AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER

Oral History Transcript

**Interviewee:** Emily Browning Little

**Interviewer:** Toni Thomasson

**Date of Interview:** June 2, 2017

**Length of Interview:** 1:05:24

**Original Tape Number:** 3300

**Subject Headings:** Architects--Texas--Austin; Architecture--Texas--Austin; Architectural drawing; Gentrification--Texas--Austin; Architectural firms--Ownership

**Geographic Names:** Texas State Cemetery (Austin, Tex.); Barton Springs (Austin, Tex.); East Austin (Austin, Tex.); Seaholm Power Plant; Byrne-Reed House; Hard Rock Café (Austin, Tex); Schneider Store; Bremond Block; Christopher House; Texas State Capitol (Austin, Tex.); Sagrada Familia;

**Personal and Organizational Names:** Little, Emily Browning, 1951-; Alexander, Blake; Williamson, Roxanne; Swallow, Richard; Coote, Jim; Wagner, Cy; Jackson, Robert; Page Southerland Page; STG; McCann, Jana; Lambert, Liz; Lake Flato; Keeter, James; Cowden, Chris; Liu, Beili; Hadid, Zaha; Niemeyer, Oscar; Gaudi; Godfrey, Limbacher; Farrell, Jay; Clayton, Paul; Venturi, Robert; Clayton and Little Architects; Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; Women And Their Work; Barton Springs Conservancy; Preservation Austin; Hotel St. Cecilia (Austin, Tex.); Green Pastures

TONI THOMASON: This is Toni Thomason, today is Friday, June 2nd, 2017 and today I’m interviewing for the first time architect Emily Little. This interview is taking place at the Austin History Center at 810 Guadalupe Street in Austin, Texas. This interview is being done for the Austin History Center Architectural Archives, and is one of a series of interviews with and about Austin/Travis County architects. Good morning, Emily.

EMILY LITTLE: Good morning, Toni.

TT: Welcome.

EL: Thank you.

TT: Why don’t you start by telling me your full name and when and where you were born?

EL: My full name is Emily Browning Little, and I was born in Austin, Texas on June the 4th, 1951.

TT: It’s almost your birthday.

EL: It is.

TT: Happy early birthday.

EL: Thank you so much.

TT: Tell me about the house you grew up in.

EL: I grew up in a house designed by an [00:01:00] architect named Kiger, K-I-G-E-R, and it’s at 3928 Balcones Drive. And, in 1951 Balcones Drive stopped three blocks, three -- excuse me, three lots up from our house, we were at the corner of Balcones and Edgemont. And then, it was dirt; I mean the paved road stopped at our house, dirt road for three lots and then the rest was all Mt. Bonnell, and just the wild woods of Austin. So, we were on the outskirts, and Mr. Kiger lived in it for a couple of years with his family and then my parents bought it in, I think, ’54; and I lived there throughout high school, O’Henry, Austin High, and then went to UT, and have [00:02:00] spent all except two or three years in Austin, spent my life in Austin.

TT: And how long did the house stay in your family?

EL: It stayed in my family until my mother left it in about 20-- oh goodness, maybe 2009, and we sold to a neighbor and they demolished the house and built a new house.

TT: Did you ever work on the house, do work on the house?

EL: No, not a thing. It was a great -- it was a simple, little, mid-century -- not a great mid-century house, but there were architectural touches that were definitely was aware of. It was very -- just a very simple home.

TT: Okay, when did you know that you might want to be an architect?

EL: Well, it came to me sort of [00:03:00] in a secondary fashion; I have a bachelor’s degree in cultural anthropology, my father was a physics professor at UT, so education was, you know, primary in our home growing up and he said, “Oh, just major in what you love,” and so I loved cultural anthropology and then I got out and just sort of, thud, what do you do with that degree. And I moved to New York with a friend and just couldn’t -- and I went to the Museum of Natural History and they were not -- they were hiring PhD candidates to teach the kindergarten classes at the museum, so I thought this is not a field I’m going to pursue. So, I worked as a secretary and then I was promoted to administrative assistant, and I learned how to run an office, so in hindsight, all of this stacks up because at the end of a couple of years as -- in an office administration and I just thought oh my gosh, [00:04:00] I got to get a career. And, at that time it was sort of like doctor, lawyer, period; teacher maybe. And then I had a friend who had gone to graduate school in architecture at UT and she was -- she loved it, and she told me about it, and I had a -- I could draw, sort of, kind of a cartoonish method. And, I just thought, you know, that could be really fun, it was just that naïve and that innocent -- and I really wanted a career and so I applied. And I started thinking about it more and more, and very quickly I -- once I started school I began to understand how the cultural anthropology was the most wonderful platform to build upon, and it has guided my whole practice. So, it was a calculated move for a career that I really was so lucky. [00:05:00]

TT: That worked out.

EL: It worked out beautifully, I was very well suited, and I knew that quickly.

TT: What about that friend that went to graduate school?

EL: Yeah, she didn’t pursue it, she went one year.

TT: Oh, no.

EL: Yeah, she wasn’t even there when I got back from New York and went to school. But, it was what -- it was the impetus.

TT: That was it, interesting. Were there any instructors or professors at UT that particularly influenced you or helped you, or...?

EL: I think -- oh, definitely, my heart favorites are Blake Alexander, Roxanne Williamson, and Richard Swallow; all of them as individuals, as thinkers, as teachers, and they inspired me and opened the world of architectural history to me and that, again, was just foundational knowledge, and I loved their [00:06:00] dedication. And one time I got to go on a trip with Blake, Roxanne, and Jim Coote if you can imagine, to Washington, DC. You know, Roxanne was my roommate and I don’t know how I lucked onto that, but we toured and just -- it was just their -- I began to understand the lifestyle of an architect, that you would travel to see points of interest and study the meaning behind the buildings. Cy Wagner was the professor who really opened my brain up about design, so those four, those were my big four, although I loved UT, I thought it was a great school.

TT: I don’t know if I remember Cy Wagner, what did he --

EL: Cyrus Wagner, he taught design.

TT: Just design?

EL: Yeah, and he was kind of an ira-- is the word irascible -- he was a kind of a rough fellow but oh, gosh, brilliant; [00:07:00] and rugged, and the first day of class he showed the diagram of the brain, it was -- this was decades ago before we knew about left and right side, but he knew, and he started talking about the best architects are the ones that can jump from right to left and move through that and use language to explain their ideas rather than just drawings and so, he was most inspirational to me as far as design theory.

TT: Well, it sounds like we know the answer to the next question which was what particular aspects of your background and upbringing have shaped your design principles?

EL: Yes.

TT: We know your first degree had a huge impact.

EL: Right, yeah, and my father was a huge influence on me in terms of curiosity and travel. He loved to travel. [00:08:00] Road trips anywhere, anytime, 30 miles, 3,000, whatever; when I first got my driver’s license we jumped in the car and drove to Central America. And he was just a curious fellow and loved culture and so it just opened my eyes -- he opened my eyes to the world and why it looks the way it looks and how different cultures solve problems.

TT: And communication with people when you travel I suppose it sounds like he was probably very friendly.

EL: He was, he was. He was -- my mother was definitely the outgoing one, but he was a silent, steady sort. Not silent, but thoughtful.

TT: [00:09:00] Tell me about some of the architects around Austin that you’ve worked with.

EL: Well, Robert Jackson is my highlight. We lucked out, I lucked out, I was the Chair of the Austin Design Commission many, many years ago, and it was when the city was just starting the MBE/WBE Program, and Robert was on the Design Commission. I had just met him, he was brand new, and he called me up and he said, “Well I just went down to the City and they told me that as a white male I probably wasn’t going to get any work in Austin for a while.” Yeah, I know! And he said, “Do you want to go for this project?” and -- so we had the rotation list first, which was -- and he’s a brilliant designer and he is one -- I think one of Austin’s absolute unsung heroes. He’s brilliant, he’s -- oh he’s so good, he’s so very, very good. So I got the pleasure [00:10:00] and education of working with him and maintaining a long-term friendship with him. He was one -- Jana McCann and I were in school together and I admired her at the time and she went off to AA and to work in London and Paris, and then came back to Austin and worked for the City and now has her own firm, McCann Adams Studio. And I sit on the review committee with her at Mueller, Mueller Community, and she’s been influential to me as far as just her grasp of the minutia to urban planning. She can just run up and down the whole range of scale and I have admired her work greatly and her approach. And then Paul Clayton came along and he was my employee, I hired him as my right-hand man, and always had to have [00:11:00] a strong person in that position when you run a small firm, as I did, until I met him and then from then on I think we’re moving to the next question, but the current partnership with Paul Clayton -- oh, I want to backtrack.

TT: Okay.

EL: Two other firms that I’ve worked with that were important to me was Page Southerland Page at the time, now Page -- they were hired to do the CSC buildings that flank the Austin City Hall -- and Schneider Store, the historic building sat on the northeast corner of one of their blocks, and they were forced by the designation -- historic designation state and national on that historic building -- they were forced to leave it, to rehab it. And so they hired me to do the restoration, the rehab of this Schneider Store, [00:12:00] and it was boarded up, and controversial because Liberty Lunch had been part of it and next door, and, yeah. And it had been boarded up for years, so, and that’s when I got my real taste of how the big boys don’t really care about the historic little dot on the side. Especially when they’re doing one full block and they could just do the same building, but no, you have to carve out a little corner for the historic building. So, that’s when I really got tough on internally to what it took to navigate the waters with a big firm and as a consultant and preserve the historic. And then they hired me later to do Hard Rock Café, it was on East Sixth Street, and it had a kind of a deco-ish plaster façade done, maybe, in the ’70s [00:13:00] and we peeled all that off and that was an exciting project, because sometimes as a small firm you have to hook up with larger firms in order to do larger work, and they later -- see I did those two, and then we recently did Seaholm, we were the historic consultant for the rehab of Seaholm Power Plant and that was with STG. And those are the prime firms I’ve worked with.

TT: Did you enjoy working on Seaholm?

EL: Oh, yes, it was the thrill of a lifetime. But, I also -- that was a point when I kind of hit the wall on, gee whiz it’s a whole lot more fun to be the design architect, too, because, I mean I was in a meeting, I mean Jim Susman is an old pal of mine, but I walk into one meeting and he hissed, you know, because that was my job was the policeman, or the policewoman. You know, I had to say, “No, no, can’t do that, no you can’t do that,” because as a designer looking at Seaholm, an architect, you know you just want to [00:14:00] have at it.

TT: It’s an amazing building.

EL: It’s an amazing building, and --

TT: What about the intake structure, have you done much with --

EL: We did -- our firm did a proposal when the City had the call for entries and that’s when they didn’t accept any of them. That’s a very challenging building, and I can’t wait to see what Jeanne Gang does, but we did not. It wasn’t in our scope at the time, but we did the -- we did a competition solution but...

TT: Yeah, after they turned it over to the Parks Department it became a separate kind of project, peeled off from the Seaholm, bigger project.

EL: Exactly. The challenge there is the fact that those solid walls face the lake, and you want -- you’re just dying to open them up, so that’s the same thing at Seaholm Power Plant, that was my role to say, “No, it has to be a solid wall [00:15:00] in your gorgeous view,” so, but anyway. You know, you just roll with it and it toughens you up, learn how to play in the big leagues.

TT: So, how does Paul fit in to your organization?

EL: Paul, yes, well now he runs the show. But, it was a slow evolution, I hired him in 2001 and by ’07 he was ready to start his own firm, and for a while we coexisted; he had a different partner and we all -- we both -- we all officed in the same place and we used the same bookkeeper and pretty quickly we realized we were duplicating efforts on a lot of things, and I would use his resources for various projects and he would use me for various projects. We really enjoy working together, and at a certain point he just said, “What if I bought you, what if?” [00:16:00] And so we, through a lot of serious analysis, and I hired a consultant to help me, we structured a buyout and he bought my firm. And so, for five years we had a structured buyout over the five years, and I was a consultant to him. And then, in the -- we kept that going for a while and then a couple of years ago I became an employee, and my name is on the firm and -- but he runs it, and I really, you know, it -- I guess it could be a slippery slope for an architect, it was a dream come true for me to find someone with whom I shared principles of design and code of ethics. And --

TT: I would say you were quite fortunate, because one of the things I [00:17:00] hear in these interviews from more senior architects is the pain of how do you end the firm? It’s like they can never quit.

EL: Oh, exactly, Toni.

TT: They don’t know how to get out at the end.

EL: And I know -- I mean, it’s a miracle, because usually sole practitioners, which I essentially was, I mean, the biggest my firm ever was seven people, and I was always on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The -- yeah, I wasn’t a real calm boss, you know, Paul’s greatest advice to me, he said, “Emily, you have got to quit freaking out,” he said to me. I just remember it all the time, because I didn’t even know, I mean, I just, I was just thrown in the deep end and started up a firm and I’m, you know, I had business, an old family friend called and that’s how I got my first job, and it just, like, it was -- I was just running along with this train happening, running down the tracks, and I never studied business, [00:18:00] I wasn’t interested in business. I like having money, but it’s not the reason I’m an architect.

TT: So, when did your firm start, when did you have that?

EL: In ’83.

TT: Oh, okay.

EL: Yeah.

TT: So you must have been not too long out of school.

EL: I wasn’t even licensed, yeah, yeah, it was kind of a -- I got licensed, I opened my own office, and I remember the day I put the name on -- my name on the window, on the Bremond Block, and I remember the day I could put architect underneath it. It just said Emily Little for a long time, for one year, and then I -- it was in the works, but I hadn’t taken the exam. Yeah, so --

TT: That was very brave of you.

EL: Well, I had a big job from this old family friend, and then I got another one from a friend I grew up with. But, people like that, people with that career type, architects, usually just -- I mean I could just thought if I was just going to die face [00:19:00] first on my drafting table, you know, I just couldn’t see any way out, and I was getting tired of it and finding that right-hand man is so hard, so I just, when Paul suggested that, so -- and now, he, I think he has a double major, business and architecture from Tech, so I’ve seen what it’s like and experienced the beauty of working with someone who’s even keeled, understands business, has a growth plan, targets the kind of work he wants to do, and I just said yes for 30 years. Sure, yeah, I’ll be right there.

TT: Because you couldn’t take the risk, I guess, of turning anything down.

EL: No, no.

TT: So, you have two offices now, right?

EL: Yes we do.

TT: And how many employees?

EL: Oh goodness, now it’s, I think we have about twenty, [00:20:00] twenty-two perhaps, there’s an office in San Antonio; and Paul has grown by acquiring, he bought a small firm in San Antonio -- acquired Jonathan Card, who had a small firm there, and then he hired some real talent in San Antonio, and, excuse me, so that sort of muscled us up as far as design goes, and capability and experience. Because then your portfolio is all of a sudden deeper, bigger projects, and it was a gorgeous-- it’s just a wonderful stepping stone toward bigger projects. So now Paul attracts -- our firm attracts much larger projects that I would never have had the chance to work on had I stayed on my own with my somewhat limited, even vision, you know I just never [00:21:00] -- I was happy. And I don’t regret it, but I’m thrilled with this -- I feel like I’m just riding this wave and I’m just going to sail out of here on the crest, I hope; I mean, things will change, Austin will slow down at some point, but --

TT: Well, you know, I’ve heard -- this is what I’ve heard, that if you want to get a good doctor, to select a new doctor, you should go to someone young and right out of school because they’ve just had the latest training and they will be the best person for you to have. And then I’ve heard, for architects, that you always need to hire the oldest --

EL: Oh, that’s great.

TT: -- because they don’t do their learning in school, they do their learning through their career --

EL: That’s real true.

TT: -- and it culminates at the end of their career. What do you think of that?

EL: I think there’s a great deal of truth to that.

TT: [00:22:00] It sounds like what you’re saying about your own career, too.

EL: But, I have not, Paul has built the firm up I’m in now. He really has, and I know my role as the elder --

TT: Experienced.

EL: Experienced, but I know also that I’m -- I can feel my lessening of interest in the latest technical solutions, the latest products, the latest -- I just, there are people in my office that are younger, eager, you know just thrive on what the newest stuff is, and newest methods, and so I rely on them for that.

TT: Interesting, okay. I’m curious about this, do you talk to people outside of your office about [00:23:00] your work; is there anyone that you talk to, or is work all in your office and with your fellow employees?

EL: I talk about it with friends who are interested in design, and lately, for the past several years, we’ve been working on projects that are known in Austin, and people are dying to know, or the see our sign, because we work mostly in the central city, and they’ll see our sign and they’ll -- so I’m at a party and they’ll say, “What’s going on?” or, “What’s going on at Green Pastures?” I mean, I’ve heard that question so much because we just finished that project. But, I’m also extremely -- I mean I talk about the design fun of it, and the challenges and the meaning of it, but I don’t -- I’m very protective of clients, [00:24:00] and any matters of the business of the project. But I don’t have anyone that I would say, “Gosh, I just can’t figure out this detail.” Unless it was Jay Farrell or some architect that is in Austin that I’ve known since graduate school. But he would be a great interview, too, Toni; I hope you’ll get him someday.

TT: Oh, okay, we’ll put his name down. Tell me about projects in Austin, or Travis County, that you’ve worked on and if there are any that you feel have had a bigger impact on Austin, on its built environment.

EL: Well, I have a list here of sort of my big favorites, but as far as impact on [00:25:00] Austin’s -- on Austin, I feel like the bulk of my career has been in terms of small moves, like I’ve done so many additions and remodels in Hyde Park, but you don’t really know it when you’re driving through the neighborhood. I think I’ve been helpful in retaining the character of significant neighborhoods in Austin/Travis County.

TT: Sure, so it’s more a body of work --

EL: I think so.

TT: -- that impacts Austin.

EL: Yeah, I don’t have -- I mean, and the high profile ones are small, they’re all smallish, but Green Pastures is big, although to me it’s big because of the importance of that family and our history of Austin and just the values they stood for, and the rarity of six acres in the middle of south Austin, that’s sort of bucolic in nature. [00:26:00] But, Jeffrey’s and Josephine House on the corner at West Lynn and Twelfth, you know, that was another Austin favorite that we were asked to work on and change, and most people don’t like change, so you’re never going to make everyone happy with a project like that, but it’s fun to work on a really known structure and hear people talk about what they love about it and then try to keep that, but then bring it along into modern day.

TT: So, what are some of your other favorites?

EL: Yeah, well, the Byrne-Reed House, which is Humanities Texas, that was the most fun, because it had been wrapped in a stucco shroud and we didn’t even know what was underneath it, it was just this hideous white box, and we went to the interview and they said, “Well, there’s a historic building under here.” I’m like, right, but there was, and so that was just so much fun unpeeling that.

TT: [00:27:00] Was the inside also modified?

EL: It was awful, dropped ceilings, acoustical tile, carpet, you couldn’t -- you didn’t really have any sense of --

TT: What was there?

EL: No, none at all, inside or out. You could see the very edge of a gable eve at the top of the building and there was a little bit of this decorative sort of egg and dart sort of cornice, and you could see a little of that, but...

TT: So, what was it like uncovering all that was it piece by piece?

EL: Just so much fun. And the other thing is that it was Humanities Texas so very limited budget, so they had to stay in it as long as possible, so -- and tight budget -- so we superimposed photographs of the white box with the historic photographs that we found, and identified sort of rectangular areas, or square areas, [00:28:00] that we thought, “I wonder if that very expensive to replicate detail is still there?” And so we identified like 20 test holes that they cut in the stucco exterior and then we -- we have pictures, you take the flashlight, they would start cutting and you’d hear the rats just like (growl), scurry, scurry, scurry, it’s just grizzly. And then we’d peek in with our little hazmat suits on and you’d say, “There it is, there’s the scroll, there’s this!” or, it was just so much fun. And we had a -- we also set up Studio Eight, Milton Himes, Studio’s right across the street, so he let us put a camera, a webcam up in his dormer attic, and so we had that time-lapse.

TT: That’s great.

EL: Yeah, and then we started stripping down the inside, and luckily it was close to our office, and we were just hot-footing it over [00:29:00] there three times a week to see what they found, and everybody was -- all the demo guys were on red alert for cautious chipping as you remove these layers, and we found quite a bit.

TT: I bet they were as excited about it as you all were.

EL: Yeah, everyone got in the swim of it.

TT: Who was the contractor, do you remember?

EL: I can’t remember that at this moment.

TT: That’s okay.

EL: Sorry.

TT: Other favorites? You’ve got a list there.

EL: Oh yes, well, the Hotel Saint Cecilia was taking the historic house that was on the property and then building new buildings, and that was just a great, great client, Liz Lambert; great vision, good budget, and beautiful site. And once when I went over there to see it after it opened, there was a mother and with some little kids and they had spread out a blanket on the grounds and they were having a picnic, and I just thought, [00:30:00] mission accomplished. That they would feel the site, because it was such a beautiful site and we just tucked these new hotel rooms back in there but it’s a 14-room sort of boutique hotel. That was a fun one. The Texas State Cemetery was a big high point for me, that was a big -- I was the project manager and that was with Texas Parks and Wildlife, and there were 16 State agencies involved in it, because it was Bob Bullock’s pet project, so I had to navigate all of that with those State agencies. And they were all fighting for his favor and attention, and --

TT: That was a Lake Flato, wasn’t it?

EL: Lake Flato was the design architect. So I got to work with them. Thrilling, and really -- and a landscape architect they brought, Jim Keeter from San Antonio.

TT: Oh, I worked for him.

EL: Oh, Toni, I was just going to say, just, you know -- [00:31:00]

TT: He’s amazing.

EL: -- amazing. Wow.

TT: Right out of --

EL: Is he alive?

TT: I don’t know, I haven’t checked on him in a long time.

EL: I don’t know, oh, we should find that out.

TT: We should.

EL: I was so impressed with him and his manner and really learned a lot from how he conducted himself.

TT: Laura David used to tell me good stories about the cemetery project.

EL: It was fascinating. We relocated how many graves.

TT: Confederate graves.

EL: Confederate graves, 28 of them or something, and so I was -- and I kept my pearls in my desk drawer, because my office was three blocks away, and I had to go every time there was a funeral. You can’t close a cemetery, you just have to stop action, so I would just -- I had my black jacket and my pearls in the office and I would just throw them on and just run over there and I just saw amazing, like when Mrs. Shivers died? [00:32:00] I got the -- I just had to go be sure all the workers were quiet and that everything was handled properly, so that was a real fun project, but seeing those bodies exhumed was beautiful. I was so wary of walking up and seeing it, but there was just -- there were only bones, and but it was fantastic, and this is something you’ll appreciate, is that they -- the archaeologists set up shop in an old greenhouse on the site, they cleared the site first and exhumed the bodies -- exhumed the graves, let’s call them, I mean, they were remnants, and meticulously cleaned and examined every tiny item they took out of the graves. And then they were reburied, put back in different boxes and buried. It was just --

TT: The boxes were deteriorated?

EL: They were gone, the coffins were gone, clothing was gone; there were metal buttons, bones.

TT: I remember Laura telling me there were [00:33:00] like nylon stockings.

EL: That was the unbelievable one; there was a 1950s grave and it was the wife of a soldier, and they found nylon stockings in there. But with a team of archaeologists came this older woman, the illustrator, and she drew everything. Not the bones, but she drew the buttons, the buckles, the belt buckles, because they said that they could not replicate as well with photographs as they could her drawings. I’d love for you -- I’ll show you the book, they produced a beautiful book.

TT: They produced a book?

EL: Yeah, of her drawings and all the findings that they -- oh yeah, it’s amazing. And then --

TT: Nice, that was a good one.

EL: -- I wanted -- yeah, that was a great one. And then -- especially with my anthropology -- and then the other highlight [00:34:00] was doing Thirst, which was a public art project, I don’t know if you’re aware of it.

TT: I don’t know about that.

EL: Oh, it was so --

TT: Tell me.

EL: Well, it was a Robert Rauschenberg Foundation funded project, and Women in Their Work, which is a local arts organization been around for 30 plus years, Chris Cowden is the head of it, and they -- the Rauschenberg Foundation asked I don’t know how many arts organizations throughout the United States to submit ideas for projects that were sort of in a vein of Rauschenberg that they would fund, public art projects. And I saw Chris Cowden and she said, “I need to talk to you,” and she had already contacted Beili Liu who is a wonderful visual artist, or artist, works in various media. And so I got together with Bailey [00:35:00] and Chris, and we just sat around and brainstormed about how to do a big public art project that would -- we just thought well, you know, the drought is -- this was during our drought -- the drought is on everyone’s mind.

TT: Oh, now I know what it is.

EL: Yes. And so we came up with this wild idea of putting a dead tree in the middle of Lady Bird Lake, and we were selected, and very few, I can’t remember how many, were selected in the United States, but we won this grant, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. And Chris Cowden, bless her heart, she was just -- she was the best leader, she was just right behind us just, you know, whatever we needed she would raise money for, and she found a ranch right outside of town. We started thinking we’ll just get a trailer right on the edge of the lake, and pluck it up, this was during our naïve [00:36:00] ignorance is bliss phase of the project, and then you start thinking about what is the public going to do if you just yank a living tree out of a parkland and, like, urgh, that’s not going to happen. I could talk about Thirst for a long time, but it was a collaborative effort extraordinaire, we found a dying tree on a ranch outside of town, excavated it --

TT: Moved it.

EL: Mo-- yeah, I mean, painted it, took the leaves off, on and on, figured out a way to drive a steel pile down into the bottom of the lake, and we had to go to -- we had over 50 meetings, various City entities getting -- and Thirst even had an address, because to get the site permit it had to have an address. You can imagine what we went through, [00:37:00] but we did it, and we barged it down, to-- lifted it, it was just a blast, it was a 38-foot cedar elm and it was painted white that was up for three months in the middle of the lake.

TT: I remember there was a flood.

EL: Two, yeah, I mean yes it brought the rain, everybody just couldn’t, I mean it was shocking that we had two floods in the middle of the drought, but it ruined our installation, but we would motivate, “Chris, we need $5,000 more.” “Oh, sure.” So, it was just the collaboration of all the kind of people that took from tow-truck drivers to painters to -- it was fascinating.

TT: And what about all those flags, I mean?

EL: Oh yes, and Beili drew a beautiful tree, and put prayer flags, yeah, good, thank you for (inaudible) that. That was huge too, and thousands of hours stapling those to the streamers and --

TT: The volunteers who helped.

EL: [00:38:00] Some great community effort. So, may I say one thing?

TT: You certainly may.

EL: That my favorite project, when you said tell me more about one, which I’ve just told you so much about Thirst, but I wanted to mentioned Christopher House, which I did very early in my career and was hired way out of my league, but by a woman named Carol Cody, who was a nurse practitioner and married to Ken Blair who they were on the front edge of AIDS care when AIDS really was not treatable, a voracious killer, and they lead Austin’s efforts to deal with that illness in Austin. And, they bought this defunct nursing home in east Austin that was 14 inches out of level over the overall length of it, yeah we ended up cutting the studs different heights.

TT: Wow, I remember the project, [00:39:00] it was huge.

EL: That was, yeah, it was huge, and that was such an important project to me because it was nonprofit, it was visionary beyond and beyond, and lead by a gentle soul with a will of iron, and she set a vision and I saw what happens when you hold to your vision and people -- we just fell in line and just whatever it took, we did, whatever it took, we did. But, that was a real moving project for me.

TT: I remember going to the celebration when it opened.

EL: Is that right?

TT: The City had a small involvement in it, I think.

EL: I don’t doubt it, oh I’m sure.

TT: Through the Health Department, I think.

EL: There was so much funding from every level, everyone in town, it was really --

TT: It was really quite [00:40:00] a happy day.

EL: It was, and now it lives on as a hospice, so; it was not designed to be a hospice, it was at a time in the disease treatment that people with AIDS would live -- felt fine, and then there would be just a spell of illness and then -- or it was a place to go to give a caregiver a break, if there’s a caregiver at home, then the patient can go there, but the way it’s all designed is that they each had their own exterior door through a beautiful garden, so you didn’t walk through a scary hospital with all those IVs and stuff, you didn’t go through that corridor to go visit your friend, that the patient could just go into the garden or go into their room and --

TT: So that works well for hospice.

EL: Yes, oh yes, it works beautifully. So, that was a great deal that Hospice Austin was able -- because the need for that type of facility faded but hospice [00:41:00] stepped in, Hospice Austin owns it now.

TT: Thank you. Would you be able to describe an evolution in your work or your thinking about architecture from the time you started until today? Have you noted any change?

EL: I can’t say that my -- excuse me, I can’t say that my work has changed that much, but I will say that I have gained a great appreciation for architecture as sculpture, like I think now the forms like Zaha Hadid’s work, you know, is so elegant, so beautiful, it’s so foreign to me, I love it, I admire it. I could never do it, but I see that as a gift of an [00:42:00] extraordinary talent. And then, you know, you see people fall far short in an attempt to do that, so I would just say that I -- my appreciation has expanded greatly, although good or bad, maybe my solutions haven’t changed that much.

TT: Well, you did stop freaking out.

EL: I did. (both laugh)

TT: You’ve evolved there.

EL: Right. Oh, God.

TT: Are you a sketcher?

EL: Oh, yes, very much so. Mandatory; I can’t really even talk or think without it.

TT: Really?

EL: Yeah, so I -- and I’m frustrated by the computer. I love it, it’s impressive, but that our staff can’t draw for me what they’re thinking about, I mean I try to really [00:43:00] stay open minded and I just think wow their powers of visualization are better than mine, because it’s so much easier to draw what you’re trying to convey, but they don’t have that as a tool on the most part. But we’re really bringing it back in our office.

TT: Are you?

EL: Yes, yes, we have a young fellow who is a wonderful illustrator and we only show hand sketches in schematic design which I am very proud of, because I think the computer drawings are hideous number one, do not convey the life and spirit needed to engage a client at schematic -- you got to set the hook.

TT: Well, I was going to ask you if you felt like sketching and model building still had a role.

EL: Definitely, definitely. And we’re bringing it back, but it has been gone, it dried up, and I hope that it’s making a comeback. [00:44:00] And it is in the profession as well but certainly in our firm, but I think it’s coming back because people saw the other method not succeeding, you simply can’t inspire someone with straight, flat, they don’t even know line weight.

TT: So, we’ve got this whole generation of people who have been trained in architecture school without sketching, are they going to learn to sketch, do you think?

EL: We are, we have a -- what do they call it, Drink and Draw on Friday afternoons.

TT: Oh my gosh, really?

EL: Yeah, Drink and Draw.

TT: Fun.

EL: Yeah, it is fun, and so we bring sketches and they’re just little doodles that we -- as you work -- as you’re -- it’s not any presentation kind of sketch, it’s like what you did during the week trying to figure out whatever project you’re working on, whatever aspect you want to talk about, and we just pin them up. It’s also a really good way for a firm that gets as large [00:45:00] as we are now for everyone to kind of have a general idea of what’s going on.

TT: Sure, oh I like that. So, do you have a daily ritual that gets you ready for the design process?

EL: Well, I sure used to, you know. Now I’m in the golden years of some level of ineffectiveness, but when I really had to produce I had a real method, but my office was just right next door to the house that I live in, and so I was able if I knew I had a big morning of design the next day I would get my desk all cleared off and just lay out, I would just look at the problem, or the site plan, or just refresh my memory. And then I would just go home and have a normal evening, and then I would wake up around four, like the four to seven slot was my [00:46:00] time --

TT: To be creative.

EL: Yeah.

TT: Wow.

EL: And it was delicious, and I would just get -- I would wake up I’d get my coffee and I would just go to work. I wouldn’t get all ready, I would just like throw on a sweatshirt or something.

TT: You’re over there in your slippers.

EL: Oh yeah, yeah, it wasn’t for public consumption, but it was -- and I would -- I’ve heard myself say this to friends, you know, I would kind of like wake up at the drafting table and it would just sort of -- but I set this little seed the night before, but not a lot of conscious thinking about it.

TT: Just let your brain cogitate overnight.

EL: Yeah, and it was so nice to walk into such a quiet room, because by eight the buzz is starting, and phone and all that, and then it’s just a different wavelength of brain activity that I’m not able to do it -- like our office now we just have, I think I’m a more my deep think happens quietly, and [00:47:00] we have a very collaborative atmosphere at our office now where you can just be tossing around ideas with people and they’re just like oh yeah, okay, got it, and then that’s it, that’s the design process. It’s another way of doing it, and I’m learning, but --

TT: It’s not natural for you, it doesn’t sound like.

EL: I always think, well did you think about it hard enough, or long enough, or...?

TT: Was there a project that you worked on or that you did yourself that indicated to you that your career was taking off, oh yeah, I’m going to be able to do this.

EL: Oh yes, well I -- yeah, I think my first project I told you was a big project, old -- for an old family friend and it was on an historic home and that’s kind of how my interest in all that started, and then on the heels of that and old friend asked me to do a project over in Pemberton for her. They lived in a duplex and they wanted it converted [00:48:00] to single family, and that was the first year of the AIA Homes Tour, and so that house was on that homes tour. So that was the first time I ever saw a lot of people, strange people -- strangers go through a project I did and respond positively, and that was a turning point.

TT: Reinforcing.

EL: Very early on, yeah.

TT: And you were there to talk to the visitors, I guess.

EL: Right, and then I think -- and I can’t really remember from then on, I guess the phone just rang, because --

TT: Well I’m sure you had lots of good contacts through your having lived here your whole life.

EL: Oh yes like I lived in east Austin but for many years of my life I was always driving west, you know, where the money was and where people had money to work on their houses.

TT: Well you talked a [00:49:00] little bit about travelling with your father, how about travel later in life, how has that influenced your work, if any?

EL: Well, I love to travel; it’s my favorite pastime, and well the two highlights were Brazil to see Oscar Niemeyer’s work, it was just fantastic and Lina Bo Bardi, and then that landscape Burle Marx and he worked with landscape architect -- the gardens, the public spaces that those guys created was just staggering and then that was thrilling and then Japan, going to Kyoto and seeing that craftsmanship and relationship to nature, both of those have been [00:50:00] very powerful. But I just love, I love seeing how the everyday person lives in foreign countries, I love just to walk in neighborhoods. And also I got to go to Helsinki and I went out and saw Aalto’s Experimental Lake House that he did for himself, right after his wife died, and that was so impressive. He said he used 50 different kinds of brick, all different patterns; I don’t know if he laid it or he was there with the mason, but that inspired me a lot, about just projects of my own going around the house, you know, just use the samples, use the pile of samples.

TT: That’s great. Are there any projects that did not happen either for you in your own career, or maybe just in our city, something that didn’t happen that you wish, ugh, [00:51:00] I wish that it had come to fruition.

EL: Well, I don’t know that in hindsight Venturi would be the firm I would want to do our big city museum but I sure as heck wish we had one, a really big, fine building. That’s a loss; we did a serious study for Mexic-Arte in their old building on the southeast corner of Fifth and Congress, that didn’t happen I wish that could’ve happened because I fear that building will just continue to crumble. They can’t even use the second floor now, and it’s been eight to ten years since we did our proposal. Yeah, so that was a chance to save something like that.

TT: It’s usually a funding issue it seems, for both of those I’m sure.

EL: Oh yes, of course. And then the third regret is that I wish [00:52:00] Seaholm had been able to be figured out to be for public use, the power plant. I mean, I’m thrilled it’s saved and it’s saved and who knows what its future will be.

TT: In a hundred years.

EL: Yeah, it could happen.

TT: It could happen.

EL: It could happen, but as just a place that everyone would be able to enjoy.

TT: Sure. Personally, what are you most fascinated with outside of architecture?

EL: It would be art and travel. The few projects I’ve done in fine arts are exciting but I also love to see art and performance art and that art and travel, and I love to go swimming [00:53:00] at Barton Springs.

TT: Okay, you’re not a Deep Eddy person.

EL: I’ll go to Deep Eddy but I prefer Barton’s.

TT: Just because it’s colder or bigger, natural?

EL: Oh, colder, bigger, but yeah, the natural -- there’s a spiritual something or other going on there that I don’t feel at Deep Eddy.

TT: It’s a little too cold for me.

EL: Is it?

TT: I like Deep Eddy.

EL: Well, I don’t blame you.

TT: What excites you about Austin today?

EL: Oh, I’m thrilled by so much, it’s just a boom town and for architects boom towns are fun. I love the idea of increased density, especially downtown, CodeNext. I’m wary of certain aspects of it, but I feel like it’s thrilling to me to think I mean having spent a career adding on, [00:54:00] expanding houses on small lots it’s just I think there’s a lot to be done that we don’t think about, or don’t understand, and so I am pleased to see that encouraged at the code level. Let’s see, I think that’s --

TT: Concerns, opposite side of that question.

EL: Concerns, yeah, well, pricing out the average person; yeah, values, property values and not enough required housing, affordable housing downtown and close in, even.

TT: And you’ve lived in east Austin for how many years?

EL: I have lived there for 33.

TT: Huge changes.

EL: Unbelievable; I used to go to the Texaco [00:55:00] hoping they had anything that was like white liquid that I could put in my coffee, yeah, and now I can just roll out my door to the finest Italian, Asian, whatever cuisine home-made everything, it’s just --

TT: Locally-grown produce.

EL: Locally-grown everything, the purest, the finest, the best. Gelato shop in east Austin, you know, unheard of.

TT: Would you say you like it better now living there or do you miss the old days of pioneering?

EL: The pioneering had an edge of danger that was a little, some -- mildly disconcerting, you just had to live very --

TT: Carefully.

EL: Carefully. And I like the increased safety, [00:56:00] I love feeling so comfortable in my neighborhood and knowing my neighbors. It’s just parking and traffic, you know the common complaints. And the loss of a lot of neighbors that had been priced out, that’s hard to watch, and Angle-- what is word -- Anglofication? Did I make that one up?

TT: Anglicizing?

EL: Anglicizing, yeah. Gentrification of my neighborhood that was so rich, so --

TT: Diverse.

EL: Diverse, yeah, so great.

TT: Do your employees live around the office, is the office moving?

EL: It has moved, yes, it’s at 2201 North Lamar [00:57:00] now.

TT: Oh, okay.

EL: Mm-hmm, you ought to come see us there.

TT: I will.

EL: It’s very nice. One time I was talking to one of our employees when we were still on the east side and I said they were looking for a house I said well why don’t you look on east side, and they said, “I can’t afford the east side.” And that was kind of a sobering moment.

TT: Wake up.

EL: Wake up, yeah, it was like, ooh, it’s not very affordable over there anymore.

TT: What advice would you give students and young architects today?

EL: I wrote down my three points: draw, travel, and diversify. And, I think, as we were talking before we started the interview how exciting our profession is that there’s so much you can do with an architecture path, and the collaborations possible with all sorts of other professions, healthcare professionals was one of my thrills, you know [00:58:00] I mean it just I feel like we have the best profession, I love -- I’ve loved it, and I just say don’t follow one path.

TT: So, that’s what you mean by diversify.

EL: Diversify.

TT: Be open to --

EL: Excuse me, yes.

TT: I see.

EL: Yeah, be open to what all architecture can encompass. And if you love making videos or whatever you love, hook that into architecture somehow.

TT: What percentage of architects do you think are really designers?

EL: Small.

TT: That’s what I think, too.

EL: Fifteen?

TT: I don’t know.

EL: Twenty?

TT: I’d say five, sometimes

EL: Okay, five.

TT: I don’t know.

EL: We struggle all the time in our firm, like we got to [00:59:00] hire a designer, we’ve got a lot of technicians and project managers, oh my gosh, we have the best, we really do. But, we have got to have this spark, where’s this spark?

TT: How do you get someone?

EL: Luck, word of mouth.

TT: Stealing.

EL: We haven’t stolen yet, I don’t know how to say, we wouldn’t, but we have had people come to us because they like what we’re doing and they like the kind of projects that we attract, so that’s great. So we think, if we just keep doing really good work.

TT: That’s true, it will attract the best.

EL: We hope so.

TT: Do you have a favorite building, just in Austin, in the whole world; can you tell me about that?

EL: Well, the State Capitol’s my favorite [01:00:00] building in Austin, I just love it. I love what it represents, especially in the old pictures of Austin, that people were so proud of their government that they finally had civilization and a government that they were able to build this structure of such majesty.

TT: It was huge on the landscape.

EL: Huge, laughable, I mean if we saw that building in Austin now relative to what’s going on, I mean, outcry, the protest would endless. It was huge, and I just love that spunk, I love that vision and I love the fact that it took how many years to build, and the whole thing. Yeah, so, and then the world -- I think the most I’ve ever been moved by a building was at this underground mosque in Cordoba, Spain, it was a complete surprise to me but as far as I could see were these arches, striped arches, [01:01:00] on slender columns, and it was underground that I don’t -- something about has haunted me forever, in a good way, stayed with me but it was also just profound, I mean I had a visceral react-- physical reaction.

TT: Only been there once?

EL: Mm-hmm. I should go back.

TT: You need to go back, it sounds like.

EL: I do, that’s a great reminder. But, you know, Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia, I just love exaggerated whimsy and thrill, maybe I’m just a thrill seeker, I think, at heart and all of that’s just is whimsy, I love it that he would -- it’s just those artists that -- those artistic souls that has to come out, and they’re just compelled to do it and I remember there was his room where Gaudi lived in Parque Güell, [01:02:00] and there’s just a tiny little cot in a room, you know. Just, it’s all for the art and architecture, so that, I’m deeply affected by all of that.

TT: Well, I believe that’s the end of our questions, is there anything that we did not talk about that you would like to talk about or say?

EL: I would, because I think one aspect of my career that has been enriched and is I think a word to students and to new architects is to be involved in your community. And, I know that I would never have had the career I had if I hadn’t been on -- early on I was President of the Board at the Heritage Society, now Preservation [01:03:00] Austin, and then I was head of the Board of Texas Fine Art Association, and the people on that, the passion of nonprofits and volunteer organizations that believe in Austin and believe in the community and want to improve it, there’s just nothing like that kind of energy. And now my latest is the Barton Springs Conservancy, relatively new group but there was a wonderful master plan done of Barton Springs, I don’t know if you’ve seen it, Limbacher and Godfrey, it is a -- were you working -- were you still with the City when they did it?

TT: No, I just kind of keep up with stuff they’re doing, I love their work and --

EL: Yeah, I love their work too, and it’s just the most complete document that you can imagine, and they’re -- it was produced, printed, and then what? And I was asked to join just because [01:04:00] of my connection to Preservation Austin, and being an architect, but I was on the founding board of these people that number one love Barton Springs; they’re lawyers, they’re -- they’re all kinds of people, economists, water hydrologists-- all these different sorts. And just a love of Barton Springs brought us all together, so community work enables you to meet new people that are outside of the field of architecture and give back, but that kind of giving, all it does is get your name out in front of people. I didn’t luckily do it for that reason, I think people say that’s the way to build a career, I just did it because it’s what I loved and Preservation Austin was the way to know about old buildings; but it’s a beautifully reciprocal process of doing good work, doing meaningful work, and getting work from that, and meeting all kinds of [01:05:00] fascinating people, so I would say work in your community.

TT: Get out there and volunteer.

EL: That’s it, just like you.

TT: Anything else?

EL: I think that’s it, and I thank you so much, it’s so great that you’re doing this, Toni.

TT: I enjoy it, and appreciate you coming in.

EL: Sure, thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE