsterm, it's very dramatic. It was amazing. And nobody could believe their eyes.

New American Garden style was definitely inspired by paintings, and especially the paintings of Hans Hoffman and Helen Frankenthaler. And I was always interested in paintings and visited galleries all the time. And those painters really influenced me. And I think you can see how a Helen Frankenthaler painting can be a metaphor for a garden of any scale. And I think that was very important for the New American Garden. I also think that my experience in Michigan walking through meadows and through the landscape of Michigan, along those railroad tracks, had a great deal to do with it.

Wolfgang was influenced by Karl Foerster, who first used ornamental grasses. I was influenced by Mien Ruys, the Dutch landscape architect, and Jan Bijhouwer who was my professor at Delft. And all worked together to create this style, which was very different from any other garden in America. And it included no lawn. I started promoting no lawn. And the first client that gave us the carte blanche go-ahead for no lawn was Jerry Littlefield, who was a very close friend of mine. He and his wife bought a house in Wesley Heights in Washington in a very conservative neighborhood. And they gave us carte blanche to do anything wanted. And so we took out all the lawn in the front of the house. It was a very nice, but traditional house. And it was quite revolutionary to have no lawn in the front. And that was really the first time. And then Pauline Vollmer decided to let us take all of her lawn out as well. So those were the first times we didn't have lawn in front of the house. And believe it or not, the garden in Wesley Heights was pulled out by the next owners. [LAUGHTER] And lawn was put back in.

Enjoying Your Work

van Sweden: Oh, we have lots, we always had fun. We never took it too seriously. We always say don't take yourselves too seriously because then you don't have any fun and you don't create really fabulous gardens. You've got to relax and laugh. We always laugh, because clients are very funny. It can be painful, but it's like a hangnail.

Oehme: When the woman came, visiting or something, and said what is that plant? I need it. I love it. It's dancing around. Where can I get that? the husband was standing there. He thought it was too much or too something, taking over too much.

van Sweden: Well at one point he said I can't see the paths.

Oehme: I said move the house. . What is more important? The stupid house or your garden let the garden grow.

Oehme: The main thing is that we get so much enjoyment out of whatever, so much fun out of it. Excitement.

van Sweden: And it's fun to bounce ideas off each other. That's important in a partnership. And we always did that. That's what makes life worth living, right? And I never thought of being paid for anything. I say that to the people here. I say what a wonderful way to go through life. Never looking for a paycheck, never expecting to be paid. You're having so much fun that the last thing you expect is money, a paycheck. That's the way to live.

Reflecting on Practice

I think my favorite projects over the years and I've thought a lot about this, I think one was Rockefeller Park in New York, the fact that it is in New York and they take such good care of it. Another of course is the Chicago Botanic Garden. Then a private garden would be the Rosenberg garden. My own garden in Georgetown, which is gone now but which I enjoyed for 38 years, was also a very important project in my career. There have been many private gardens. Some stand out. Of course, that's the value of writing books because you're forced to decide what are the signature works that you want to include in the book and usually it's a period of about five years and it's amazing how many jobs you get done in five years. In those jobs there's always high points that you want to include. So the books really chronicle the most important jobs.

I think it's very satisfying to design for the public. Private gardens are a place where you can experiment and try out your ideas, but in a public garden you've got to get it right the first time and its fun to think that you're working for the masses instead of just for a private couple or family.

I love going and changing scale in a design room. Going from a small Georgetown garden, tiny, just maybe 40 feet square, to an 80-acre garden for the public. It's

wonderful. I think that's one of the wonderful things about this profession, changing scale like that sometimes within an hour or a morning. Just working in various scales and understanding the problems of scale from the smallest to the largest.

Developing a Design Philosophy

Craftsmanship

I've always loved craftsmanship. I may not like to work in wood, but I always worked in clay. I'd build puppets, for instance, with clay and wood. And my father was a great craftsman. And I admired the beautiful things he and my uncle would do. Everything was done by hand then. I mean, they didn't have cabinets that were pre-made. They built kitchens from scratch of oak or birch or cherry, and libraries and beautiful bathrooms. Cabinets, all the cabinets were made from scratch. And I admired this very much. And I think it's carried over to my work as a landscape architect, because I really enjoy doing the construction, not building the gardens myself, but designing well-crafted gardens and garden furniture, cabinets and kitchens outside and so on. And I think that came from my youth. I'm thinking this as we go, because it's interesting, I hadn't thought of that [LAUGHTER], but it's true.

The Dutch Attitude

[LAUGHTER] Well, I think I'm accomplishment oriented [LAUGHTER] because of my family. I mean, in my family, you have to be doing. You're a doer. You can't be depressed. If you're depressed, you're not working hard enough. That's kind of the Dutch attitude, m parents' attitude. There was no time to be complaining and looking down. You looked up and you worked hard. Hard work was it.

I think the older I get, the more Dutch I become. And just looking at this landscape outside the window, the flat and the rain, it's very Dutch. It's amazing. And then even the garden was inspired by a Dutch landscape architect, Mien Ruys who died about five

years ago in her 90s. I knew her quite well in the Netherlands, and she was an influence on me. As far as garden design, she had a fabulous garden and she sat in a pigsty. She turned a pigsty into her country house, and she painted the floor cobalt blue. And that's why I painted the floor in the guest house [at Ferry Cove], because I said, if I ever have a second home, I'm going to have a cobalt blue floor, and an Eames chair sitting on it. I moved the Eames chair into this house, but it used to be in the guest house sitting on a cobalt blue floor. So I think the older I get, the more I look back at the Netherlands. And of course, I had the experience of living in the Netherlands. Maybe we can't get rid of our roots so easily.

Lessons from the Netherlands and Other Travels

While we were there [the Netherlands] we traveled constantly. We went to all these wonderful cities like Gouda and Haarlem and studied the urban design, the paving. And we also looked at paintings in all the museums. Because if you look at the floors in a Delft painting, excuse me. If you look at the floors in a Vermeer painting, they're just incredible. And I've used their design in terraces. Also the proportions of these squares are important. And I was interested in studying the proportion of the outdoor, the urban spaces of the Netherlands. They were of course small by American standards. But they could be applied to even residential scale. Materials were very important, very beautiful. .. . I think what I was looking for in the Netherlands was proportion, and these public spaces are so beautifully proportioned. I've tried to articulate what proportion means in my design. And I think it's the most important factor in a design. It's also the most difficult to get a handle on. I think you have to look at many gardens and analyze them carefully with a critical eye. Not only the gardens you designed, but gardens that other people have designed and historic examples, and decide why the proportions are good or bad or perfect, and then experiment and actually do it, and then look back at it very critically.

And then we traveled all over Europe. We went to Paris. We went to France. We took an eight-month tour at the end to Italy, Yugoslavia and Egypt, Greece and Egypt. I remember we really did our research and we wanted to see everything. We were driving a Volkswagen that we bought. And we were determined to see everything we could.

Paintings Train the Eye

There's so much you can learn from Dutch paintings; for instance, proportion of living rooms and interiors, also the activities that are going on in these spaces. There are wonderful paintings of outdoors. I know one painting that greatly impressed me was [Jacob van] Ruisdael's *Jewish Cemetery at Odekirk.* It's actually, it's in the Detroit museum. I have seen the painting but I've also seen the cemetery, and it's very much like the painting even though it's three or four hundred years ago that it was painted. There are wonderful gardens in Dutch paintings. And although they're very traditional, they have a lot to teach you about pathways and materials. There are arbors and ornaments that were used in 17th and 18th century Dutch gardens; the gardens are long gone, but the paintings exist. The museums in the Netherlands are just full of paintings of the Netherlands in the 18th and 17th century, and they are very, very, very important to study. There are paintings by Pieter de Hooch, a 17th century painter. I have used a design of a terrace and courtyard garden, for instance, in a garden in Georgetown. It's a checkerboard pattern of yellow and red, yellow brick and granite. It's a wonderful combination of materials. Now you can get yellow brick in the Netherlands. It's made in a certain province of the Netherlands. You can't really get yellow brick here. So I used Pennsylvania bluestone and a kind of pink brick in Georgetown and it's a huge success. The museums in the Netherlands are just full of paintings of the Netherlands in the 18th and 17th century, and very, very, very important to study

Lessons from Japan

I went to Japan four times, and the first time was in 1983. There's something about Japan that's just gripping, and I loved it. I fit right in and, to my surprise, I liked it more than I ever thought I would, and it changed my design life because I learned so much about design from Japan, not about planting design necessarily, really, although there are some things about planting design in Japan that are very interesting and very inspiring.

I learned so much about water. The bigger the water feature, the better the garden, I've found. I saw gardens in the city of Tokyo where almost the whole garden was water. The lily pool was so big that it filled most of the space, say two-thirds of the space or more, and this was a very good lesson because I was designing water too small and outside water should be big, and this was very important. I learned a great deal about proportion in Japan. The Japanese are so sensitive, so aesthetic, and everything they do is carefully thought through. I learned about proportion and detail and materials and where materials lead and how they lead. It was the most important trip I had taken up to that point, and I had traveled a lot. But I stayed a month, and then I went back three more times, I wanted to see Japan in every season.

The first time, in '83, it was the fall, so the Japanese maples had their fall color. They were beautiful. And then I went in winter, and I went in the spring, for cherry blossoms. I never went in the summer because it's terribly hot, and so I didn't want to be there in summer, but I went in three seasons, and each time I learned a lot.

I saw different parts of Japan. I took lots of photographs. One time I was there at Christmas and it was raining every single day for four weeks, and I was traveling with my friend, Barbara Woodward, and I said to Barbara, one morning, I said I am going to take the most beautiful pictures of Japan in the rain that anyone has ever taken, and with that we went out with my Hasselblad. She held the umbrella and I shot for four weeks, and the pictures are absolutely dazzling. They're just beautiful, and everything is

glistening and the materials, the stone has so much color and luster, and the planting is beautiful and the wood is fantastic. I mean everything about those gardens was wonderful, and there's nothing like rain on a lily pool. It was beautiful, nothing like seeing a garden from under the umbrella. It was absolutely lovely, and I couldn't wait to get back each time, I would love to go back again sometime. I really, I miss Japan.

It's a sort of drug-like intoxicating place. Of course I love cities and there's nothing more urban than Japan. This screen that you see behind me is a banner. They hang those from bamboo poles at the temples, and I never could find one in Japan, but I found this, the one you see here, in Bethany Beach, which is about 100 miles from here. I bought it years ago and found its perfect spot here in this house. And I couldn't imagine anything better, and it reminds me of Japan. I have a lot of things from Japan because I love the crafts so much.

Accepting Change

Well, if it's like Georgetown, my Georgetown garden, I walked away and never looked back. And I think that garden lives through the photographs in the books and I think this garden [Ferry Cove] will live through photographs as well. I don't think that there's a chance it'll be saved unless someone who's really interested buys it. It's a very personal expression and it could never survive as it is or as I would keep it, because of that personal quality that it has, and just my hand on it all the time. I think that's the thing.

Pershing Park on Pennsylvania Avenue, right across from the Treasury, right after the beginning of Pennsylvania, was designed by Paul Friedberg originally and then we were asked to do the planting over. The Pennsylvania Planning, Pennsylvania Avenue Redevelopment Corporation was unhappy with the planting. And of course, Wolfgang and I were eager to redo it. Luckily, Paul Friedberg liked it eventually. [LAUGHTER] He didn't like it at first. But it was really dramatic. And we also planted the water. Nobody thought of planting the water. We used plants that I was inspired by Roberto Burle

Marx to use, such as water canna, salmon colored, and papyrus, and that kind of thing, which really made the water much more interesting. It was amazing that no one had done that. And we really turned it into a real garden, including the water and all the planters which were [planted] with cascading grasses. [It was] very soft, we softened all the stone and it became lush and very gardenesque. I'm not sure if Paul Friedberg is interested in the gardenesque, but he has come around.

Learning by Doing

I think today students, the graduates, should travel. That's one of the most important things. Spend several months traveling and looking at gardens. That's how you learn. The other thing is learn to photograph so you can record and you can help your memory. And then, learn to write. After that, start building and designing, it's the most important, don't worry about more degrees. Just get out there and work and build and then look at your work critically with a very critical eye and learn that way.

Giving Back to the Community

We've done many public housing projects, which has improved the housing for people. For instance, Paradise Manor in Washington D.C. was in unbelievable squalor and a drug center. My friend Marilyn Melkonian, who is a developer and a housing lawyer, bought it. We renovated it, she renovated it, with Suman Sorg as the architect and me as the landscape architect. We did beautiful gardens. She believes in landscape for everybody but especially for public housing, because she thinks if you have a beautiful landscape, people will respect the design and the place. We also did the Ellen Wilson project in Washington, and another project in Louisville where all the housing, there were several hundred units, were renovated.

I remember at Paradise, that there was a lady who came out when we were looking and photographing it, who said she had to admit that she planted kale and brussel sprouts in the borders. She was wondering if I minded. And I said “oh, no, I think that's great, I

think the more you do that, the better." She was afraid that Wolfgang Oehme would object and I said "oh, no, he has a big vegetable garden of his own, he won't mind." She also was hiding a little poodle. You weren't supposed to have dogs, but she was hiding a poodle. So I told Marilyn, and we all laughed and of course she could have her poodle, and she could have her vegetables. [LAUGHTER] And that's a very beautiful project and it's been going on for more than 20 years, and it's a great success. And Marilyn has managed through rents, money left over after she pays all the bills, to send something like 100 kids to college. She's truly a visionary and does wonderful things for people. She also brought all the people in Paradise into the city to have a big buffet at the Hay Adams Hotel, because she wanted them to see, they'd never been to the center of the city. She wanted them to see what a major hotel is like, right at the center of their city.

Mentors and Muses

Mien Ruys

A great influence on me was Mien Ruys who was working with grasses at the time. I'd never seen grasses, ornamental grasses used in the garden, until I saw them in the Netherlands. She was the landscape architect who was using them. She had a big office in Amsterdam and was doing huge projects. One time I visited her and she had done a plan, it looked like needlework. She put a symbol down for each kind of plant and she said there were 70,000 plants in this garden. And I don't know how many cultivars, but it looked like a needlepoint rug, and of course, Mien never looked at the drawing. But in the Netherlands, she had to show things exactly as they were.

Karl Foerster

Karl Foerster was the first. . . he was a nurseryman. He was the first person to design with grasses and became very famous because of that. He found that grasses could be used in an ornamental way and he was on a train, going to Denmark when he saw Calamagrostis growing along the railroad tracks. And he pulled the chain and stopped

the train and got out and pulled out the grass and that's, Calamagrostis, Karl Foerster. And now it's widely used, I mean, everybody's using it. It's beautiful, very wheat-like, it's very straight and vertical. But he used all kinds of grasses.

I visited his garden in Potsdam shortly after the Wall came down and visited Karl Foerster's wife, who was still living then, had tea and looked at the Karl Foerster garden, which was very beautiful. It was perennials, Japanese maples, grasses, and it had lovely lily pool in the middle. It was simply wonderful and a great inspiration.

Roberto Burle Marx

Now another person who was inspired by Karl Foerster was Roberto Burle Marx. I visited Roberto in 1987 for three weeks, and that was sort of a design life changing experience. It was simply wonderful. Roberto was effusive in his description of his gardens and he took me into the mountains to see several private gardens, and we also went to his house for a big Sunday party that he had every two weeks.

Of course he used perennials and what we would consider annuals in great sweeps and paisley shapes and talked sex all the time. [LAUGHTER] There was a woman doing a video, she was from California. She was doing a video for public television of him and she couldn't get him to stop talking about sex. And she would say, Roberto, we can't use this on family television. [LAUGHTER] And that's all he would do. So it was very difficult. But he had a wonderful party and actually his cook made all these lovely desserts, beautiful desserts. And I used a picture of the dessert table in my book, *Architecture in the Garden.* It was a wonderful time, and he was very generous. He had about ten people for lunch at a huge table. And in the middle was a bouquet of plantains, just a beautiful sculptural bunch of plantains. Everything he did was dramatic. For the party he painted all the tablecloths himself. And so everybody had an original Roberto Burle Marx. And you had to buy lithographs from him. You had to take him scotch, but you had to also buy. So he would pull out his artwork and you were

expected to buy at least two if not more. [LAUGHTER] And I bought two. We had them on the wall in our office in Washington and we had a robbery, and that's the only thing of value that they took.

One day we spent the day going to Petrópolis and we looked at the Montero Garden, which is one of his major works, and three or four other gardens. And they were hard to describe, they were beautiful in detail. They were wonderful in proportion, and very dramatic in plant design. And very much like our work, large scale, thinking on a big scale, and using hundreds and thousands of the same plant in certain areas, which is exactly what we were doing.

Beth Chatto

Beth Chatto**,** is a nursery person, and she has a very beautiful garden north of London, one of the most beautiful gardens I'd ever seen up to that time. And I've followed her garden for many, many years. It's still there and she's still there. But it involves water, she has huge ponds and it's very beautifully done. She's experimented over the years with plants and although she's not trained as a landscape architect, she's done incredible things with that garden. It's one of my favorites. Yeah. And she calls me Jimmy.

Martha Schwartz and Peter Walker

Well both Pete and Martha are great friends and Martha is a great inspiration to me. Pete is, too, but I think Martha is such a freethinker. We've lectured together and we've had lots of fun doing it. Huge audiences and it's been very rewarding. And whenever I would get stuck when I was designing a project, I think now what would Martha Schwartz do?

And you'll see that tomorrow. It doesn't look anything like Martha Schwartz, but just skewing the lily pool 30 degrees in the Sullivan garden, instead of having it parallel to

the house or the fences made all the difference in that design. You know, just set up a tension that, and I probably did that because I asked myself what would Martha do? Because I think of her as such a crazy free thinker and I wanted to be crazy myself at times; I can't be like she of course, but it worked out.

We worked beautifully together on the stage, because my work is as planterly as hers is sculptural, so we're perfect together. We lectured together at the University of Michigan and we also lectured in Australia together. It's interesting, in Michigan, they decided that we would do a brown bag lunch and so we thought it would be like a seminar, you know, 10 or 20 people. Four hundred people showed up. They had to move it to a major auditorium. And we were standing there saying what are we going to say to these people? [LAUGHTER] We didn't expect anything like this. And I said well, why don't we just answer questions? And so we did. But Martha's important and Pete is great. He's an inspiration, too, because of his beautiful hardscapes. They're wonderful people, just amazing.

Elements of Design

Water in the Landscape

I guess I was definitely influenced by walking along the canals of Amsterdam and Delft. I lived on a canal in The Hague., a very beautiful canal close to the American embassy. And water was just so much a part of life in the Netherlands that you just kind of took it for granted. It was beautiful, it was reflective, but it was also dangerous because at that time, canals were badly polluted and if you fell in, you died. [LAUGHTER] And so you respected the edge and you made sure your bicycle did not go into the water. You had to be very careful. But on the other hand, the beauty was always there. And that's another thing that came out on the paintings. The Dutch of course painted water, and those paintings are incredibly beautiful. Reflective, and it was, water was used for so many purposes, including just busing or transporting people across, at ferries. Now

there are bridges, but then there were boats, and there are still many boats on the canals.

Color in the Garden

And as far as our work goes, we were rarely concerned with how color went together. Wolfgang and I always thought that colors just sort of, all colors were good and very rarely did we ever have to move something. Sometimes purple would be next to a hideous orange and we'd have to move a plant. But we never really worried about color. We worried more about texture, height and achieving drama in the garden with plants, but not so much about color. We just let the colors flow and the colors do their thing, unless it was really so hideous that the client called and said, you know, we can't stand these colors together. But that only happened maybe once or twice, I don't remember it happening very often.

We use a whole plant list of grasses, and of course grasses are various shades of green. And green is very restful. And I think more than the flowers, we were concerned with the plant itself and green, the size of the leaves and the texture of grasses and how they all went together. If there were flowers, that was fine. But I think the green and the texture was more important than the flowers.

Painting with Plants

Well, I think the plant list came from photographs more than anything else. We had piles of photographs, and now with the computer it's even easier, because you can plug in and get whatever you want. But that's really how we trained; we always had pictures of every plant. And when we presented to the client, we presented photographs of every plant. It was hard to describe how everything would go together, but by placing the photographs sort of next to each other, we were able to give a feeling for what was happening. Of course, we never knew, the client never knows until the garden goes in and they finally see it. But for us, like a painter, it was more of an intuitive work. We

just felt it. And I think that's what's happening now in the office that people who are familiar with the plants know how to use them and know what's going to happen over time. And so it's just a kind of gut reaction. And that's what makes the garden really spontaneous and wonderful and surprising.

Light as a Medium

Light for me is a great inspiration and very important in the landscape. I love the idea that a garden is like stained glass, that when you see the sun behind the planting, it lights it up. It happens here behind the swimming pool because the Rudbeckia maxima has a very glassy-like feeling when the sun is behind it. And of course, as the sun moves over a garden, things change constantly. Gardens are always changing anyway. That's what gives them the ephemeral quality they have. Light is certainly part of that, and a very important element in the design. I think you understand light better if you do photography, actually. I think that's one way of learning about light. And looking through the lens early in the morning or late in the evening is very important for understanding how light is working with your planting.

Well, of course, the Dutch painters were famous for their use of light and the way they paint, Vermeer and Ruisdael, it's light that, the Dutch light that gives their paintings luminosity and the glow. And if you live in the Netherlands, that's one thing you learn. That is actually the light of the Netherlands. It's very far north. The sun comes out and lights things up in a very dramatic way, and it's just amazing how luminous things become in the Netherlands. And so in order to understand Dutch paintings, you really have to go live in the Netherlands for awhile, or at least spend some time there. And then you can appreciate what we're seeing out the window here, this kind of glow.

Serendipity

Well, this garden [Ferry Cove], this kind of garden, is certainly a good example of serendipity. Because it's mine, I wanted it to just develop in an explosive and natural

way, and serendipity is welcome because I love that, the surprise. You can put in a garden, but it takes off on a plan of its own. And I don't think it's good to control it too much. I can't afford to control this completely. I mean it would cost a fortune in nursery fees, but I love the idea that things are seeding among the others and some plants are taking off and others are sort of receding. The more flexible you can be, I think the better in doing a garden, especially a garden like this which is more meadow like and more free form.

Maintaining the Legacy

Photography

I have a designer's eye, so it was easy for me to transfer that to the camera and looking through the camera and composing pictures. I had to learn the technical part of the camera, and for that I asked a friend of mine, Volkmar Wentzel, who is a photographer. He's now gone, but he was a photographer for many, many, 50 or 60 years, at the National Geographic, and he went out with me, with my Hasselblad, and taught me how to use it. I loved the Hasselblad. It was a square format and took fabulous pictures, and it really became part of my hand and my eye. I could just feel what it was going to do for me. Depending on the light I could read the light and know how to set the Hasselblad.

Photography is very expensive, so it's important for landscape architects to learn how to use the camera themselves, not that you can take all of the pictures yourself. My literary agent, Helen Pratt, told me when I was starting to write books, that I shouldn't take all the pictures myself. It's too incestuous to just look at our gardens through my own eyes, that you needed the aesthetic of different photographers looking at it. But I did take I would say probably a third of the pictures. But we've had some wonderful photographers photographing our work and they've taken some marvelous pictures.

Teaching

For ten years I taught at La Napoule, which is a castle built on Saracen foundations about five miles from Cannes, France. I worked there with John Brooks, who taught mainly English speaking students, but we had classes in garden design, and we were there for three weeks each summer. We also had buses take us out to look at gardens and we saw many gardens around Cannes, and it was an incredible experience. It was fabulous. The Mediterranean is beautiful. The castle was beautiful, and the students were very interesting and the food, of course, was fantastic [LAUGHTER], and we just had fun and we talked about design had everything from a woman who didn't even know what side of the T square to draw with, to landscape architects who came just to be in France and have conversations with John Brooks and me. In every way it was very satisfying. John Brooks is a very close friend. He's written many books, and I was a great admirer of his designs. And I think we both learned from each other. He has a great sense of detail, use of materials, and also a great design sense, use of plants.

Writing

I don't consider myself a very good writer, but I think under pressure, I write very well. I have to be really pressured and my editor at Random House used to be Jason Epstein, and I was terrified of him. And he signed a contract for us to write a series of three books. And I'd never written for him before, and he said he didn't want to see anything until everything was finished. He didn't want to see any images ever, and he didn't want to see the writing until it was all done. So you can imagine how scared I was. I submitted the manuscript of *Gardening with Water* and he wrote me a letter just two lines, saying how fabulous he thought it was. He said I have a few minor comments you can take if you want or just ignore them. And so I had the letter framed. [LAUGHTER]

Public speaking

I found that I was very shy when I was 35 years old or 40, and I found that the more people, the better. I loved talking to huge audiences. I went all over the world. I went to Australia. I went to Netherlands. I went to Sweden. I went to Australia twice. I learned a lot about myself just as a public speaker, and also in articulating my design philosophy. And answering questions from the audience and signing books. It's a heady trip. It's great.

Interview with Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden

Wolfgang Oehme joins the interview on the third day in the Oehme van Sweden offices. The conversation continues as Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden reflect on their years of practice.

The Vollmer Garden

Oheme: It's a long history. A friend of mine had recommended [me] to Pauline [Vollmer], and so we talked. She said I need to make some changes or whatever. She got tired of,… she had some roses with black spot and all these chemicals. She's a big garden club lady. Top federated garden clubs. So I got there and talked to her and we did [the garden] sort of piecemeal, not the whole thing at once. So I experimented with all kinds of things. They wanted also a fish pond. He wanted a fish pond, so we always were moving things around. . . .. In those days we came in every month or whatever to spray everything. We just sprayed your whole garden. Of course it drifts. It's a good-sized lot, but you know how it is. So she said, " oh no, in this neighborhood [we] don't spray our fish". It was a constant battle, but she was great. As I said, she gardened big time. She always had parties at her house. [She had] different garden clubs, I had to give talks almost every week.

van Sweden: She still has parties all the time. At age 93.

Oehme: The American Hort[icultural] Society came [to the area]. They stayed like a whole week or whatever. And they went to different gardens. Kurt Bluemel, he was big time with the [American] Hort[icultural] Society. People said they never seen a garden anywhere like this. This is a jewel or whatever. He said it was nice and cool and relaxing... Right in the middle of the city.

van Sweden: Anyway he showed me the Baltimore garden [the Vollmer garden]. That's the first garden we went to.

Oehme: Yeah, the first garden we went to. You said you wanted to do something like that.

van Sweden: Yeah, I was amazed. And of course I was stuck in the city planning firm.

German American Garden

Oehme: And we couldn't get permits or whatever. . Finally we [appealed] to the embassies, to the German embassy and they got Paul to deal with Reagan. Reagan said I want missiles from Germany and Paul said I need a garden].

van Sweden: It's true.

Oehme: We made a deal. It's true. And we changed missiles for plants.

van Sweden: And the Germans wanted a huge sculpture of Adenauer in the garden. [LAUGHTER] [J.] Carter Brown said no. [LAUGHTER] He said all the buildings on Constitution Avenue along the Mall and along the Mall are dressed in tuxedoes. And he

was so eloquent. He said we had to keep this very, very formal and grasses are too wild and relaxed.

Oehme: He said it looks like unkempt beards.

van Sweden: I loved Carter Brown. I miss him so much, but it was very funny,

Birnbaum: How did you get the approvals ultimately?

van Sweden: Carter Brown had an envelope in his hand and he said this is from the President of the United States. And he said we will now go into, what did he call it, plenary session? Where they leave the room and they came back and said it's approved, because Reagan said approve it. It's the only second time. - Roosevelt did it for the Jefferson Memorial. They wanted, the Fine Arts Commission wanted a modern building by Eero Saarinen, and President Roosevelt stepped in and said no, this is the design. And the same thing happened to the German American Friendship Garden. [LAUGHTER]. It needs refreshing right now.

Oehme: And everybody came for the [opening?].

van Sweden: Yeah, including my mother. [LAUGHTER]

van Sweden: Well, we had the dedication at the White House. The President didn't come down to the Mall.

Oehme: Just waved. Oh, Mrs. Kohl, she came.

van Sweden: But we designed the fountains and the paving, and it's been a big success. People can cool their feet.

Oehme: Oh, yeah, the kids go in there naked, in the fountains, like in Germany.

Wolfgang Oehme on plant material

Oehme: Well, I mean all the great American plants that didn't exist in America, like Black-Eyed Susan and Joe-Pye weed, the switch grass and stuff like that. I mean native [plants], I had to import them from Germany.

van Sweden: They didn't sell them in nurseries.

Oehme: No. It didn't exist in those days. They [were considered] weeds, like field plants or whatever you call them.

van Sweden: Oh, yes, now everybody's using [them]. So they're much easier to get. And we can have things specially grown, especially if we use [UNINTELLIGIBLE] masses. They'll grow a lot of plants for us.

Oehme: You can get seeds too now . . . propagations [is] easier.

Wolfgang Oehme and Teaching

Oehme: Yeah, I was teaching at the University of Georgia, but I didn't want to stay in Georgia. I stayed for a few months. I taught the first master's degree graduates . . . they didn't know anything. It was in '65 I think it was. I had met Hubert [Bond Owens] in one of these IFLA meetings in Switzerland. Yeah. . . . . I remember I was teaching in Pennsylvania and he had to check things as far as the teaching is concerned.

Birnbuam: You were teaching at Penn? {University of Pennsylvania]

OEHME: [yes] at Penn.

Birnbaum: Under Ian Mc Harg

Birnbaum: How did you get along with Mc Harg? What was that like?

Oehme: Oh [UNINTELLIGIBLE] great.

Birnbaum: Tell us about that. I mean what was it like to work with him?

Oehme: [OVERLAPPING VOICES] he's the guy, big guy [LAUGHTER]

van Sweden: Yeah, yeah, big picture.

What Makes a Good Client

van Sweden: Of course a great client also loves to garden and knows plants like Pauline [Vollmer]. That's very important. It's very rare to find something that will do that.

Oehme: And she's always out there, too. Dusting.

van Sweden: Most Americans never go outside. It's going to be too hot. There might be a bug. They do not go outside. We did a garden in New York, in Westchester County, the client would poke her nose out the doors, it was a huge property, 45 acres, a beautifully garden, incredible garden. One day she said, Jim, when is this going to look like something? I said, well, it's beautiful [now]. I'm photographing it. It was unbelievable. She said there's still mulch showing. I said it's nice to see a little mulch here and there, you know? Negative space. [LAUGHTER]

Oehme: . . . mulch garden.

van Sweden: But they were perfect clients because they did not meddle in anything. They didn't know what they were getting. They just gave us total carte blanche and it was excellent. It was a lot of fun. That was a very good project.

Birnbaum: What part of the process for both of you makes you the happiest? Are you happiest if you're planting, or if you're drawing or if you're writing? In terms of the whole creative process, if you could say this makes me the happiest?

Oehme: Designing too. You fiddle around with it, on with it. Play with it, come back and maybe do something, change it. … But planting, once you put it in, you have a limit- but on paper you don't see the whole site, you see this piece of paper. But when you're out there, it should go this way or that way. You just do it.

van Sweden: And the most fun is when you sweep at the end and everything is cleaned up.

Karl Foerster and the winter garden

Oehme: I only met him a couple times when I was, what, 20 or something. I was [caught up in school there in Berlin, the university. I read his books. Oh, his catalogue. Particularly his catalogue, I should have brought a catalogue. It was like our Bible. All the plants you needed were all in this catalogue. I think it was a pre-war catalogue. It was early '50s. We didn't have many catalogues. The war was over in '45. Nurseries needed time to get going. Of course, during the war we had to plant vegetables all the time. I think it was Ruddebeckia goldstrum there were only two plants left. We had discovered it in the 30s or something. And then Karl Foerster, he liked it, but we had to grow it and he almost lost it.

van Sweden: Wolfgang, describe his garden. We went there. Remember? Mrs. Foerster was still living. The garden is very beautiful.

Oehme: It was like a formal layout, a fountain and paths. When he did that, I guess at the turn of the century or middle or late '20s or whatever. He wanted to show that you can, first time he planted annuals. . . . He wanted to show perennials. That's what he did. [UNINTELLIGIBLE] with plantings. It was very different [with the seasons.]. His theme was to . . . It's hard to translate, flowering through different seasons.

van Sweden: Blooming through the seasons.

0ehme: Blooming throughout, flowering throughout the year. And then also the winter garden [with] the grasses, many plants, with seed heads. Leave the seed heads [on] and grasses, for the winter. That was our big theme too.
van Sweden: Right. To teach.

Oehme… We wanted to clean everything up by Thanksgiving. Shave it.

Birnbaum: So how innovative was that approach?

Oehme: Oh, very. Unbelievable.

van Sweden: The idea of the winter garden being important was revolutionary.

Oehme: Total revolutionary. Nobody heard of it. Leave a mess there? I mean, it's impossible.

van Sweden: A beautiful mess.

van Sweden: Yeah, The Offutt garden.
One of the winter gardens [in the book?]. Beautiful.

Oehme: Joe- Pye weed and grasses and sedums.

van Sweden: It's beautiful. This was big news. I mean people never thought of [a winter garden].

Oehme: Big. It's good for wildlife too.

Birnbaum: So then how did you get people excited about the winter garden here?

Oehme: I think they got it, huh?

van Sweden: They got it. The lectures- I always showed winter garden photographs and they just gasped because they never thought of it [in] that way, as important. As beautiful.

Oehme: And then the magazines started to say it's important for birds and stuff. People like birds. So if you combine it with something that people like, it makes a difference.

A Pool Enriches the Garden

van Sweden: I think the garden speaks to me of the form of swimming pool, for instance, the space, where it's going to go, whether it should be pond-like or be a very severe rectangle. It comes out of the analysis of the site for me. And I've designed every shape swimming pool. Wolfgang's designed a lot of swimming pools too
Oehme: Mostly rectangle. We did some round ones, remember?
van Sweden: Oh yeah. We did many round ones and oval, like at the Brillembourg's- beautiful.

Birnbaum: And also the steps are always very beautiful. The steps are never the same.

van Sweden: I took the steps on as a special design problem for myself. I think the steps are very sculptural and they're very important. I like to drag, pull out one step, the second step, as a bench. It's wonderful to sit in the water looking out at the view. I noticed in my pool, I have a long bench on the entire side, the house side of the pool. So when you sit there you look out at the bay and it's very nice.

Oehme Defines the New American Garden

What it is? Oh yeah. Golly. [It is]using more natural looking plants. I mean native or non-native [plants] or whatever. Shrubs are good but maybe [they are] more highlights of the various kinds. Color is important. But the big mass, not just a few little things mixed in. How it's started was this foundation planting, you have a couple trees, [and a] hedge. Also the cemetery look or whatever, horrible, it looks so unnatural. What I did, I played with the shapes, forms, proportions, big ones, small ones, some highlights, stuff like that. It's like a painting. [it] looks like a painting actually.

van Sweden: I got my come-uppance in Dresden. I gave a speech called the New American Garden. And the landscape architects came up to me afterwards and said the New American Garden is just the old German garden. [LAUGHTER] I was so deflated. . .

Oehme: I mean it's not [real natural] but it's natural looking. So it's not man-made looking. When you see what a lot of people do to their gardens, it doesn't even look like plants sometimes. They shape them, everything's so man-made looking. My garden it's like total nature. Like paradise. Like you think [that] paradise should look like this. This is totally wild. Some people may think it looks too wild, but that's what it is. It can, at certain time of year; it can be totally disaster. I mean in a good sense, a good disaster.

Birnbaum: I'm mostly thinking about both of you talking about the late summer. People were saying here- it's when nature takes over. Think about it. I think about how different [it is] seeing Jim's garden [Ferry Cove] now than the first time I went, which was early July. That month made such a difference because it's [at] the tipping point now, nature has kind of made it wilder.

Oehme: Made it wilder. And the plants feel at home, almost. The plants themselves look so mature. Well, they do. They are not kept in a straight jacket like gardeners like to do. People around here, they always do edging. In Germany, in Hanover or where ever, we let plants go, an interesting plant go over a walk, you know. But here, everything has to be neat and edged every week. Mow the lawn every week. The lawn is shaved down to nothing. At least in Germany we let our grass, I mean, be more natural looking.

OVS Develops the Second Generation of Leadership

The interview continues, Charles Birnbaum talks with Oehme van Sweden & Associates [OVS] principals: Eric Groft, Lisa Delplace and Sheila Brady.

Groft: I've been here since 1986. I think I was right before you, Sheila [Brady]. Jim hired me for the Slifka and the Shockey projects. Twenty-one foot waterfall in the hills of Virginia and a beachfront property, so I thought I was doing pretty well at the time and it's been uphill ever since.

Brady: I came right after Eric. It was a really exciting time. Jim would always say “we're really rolling now”. It's been true. We have been rolling for what? We've been working together almost twenty years, twenty three, and it's never stopped. It's just been thrilling working here. We have got projects from botanical gardens to. . .. Look around this room right here and we've got CBG, Chicago Botanic Garden, that Lisa and I collaborated together [on] and she's now working on the plant science [design]. Over

here is the New York Botanical Garden, which we're working on right now. We've got thrilling jobs and it's challenging, exciting, and wonderful stuff. So, we're happy.

Delplace: And I came to van Sweden in 1988. I guess I was the last of the three of us to join the firm but it was when we moved from the dress shop to the bank building that really allowed us to expand. So that's when I came and I've been here ever since. It's been thrilling to be here to watch, really, the progression of the firm move from being known for our residential gardens to doing some of the largest projects, The World War II Memorial, Rockefeller Park. All of the things that I think a lot of people now know that we do, but we've been doing them since really 1977.

Brady: There's a lot that the world doesn't know about us. When we tell our Wolfgang stories and our Jim stories, there's a lot that comes out. Wolfgang nurtured us close to 23 years ago in a very early way of how to make our gardens green. We never called it green then, but he was an advocate coming out of Germany after the war that fertilizers were not acceptable. And he taught us all how to work with soils, how to work with plants both native and non-native, and plants that are vigorous and take off and are water tolerant. We were just inducted into that. Those words were not even part of the vocabulary. It was just a process. So this whole evolution of green is just really innate to us. It comes out in all our work.

What is an OVS Garden?

Birnbaum: I'd like for you to tell me what you think an OVS [Oehme van Sweden] landscape is, irrelevant of it being a public or private commission? What is the philosophy in terms of place-making?

Delplace: I think that an OVS garden is really about place-making. It's about placing people in a space that is lush and green. That the proportions work really well. Where people can feel nestled or intrigued by the garden. It's almost as if you took every

adjective and the way you describe a garden, the way the light hits the leaves, the way that people walk, where you have them stop, where you have them sit. All of those things are firmly embraced in this office and encouraged and we want people to experience that. So what Jim and Wolfgang have been able to do throughout the years is they have taken us with them to experience what it's like to be in a garden at sunrise. What it's like to be there in December planting bulbs, which we all have been there, in December planting bulbs. So you really start to experience what it's like to be in a garden in four seasons.

Brady: What's an OVS garden? The composition is components of hardscape architecture, ecological, meaning land form, vegetation, and the climate of the site. The soils are really important to us. Then {there is] the art form. So it's that mastery of taking it from an ecological to an artistic. That's what I think this firm does so well. It does so well in the sense of achievement. When you go into a garden you're not necessarily focused on those elements independently. It is all composed beautifully. So hardscape is critical to our gardens [design]as architecture, as is light, as is wind, as are the plants. When we get together and talk about our gardens, plants become our passion. It's where our color is. It's where our texture and pattern making is. That's key to our work.

Groft: I think to me what an Oehme van Sweden garden is, is a garden that balanced both the architectural elements and horticultural elements. We treat them equally in our garden making. I think for a lot of the 20th century, landscape architects were almost embarrassed by the word landscape and I think what Jim and Wolfgang have brought to the table is an emphasis on horticulture. And we certainly feel very passionate about plants interacting equally with the man-made aspect of our gardens.

I think when people walk into our gardens they're often overwhelmed with the botanical display, the swaying grasses, that most people have not even experienced

anything like that before. Once they're in a garden they start to reveal the bones of the garden and see the detail that goes in to how the stones are put together, the proportion of spaces. But it's really that balance of horticulture and hardscape that really makes our gardens special.

Learning the OVS Way

Delplace: One of the things and I probably could say this for any of us, that as soon as we put a line on paper, on a sheet, I think we all hear Jim saying is it large enough? It should be bigger. It's always got to be bigger. And I think that scale in this office is so important and that's what Jim is always pushing the scale. Is the pool large enough? Is the path wide enough? Is it grand enough? I really think that is something I know I particularly hear on a daily basis any time I start drawing.

Groft: And simplicity. Jim has always taught us to do one thing right.

Delplace: And edit.

Groft: Yeah. I think that landscape architects in general are trying to do too many different things. If you can just do one, get one idea across, don't try to have too many different things going on. And whether you're doing a small Georgetown garden or a large estate, you've got to think about that, the big picture and the bold statement.

Brady: I certainly appreciated and still do that coming from an art world Jim has taught us all to go to our inspirations that we all work from and appreciate that and draw from that world. You can see that in all our work. All three of us are very passionate about that, about the arts and certainly, its part of our development [of the] project. It's just part of us.

Groft: I think one of the things I like to always think of with Jim is, my coming from the University of Virginia, where there's a rigorous design background, where the axes was God almighty, and obviously in this firm we respect axes in architecture as well, but it always seems like Jim knew how to just draw that diagonal. Breaking that axis and putting the spark on the page. I always try to bring that to any of our work. Kind of know when that architecture should stop and that magic moment of nature should begin, is I think what really makes us special.

Delplace: And to press that point home, one year for Christmas he [Jim] bought everyone in the office thick pencils, beautiful pencils from Takashimaya. They were beautiful Takashimaya pencils and he said everyone in the office should just lose a pencil sharpener and we should only draw with these big, fat pencils. It's really true. Sometimes I think we've gotten away from that because CAD [computer-aided design] has sharpened the pencil to the point of being so specific about every little detail that we, the three of us, I know, have made a concerted effort to pry people away from the computer and challenge them to give us their first thoughts in traces like Jim used to.

We've also, one of the more important philosophies that I think we carry forward is that we want people to present to us like they're presenting to a client. We want them to gather their ideas and bring them forward and we want to hear what they have to say. And we also want to hear how they present and where they get their inspiration from. Jim did that with all of us and we think it's really important to carry that forward.

Brady: Eric, that's what all three of us [say], if you asked why we came to Oehme van Sweden is because projects got built. That's the value. That's the difference. We love being out in the field. We love being part of the process, where we're not just paper. We want to be there. That's key. Key to what makes us pretty different.

Delplace: Or the other thing is that our plans are literally just for quantities and if you were to go planting with Wolfgang, particularly bulbs, he would take three boxes of bulbs, throw them together in one box, and then throw them out into the space and where they landed, they were planted. So that kind of spontaneity is what has just really made our gardens so wonderful. Because as much as we can design on paper, the place is what inspires the gardens, so it is what makes it so special. Our involvement all the way through the process just means that we can execute it with the spirit of the place.

Groft: I think what Jim and Wolfgang have taught me is that a planting design is really just a painter's palette. It's just assembling what we want to use and when you go into the field it really is like drawing on the ground and just filling it with color and texture.

Brady: You can't put in a plan all of the elements that are there in space. You can't think out every little angle, every little moment, every little perspective or what is the client going to see every morning when they have their coffee. And that's the joy of composing it at the moment.

Projects

The van Sweden Garden, Washington DC

When I bought my house the garden had a little square of lawn and 20 rose bushes. And of course we didn't want any lawn. It was a small space and I wanted to dedicate all the space to planting. And so we took out the lawn and put in all perennials. The terrace was at the house end of the garden. The garden was relatively small. It was 55 feet deep and 17 feet wide. The garden changed dramatically, with each season. The perennials got to be five and six feet high, and so in the summer you didn't even see the fences. It looked like there were no boundaries. It just dissolved into the neighbors' properties and you had all this wonderful borrowed scenery of magnolia grandifloras and Hollies that became the backdrop, the whole place was like a theater. The garden

luckily was tilted, so it was like great stage, and that added to the perspective, so it looked much deeper than it was. It was very tricky and very beautiful. In the spring when I cut the perennials down, of course everything showed again, all the bones of the garden, and you had the simplicity of just a rectangular space with fences around it. And the first thing to bloom in February was the witch hazel, Chinese witch hazel, from then it just exploded from the ground, much like my garden in the country does now.. . ..

In 1977, when we really got started in our partnership, Wolfgang and I had five clients right away in Georgetown. I lived just around the corner from this house, on N Street for 38 years. I don't live there anymore, but I had a very, very beautiful garden there and it was an advertisement. And we did more than 100 Georgetown gardens because of that garden. We always have one or two going now at a time. We've just finished a garden and we're starting another one. So this is just an example of many gardens that we've done. And it's interesting because we can go to parties and have, actually have progressive dinners and end up in five or six gardens at a time. I used to have cocktails at my house. Barbara Woodward, who had the garden behind my house, we had a gate between the gardens. And we'd walk up, the guests would walk up the garden, go into her garden and we'd have dinner at her house, then cross the street and have dessert at the Platts on 28th Street, just across from Barbara's, and then down to the Nef garden for after-dinner drinks. For cognac and so on, which has that wonderful Chagall mosaic in it.

The Federal Reserve Board Garden, Washington DC [interview on site]

David Lilly, a wonderful man who was a Governor of the Federal Reserve, had seen the article [Washington Star, 1977] and thought we had to be the right people for the Fed because we used witch hazel. His family owned the Toro Corporation, and so he was very interested in plants. He's in his nineties now and he still is interested in plants. So he became our sort of patron at the Fed[eral Reserve] and we worked there recently even. And the interesting thing was it had to go to the Fine Arts Commission. The

drawing was not that great, but we went to the Fine Arts Commission with David Lilly, and when I presented the plan, we were showing gardens in East Germany, in Leipzig and they were wonderful with lots of people. And of course then it was the Cold War and we thought, you know, East Germany was communist and just terrible, and this looked absolutely beautiful it looked like Paris. We never told the Fine Arts Commission that this was Leipzig or Dresden because here we were representing the citadel of capitalism, the Federal Reserve. And so I presented the plan and Carter Brown, who was the Chairman at that time, said this does not look like the typical landscape of Washington, DC. David Lilly was standing behind me and he stepped in front of me and pointing his finger at Carter said, that is just the point. And that's the kind of client you need to change the world.

This, originally, the garden was designed by George Patton, whose office was in Philadelphia. And George Patton had a very formal design, which was typical of Washington. George Patton designed the fountain, which is here. We did not change that. And he designed the terrace around the fountain. The light fixtures were always here. And they were I suppose specked by George Patton. And they're very beautiful. They're wonderful if they're lighted. During the Carter years, when we were working here, they turned them off. Remember, Jimmy Carter wore sweaters [LAUGHTER] and he was trying to save electricity. And so they turned them off, and it was unfortunate because it gets dark very early in the winter in Washington and they were very decorative and very appropriate.

I should start by saying that this entire garden that I'm sitting on here is on top of parking. The whole front of the Martin building is parking. So this is a roof garden. And all these plants, and including these Zelkovia trees are growing in a planter. The perennials are planted in 18 inches and we mounded to four feet for the trees. And you can see how successful the trees have been. In fact, I wonder if they're not getting too

big for the roof, although it's been 25 years and we've had no problems. So hopefully this is OK. I tackled the design of the hardscape and Wolfgang tackled the planting.

After we put the gardens in, of course, they did not look like much, and we decided they looked, like a hair transplant, you know, little tufts of grasses every few feet and perennials. And then the trees were very small. So the people in the Federal Reserve working here were complaining that they weren't getting raises and we were wasting money on gardens. David Lilly decided that we should give a lecture, give a talk, a tour of the gardens to the people in the building, and just a brown bag lunch, and Wolfgang and I would come down and lead them around and talk about what was going to happen to the planting. And so we did. They expected maybe 15 or 20 people at the most. Four hundred showed up.

This was the first public commission in the office. And as I say, it was our big break. And it got a lot of notice because no one had ever seen anything that looked quite like this in Washington. And it was really the first example of the new American garden style. And it was all because of David Lilly. He was a wonderful client. And he liked gardens much more than money. He was a governor of the Federal Reserve, but he was really interested in the garden and doing something for the people in this neighborhood. He wanted them to have wonderful gardens, to learn about plants. And where I'm sitting is a place I designed for people to have lunch. There are benches. There were no benches here before. And we wanted to be very comfortable and humane and human in scale, and so we broke it down to sitting areas and of course, the dramatic planting area.

This particular part of the garden is designed to take sculpture of every size. Where I'm sitting here takes smaller sculptures and the big lawn between these two sitting areas in the front of the building, takes larger sculpture. Here you can see a sculpture by John Dreyfus. The first sculpture to be here was, with her work, was Lila Katzen. And Lila introduced us to the [Alex and Carole] Rosenbergs because she was a friend of theirs

and she had work in the Alice Rosenberg Gallery. So this has great meaning for us, the sculpture is very important and people in the building love the changing sculpture exhibits. I think it's an important part of the space, enjoying the space and making it human and interesting.

This garden is beautifully maintained. The Federal Reserve is very fussy about its building and also its image and the gardens are very much a part of that. They like them very much and they call us back every couple years to do more work, or to walk the gardens to make sure everything is as we want it. They called us in about five years ago to retrofit this for against terrorism. And so we designed walls to keep out trucks and various bollards for both the old building on Constitution Avenue and the newer building. We designed a planter which is now dripping with Perovskia and roses, and it doesn't look like it's designed for terrorism. That's a perfect way to deal with it, and we were lucky to be able to do that here.[

The rest was history really. It's become a very important garden in the city of Washington. We've done 20 gardens like this, including the Einstein garden at the National Academy of Science, is just a block away. the German American Friendship garden. The new American Garden at, the National Arboretum and was one very big major project that we got from this garden, [as] was the International Center, which includes 40 embassies.

The Rosenberg Garden, Long Island, NY

At the Federal Reserve, there were sculptures placed by Lila Katzen. I met Lila Katzen at a party for the opening of her show there in the garden. She was a friend of Alex and Carol Rosenberg in New York; and she had been out to their country house in the Hamptons the weekend before. So she called up Carol and said you've got to get these men, Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden to do your garden, because you're just

doing little ditzy marigolds around the driveway and this is not appropriate for your property.

So the first garden we did in the Hamptons was in 1981, was for Carol and Alex. It was only an acre, but they owned an art gallery in New York so they were into the avant-garde and they gave us carte blanche and we could do anything we wanted. So we did our thing and it turned out to be a very dramatic garden, which nobody had ever seen the likes of before. That was instrumental in launching us.

It included a swimming pool, which was there, kind of kidney shaped, a vegetable garden, and a lawn going down to the seawall. But all around the house we planted grasses and plants that are appropriate for the seascape, such as lavender, for instance, and sedums, Magnolia virginiana, and willows. All of this framed and set off the house, softened the house, which was very attractive anyway. The driveway we planted the center of the drive, with a great collection of perennials and grasses, and the whole thing was a kind of sculpture on the ground plane or a tapestry. People saw it as treatment of the entire ground plane, not just foundation planting.

This was really the first time many people had ever seen a landscape treated like this. We also did something very revolutionary for the period. Planting ornamental grasses right up to edge of the swimming pool, right up to the coping. Grasses don't shed so it's perfectly fine to use grasses at the edge. There are other perennials that don't shed, such as hibiscus moscheutos, those are perfect with water and they reflect in the water so it's a wonderful way to soften the edge of the swimming pool and make it look more natural.

This is one client, one of many, who became friends of ours. We did also their terrace in New York, so we've had a lot of contact with them. We visit constantly every year, two or three times a year we visit and of course give tips for the garden. You can't have this with every client when you have hundreds of clients, but in the case of the Rosenbergs

this was possible. As a result, the garden has always been photo ready and perfectly beautiful and the Rosenbergs themselves are very proud of it. They promote it as much as they can. And they also, like many of our clients, entertain all the time, so it was a wonderful way to get the news out to people in the Hamptons and we've done dozens of gardens in the Hamptons because of the Rosenberg garden.

The Nef Garden, Washington DC

Here we are in the Nef garden, a very important design for us. We did the first design in 1977. We've done the garden over three times since. And the garden now is very beautifully detailed. You can see this terrace. Of course, the most important aspect is the Chagall mosaic, and that was very difficult to design to, you can imagine, to get any attention away from that was very difficult. We just treated it as a very important work of art in a room, so the terrace that is in the center of the garden is like a carpet, and it's inspired by Dutch painting. You can see the pattern. And the planting under the mosaic took several years to get right, we had to keep it low, and the beautiful thing is the hakonechloa, which is a Japanese grass, we knew wouldn't grow and cover the mosaic. We designed a beautiful tool shed here. Everything is done in both the brick and the limestone as carpeting, and with very detailed, intricate patterns. And also I did in this garden, which I like to do, I did all the furniture.

The planting in the Nef garden had to be much more conservative and much more, well, we were much more limited because of course, we couldn't compete with the mosaic, and we couldn't in any way cover it up. And we couldn't create the layering that we're used to doing because of course that would cover the view from the house. So it was very different; it's really planted around the sides, three sides. On the house side, there's a dining space.

The mosaic itself was given by Chagall to the Nefs as a gift for their wedding in the 60s, 1960s. And Evelyn Nef said that she expected it to be just a small plaque-like or

painting-like size, maybe two by three. And when the maquette came from Chagall from France, it turned out it was as big as a billboard. Of course, it had to be approved because it can be seen from the street; it had to be approved by the Fine Arts Commission. So they had a lot to say about the wall that the Nefs built to hold the mosaic, which is a party wall against the next-door neighbor's house. The Fine Arts Commission turned down Chagall's idea that it should be stucco, that sounded too much like the south of France. So they required that it be red brick or it could be pink or whatever, reddish brick. And right away, very soon after it was installed, the mosaic was installed, we painted the brick a gray color, which is very nice. As it peels, it looks, it stresses very well. And I think it's attractive for the mosaic after all.

At Nef you have a loggia on the ground plane, and then you have a kind of veranda on the second floor, off the living room. And that's where most people who come to parties view the mosaic. So that was really important in designing the terrace. At first, it was just gravel for several years. And then we decided to do it in stone and limestone, and so it was important to do a very beautiful pattern that could be enjoyed from above.

Nelson A. Rockefeller Park, New York, NY

We had a great patron, Amanda Burden. She was a great admirer of our work and wanted to make sure that we were involved in the design. We worked with Carr, Lynch on this and it was collaboration. It was up to that point the biggest, most important project that we had done. Of course working on Manhattan was fabulous. We were just thrilled to work on Manhattan and do this eight-acre park, Rockefeller Park, which includes a lot of lawn because people wanted to play games. It also includes the promenade that goes along the Hudson River, The Esplanade; and a children's playground designed by a firm in Brooklyn, who are experts on playgrounds; a wonderful sculpture piece by Demetri Porphyrios and also a lot of sculpture by Tom Otterness.

It was a great challenge and the grading, again, here was so important because it was perfectly flat. We got very subtle grading in and that was really what made it, made the design special. Then the planting could be signature Oehme van Sweden design; that's what they wanted, they wanted all the grasses and Black-Eyed Susan, and so we could actually do our thing. It was fun doing it in New York. It was very important.

The entire Battery Park City was a great way to display various landscape architects' designs and aesthetics. It's 50 acres of park and they're strung along the entire waterfront of Battery Park City. We worked with our team, but many teams were also busy at the time. It was a wonderful collaborative spirit.
It was a very important site because of the view of the Statue of Liberty and the Hudson, although not available for the public, of course is a very dramatic view and quite active with boats, which is nice. The Potomac here in Washington, there aren't many boats, really, but the Hudson has a lot of boats and some very large steamers. We designed a water feature at the end of Veazey Street, which is a cascade, and that brought water close so people could get near the water, dangle their feet in the water, and play with the fish. I also enjoy water plants and learned about water plants. We designed it for that. Just as at the Federal Reserve. We designed the planting here as an educational tool for people using the park.

The Authority, [Battery Park City Authority] yeah, they maintain it. It's beautifully maintained, really. It's perfect. They have a lot of events in Rockefeller Park. It's also now a memorial to Nelson Rockefeller, which I thought was great. I knew that the Rockefeller family would never let it go down hill. I was very pleased when they made it a memorial to Nelson Rockefeller.

The World War II Memorial, Washington DC

One of the most difficult projects I ever did was a World War II memorial. I was called one day by Friedrich St. Florian, who had won the first round of the competition. He had to put a team together so he asked me to be the landscape architect on the team. Ray Kaskey was invited to be the sculptor. We had to make a presentation to 35 people on the committee. The six finalists were going to present. So when we went before the committee I recommended using mostly white roses in the design, which I think everybody thought was a great selling point, and we won. Then we had to do it. It took nine years to finish it and during the time I heard the testimony, negative testimony, at least 50 times if not more, and thought it would never end and we'd never get approval. But guess what? It's there now and it's actually a wonderful meeting place. Friedrich St. Florian calls it a forum because it's a kind of marvelous central place for the Mall where people can gather, meet friends, and so on.

His ingenious idea that won the first round was to lower it two meters into the ground so you go down into the space. It's a very small amount in that landscape, but it makes all the difference. Then finally we saved all the trees that surrounded it, even though they're diseased and they're going to die. We reserved trees in the nursery so they would grow to the same size and we could replace the existing trees over time, which is being done.

I pass the memorial every day at least twice on my way to work and it's very satisfying to see how beautifully it's used. How wonderful people are using it and enjoying it. They sit on the edge in the shade of the trees or they move into the center and enjoy the fountains and the memorial aspects, which are very poignant and very interesting.

It was a difficult site because it's in a flood plain. Also I always said what we did was mostly not seen. The grading is very important, key to the design; the planting is important but secondary to the grading and lighting, which we were involved in. We were also involved in the fountains.

It was very scary working on the project at times because it was so controversial. I had the feeling that people were going to come to blows in the meetings. I've never had that before. They accused us of covering up the Lincoln Memorial and I knew that all of this was lies. I kept saying, now I know how Richard Nixon felt because I would read in the Post the next day all the lies that they were promoting. It was just incredible. Of course we had models; we showed them what it was going to look like, beautiful lavish models. They could see that that was all a lie, but they kept up that attack. Finally it was approved by the Fine Arts Commission and that was key to getting it built. We had the ground-breaking. President Clinton did the ground-breaking and President Bush did the dedication after it was completed.

We used only white flowering plants at the World War II memorial. We couldn't use roses, even though I showed them in the first design, but the [National] Park Service wouldn't approve roses. But we did use plants like Magnolia virginiana, azaleas, and so on, and many bulbs. Everything has to be white. I thought that was interesting and kind of a symbolic gesture, which we wouldn't do in a private garden, but which I thought was appropriate here.

I felt the World War II memorial was a signature piece and probably the most important design we would do. It would be there longer than any other design and it had more significance. It was really very important to the firm. Although in the short run, there was a lot of controversy, I knew in the long run that it would be appreciated and it would be enjoyed for many years, forever, really ten thousand years. Like the Einstein memorial at the National Academy of Sciences. The sculptor kept saying this is going to be here for 10,000 years. [LAUGHTER]

The Sullivan Garden, Washington, DC

Here we are in Georgetown. This is a typical street, a wonderful, historic street. It's O Street actually, Northwest in Washington, D.C. And you can see all the brick paving, beautiful herringbone paving, and various patterns. Different houses have different patterns. And you can see the beautiful iron fences which are traditional. Everybody has a fence and a gate, it keeps the dogs out. And this front garden is actually our design as well. It's more like a planter; it's very small, but lush. And again it uses many of our signature plants like hakonechloa and there's a magnolia virginiana for instance, in front of the house. The curbs are granite, which is typical [of] Georgetown, and they're very old, very picturesque. You can see how beautiful the houses are, and there's great variety which I always am amazed by how much unity one gets in the variety of these houses here in Georgetown. You wouldn't think that all these things would go together so beautifully. But they do. They fit together in a very special way, and everybody loves it

This is the second garden that we designed for the Sullivans. We did a garden for them about 30 years ago and 10 years ago they bought this house and asked us to do this garden as well. That's a really nice thing. We love working for the same client more than once if we can. And this garden, interestingly enough, was a parking lot. There was only concrete here, and the building we see in the background, which is a studio and entertainment space, was actually a three-car, three-stall garage. And you can see, we turned it into a lavish garden with all of our signature plants, trees and so on. And this is a good example of the limits of the garden, the fence is disappearing as the plants mature and grow up. So you start just concentrating on the borrowed scenery, and it makes the garden look much bigger than it is.

There are beautiful details here. For instance, the lily pond you see behind me is actually skewed. I drew it as a rectangle parallel to the sides of the garden and parallel to the house. But I thought, what would really jazz it up and give it some tension. And

so, just moving it around 20 degrees created the kind of tension and interest that I wanted. And it also points you back toward the back of the garden. Another thing about this garden that's very important is the change in level. There are just three steps, but that's very important in a tiny garden and a basically flat garden like this one. So we were able to create a terrace above where you can sit and look back at this lovely house. The back of the house is very pretty, or you can sit where we're sitting here, just outside of the kitchen and have the whole garden as a kind of stage set. I always say to Georgetown clients that this is your view; this is the only view you have. So we have to create something really dramatic, something that changes with the seasons and keeps your interest all year long.

It's wonderful to have clients like this who have not only great taste, but a great collection, and are interested in sort of accessorizing the garden. You can see a very nice sculpture to my left here. I was asked by Beverly to place that. And of course, raising the fountain or the lily pool just to bench height gave that sculpture a perfect place to sit, with her dog at her feet. There are other things here that are interesting from Haiti. Beverly Sullivan is an expert on Haiti, and so she has a lot of Haitian art and a lot of artifacts from Haiti that she's put around, jars and so on. This is a good kind of client to have, because they finish it for you. And the other thing is, she's not over maintaining the garden, which is important. You can see begonia's seeding around. She doesn't, she's not trying to keep it very neat and too cleaned-up looking. We like that. We like it to be soft and natural and all the stone edges, if possible, softened by planting.

Here we're working in a historic neighborhood, and we have to keep that in mind, but the gardens have always been very lush and decorative and so it's never been a problem using our plants in the gardens in Georgetown, because there's a kind of garden aesthetic here that's very important. There are garden shows. People open their gardens for tours and the garden is very important to people living in these homes

because it is their only open space, their outdoor space. And so we use stone and various details that are inspired by the house that might be considered historic, of a historic nature, but we don't overdo it. We interpret the design to match the house and the environment.

This is a good example of sustainability. This garden is low maintenance once it got established. It doesn't have to be watered. It doesn't have to be fertilized. And it's definitely sustainable. We've been doing this for 35 years. We called it low maintenance, but lately the buzzword is sustainability, and I realize that we had been doing it all these years and didn't realize, didn't actually put that definition on it.

This garden is also a good example of layering. We create depth by layering, and create depth also by using big plants and big leaves in small gardens. We say big plants in small gardens, big leaves in small gardens. We don't want it to be pretty pretty either. We want it to be dramatic and have huge differences in scale. That's what gives it interest. You don't want to use small plants in small gardens, there's nothing worse. It makes everything look much smaller. So you can see here that we've used very big plants in this garden and we've layered going back so you have the building behind, sort of mysterious and layered behind the layering of plants. And we've used a lot of our signature plants, nandina, hosta, begonia, the Magnolia virginiana.

Halcyon, Eastern Shore, MD

Halcyon was one of several very big projects we did on the Eastern Shore. And it was done for clients who already had a garden of ours in Georgetown. It's one of the most beautiful gardens I've ever designed and I consider it one of my most important designs. And when I first looked at it, I couldn't believe the scale. They were building a huge house and needed, wanted everything. So we designed a swimming pool and you saw that beautiful oval swimming pool with a negative edge, cascading water off of it. And I

wanted that to be visible from the terraces so that you could see water glistening over the edge of the pool from the living room terrace.

The planting could be signature Oehme van Sweden design. They were sold on our landscape and were eager to have a very dramatic garden. They're from Venezuela, so they understand drama and they were eager to have a very showy place because they entertained a great deal, and have big parties all the time. They think nothing of having 30 people for lunch and then 200 people for dinner that same day. So the garden was definitely an entertainment space.

The house is set back about almost a mile from the main road. It's a very beautiful road through the property, and then you come on two ponds. You cross two ponds, and then go through a gate, two brick piers, and you arrive eventually at the house. The designed garden really only took in the area around the house but that was considerable. I would say it was probably five or six acres of designed garden. It's very well maintained. It's very beautiful and they've had everything from book signings there to concerts to weddings, several weddings. So it's really a used space.

The bridge between the pair of ponds, we did not design, but it does have a wonderful sound. And it's wood and the members rattle as you go across, and that's very musical and very nice. It's what do you call that. It's actually a rumble, a so-called rumble announces that you're getting close to the house.

Luckily, we had control of all the scenery around this property. The client owned enough property that we didn't have to worry about what was outside, except for the view of the bay. And that of course is borrowed and it's very, very beautiful. It's actually the Tred Avon River that is borrowed scenery.

I wanted the pool to look like a pond as much as possible. So we planted right up to the edge on the water side. And I did a terrace that has radiating lines, radiating out from the coping and made it as natural as possible. It had to be a huge terrace because of the entertaining these clients do. Also, it has a negative edge, so water spills over the end toward the house. I wanted that water to be visible from the living room deck and the verandas and glisten in the distance as you sat on the veranda at the house. The furniture, designed by Ben Forgey, is a very important part of the design. And of course, we needed a lot of furniture there because of all the people that were going to be there. They have many lunches around the pool.

The house itself is very large. And the landscape, I wanted the landscape to bring it down to the ground plane, and soften the architecture. It's kind of in-your-face and until the gardens took off, it was not softened enough, I thought. So we planted huge masses of plants and enormous borders, thinking of them more as planting areas than borders themselves. Borders would be too small. We had the luck of having enormous trees on the site, which of course, we protected and made sure we fed and fenced them off during construction. At the point, if you're facing the house, to the left is a copse of cedars, or Juniperus virginiana, and those are really beautiful. They were existing, and it makes a very lovely sculptural ending to the vista. Also on the point is the folly designed by Ben Forgey.

Ferry Cove, Sherwood, MD

I always loved the Eastern Shore. And I was looking for the time that I could afford a house, a country house on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. It's about as close as you can get to the Netherlands in the United States. And having Dutch roots, it was a perfect place for me. I love flat landscapes. I don't like mountains; they give me claustrophobia. And the big sky and wide open space; I suppose the Middle West also influenced me in this way. But this was a perfect site. It was completely flat, which I loved. And it was all platted. There were five sites, and I decided not to buy it myself,

but to invite two friends to buy with me. So we bought the entire 25 acres together, and I chose a three-acre parcel for myself.

This parcel has the hedgerow along the road, which made it a very intimate and beautiful, and there was something to build on. The other properties were just plain open space and we've had to create the hedgerow for those. Suman Sorg was the architect and one of the investors, and we decided that I would design her garden and she would design my house. That way we did a trade, which was very, very good. I also decided that I was really going to enjoy the process. I had seen so many clients, their marriages ruined, their sleep disturbed, everything about it a terrible experience. And I thought I am going to build a house once in my life. I graduated in architecture. I'm the son of a contractor and I'm a landscape architect, and I'm going to for once build a house and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it.

It took a year to design. I was very careful to design it exactly the way I wanted it. And then it took another year and a half to build it. I didn't even start the design for a year after I bought the land, because I just wanted to come out and walk on it and think about it and enjoy it and get rid of the poison ivy [LAUGHTER], that kind of thing first. So that's what I did and in 2000, I moved in.

And the garden was very open. You could see me from the street. Everything was glass. I felt very exposed. But now, as you can see in these pictures, everything has closed in, grown in and it's very meadow-like. I'm very flexible about weeds. Any weed that is attractive, I don't consider a weed. I just let it go. I let the plants that started out in the design seed around the garden. For instance, the rudbeckia maxima has seeded, and I just leave those in, because I want it to look like a meadow. The designed garden is about 70 feet around the house. And then there is a real meadow out to the bay, on the west side of the house. The meadow, I just let come in, whatever came in, came in. I consulted with Darryl Morrison about the meadow, and we both agreed that we'd just

let the meadow develop, and it's amazing how beautiful it is. The first year it was all horsetail, and that was actually very dramatic. Those seeds have been in the earth for probably thousands of years. And once they had a chance to develop, they did. And that was the first year. And then after that, the grasses began coming in, and now we don't see any horsetail. So this garden is incredibly dramatic. In the spring it's cut down and it starts over every year and all the perennials start over. And it's amazing how it changes. Every week I come out and it's fascinating to see what's happening each time

I think if I were doing this garden again, I would let the meadow come right up to the house on the bayside, and then have the designed garden on the street side. Just have this meadow, as you see out there, come right up to the windows and keep it very simple. I would make it much simpler than it is now, because that meadow out there is so easy to maintain and so beautiful. It's beautiful in every season. And it's cut down in February, so we don't get seeded trees in the meadow itself. But I think it would be very dramatic to just have the meadow right up to the house. So that's one thing I would change.

In the last few years, I've become handicapped and I'm in a wheelchair and surprisingly this house was very easy to adapt for handicap accessibility. I could not negotiate steps anymore, so I put in a ramp and that was very easy to do. It fit into the design without a hitch, and it looks like it was always there and meant to be. As far as the house itself, there are open spaces in this house, there's a lot of room, and it's been pretty easy to negotiate in a wheelchair. Oddly enough, because of course, it was not designed with anything like that in mind. I was completely able when it was built and designed.

I did put in a swimming pool because I wanted it for therapy. And I'm very happy I did. I had to have a railing to hang onto, to get into the pool, and I did not want a standard swimming pool rail. It's so boring and so ugly. So I had this idea of having a railing in the

shape of a snake. And I had just finished the World War II memorial with Ray Kaskey, the sculptor who did all the sculpture at the World War II memorial, the eagles and so on. And I asked him to do a snake for me, and he developed the snake rail. It was cast in China, and it's out there now. And it's a very nice thing to hang onto.][LAUGHTER]

Living in the city, of course, one is, especially in my house in Georgetown, I don't live there anymore, but when I lived in Georgetown, it's very tight. Everything is very small and constricted. I had no view out. And here I have the freedom of long distance views, fabulous sunsets, and it's very liberating. And I think it's wonderful to have the contrast. The city and the country, I love both, and I feel very fortunate to have that contrast

Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL

The Chicago Botanic Garden is an interesting story because the chief donor was Pleasant Rowland, who invented the American Girl doll. She was in the audience when we presented. She was part of the jury, a member of the jury, when we presented. Sheila Brady and I went together and we talked for about an hour and then took questions. I showed only 20 slides. I pared it down to 20 images and one of them that I put in at the last minute was a painting of Helen Frankenthaler called *Nature Abhors a Vacuum*. At the end of the presentation Pleasant Rowland came running up to me and said I love the work of Frankenthaler. I can't believe you used her in your presentation. I feel that's how we nailed the job, so to speak. We were competing with four other landscape architects and we got the job and we began work.

Well, the island. It started with Evening Island, which is five acres, but as usual I tried to expand the scope as much as possible and included the entire Great Basin in it. It is the central biggest water body in the Botanic Garden and that gave us a chance to design the entire edge, the whole circumference of the Great Basin, plus of course the Evening Island, which was the central design of the whole thing.

For the planting I actually was inspired by Frankenthaler and we used great sweeps of plants in a very painterly way in this big landscape. Then I did the terrace in the shape of chambered nautilus, which is one of my favorite forms. I love that form and it gave us a chance to use lines in the terrace that remind one of the chambered nautilus. It was a meeting place for people just to pause, have a cup of tea, and just enjoy the landscape from a sort of high vantage point.

We built lots of models of the Botanic Garden and studied the paths first as a way of pinning down the design and locating the terrace. And we studied the way it would relate to the rest of the garden and that included two bridges. I saw the design of the bridges the first day when I was there to just look at the project before the presentation to the jury.

I saw if you were standing on the main terrace of Botanic Garden, I saw a high arch bridge on the left and I saw a very low serpentine bridge on the right. Certainly the serpentine bridge was inspired by my travels to Japan and the high arch bridge was inspired by Monet's bridge in his garden.

It's very funny because the color of the bridge became a big point of contention. The client was comprised of [a group of] 20 people and everybody had a different idea. So finally Barbara Carr, the president [of the Chicago Botanic Garden], said James van Sweden will decide what color the bridge is and whatever he says that's it. So I simply looked at the color of Monet's bridge in his garden, which is a kind of aqua color, beautiful, and I just said this is it. So they painted it that color and everybody loved it.

And the paths that connected are there. But we had carte blanche to change the paths in any way we wanted of course, and nothing had been done to the island. It was just spoils from dredging the Great Basin really.

The construction was very interesting on the Great Basin. They had to drain it so they built a dam and they drained all the water and they found a car on the bottom. It had

been there for 50 years. Of course they wondered if there would be a skeleton in it. There wasn't, but there was a set of golf clubs, a bag of golf clubs in the trunk. [LAUGHTER] So that was very good and we never did find out whose car it was, but it was a great way to dump it. I guess it was a clunker.

The Chicago Botanic Garden is a very satisfying design because of course it's so well-maintained. The Botanic Garden just keeps everything perfect for the exhibit. It's a people place and they want it to always look as Barbara Carr would say, have the wow factor. The other satisfying thing about the Chicago Botanic Garden is that it's an ongoing project because they keep adding other designs. The Science Center is something we're finishing up now. We're going to do a third bridge to Evening Island and it's designed and ready to go. They're just looking for the money, which should come in any day. All of this is very satisfying to us because no matter when we go in there, into the garden, it always looks absolutely pristine and beautiful.

The End