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TONI THOMASSON: This is Toni Thomasson. Today is November 16th, 2017, and today I’m interviewing for the first time architect Robert Renfro. This interview is taking place at 1117 West Ninth 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, Bob.

ROBERT RENFRO: Good morning, Toni.

TT: Why don’t we start with you giving me your full name and when and where you were born.

RR: Robert Terry Renfro, June 30th, 1931, in Jacksonville, Texas. But we actually lived in Hillsboro. My mom decided she wanted to have me in her hometown, but the doctor had delivered all the babies in Cherokee County at the time, and I happened to be [00:01:00] one of those.

TT: And did you spend your whole youth growing up there?

RR: No. I spent until I was 14 in Hillsboro, which is up north -- south of Dallas and Fort Worth. Moved to Austin in 1944. And went to junior high school at the old Allen Junior High, which is where the First Baptist Church is today. And then went to Austin High School, which was the only high school -- except for there was one, the Anderson, for African Americans on the East Side. So Austin was a pretty small city at that point.

TT: And you went to UT?

RR: Went to UT. Majored in Plan II. And it was quite interesting being even invited into Plan II. In these days, it’s almost impossible to get into it, but those were different [00:02:00] times. And about half of the people in my class were World War II veterans, so that was an interesting sort of juxtaposition of a whole bunch of 16- and 17-year-olds with these old guys who had --

TT: Seen it all?

RR: -- fought in Iwo Jima and various places. And in 1950 -- I was about to go into my junior year -- was when the Korean War broke out. And I enlisted in the Air Force in January 1951. And shall we just continue on with that narrative?

TT: Sure.

RR: Okay.

TT: Give me a rough outline.

RR: All right. Well, I didn’t have a particularly outstanding military career. I spent the entire time in San Antonio. And did get a lot of courses in night school -- in business administration. Was discharged in 1954. And by then, I decided that I didn’t want to [00:03:00] -- I wanted some kind of an artistic profession. I didn’t know what that was. And when I was in the Air Force, I ran across a book on industrial design. And I thought, Hmm, that sounds interesting. And so I started researching it. And there were several schools in the United States at that time who were teaching industrial design or were well-known for it: one was Pratt Institute in New York, and ArtCenter College in LA, and then Rhode Island School of Design. So I got out of the service and took some business courses and got a degree in business, and also started taking some art classes. And applied for Pratt and was accepted. And went to Pratt in 1955. And graduated with a bachelor of industrial design degree from Pratt in 1958. That’s where I met my first wife, Nancy Winberg, who also was an industrial designer. And shall I just continue [00:04:00] on? Because it goes on and on.

TT: Well, let’s stop a minute and tell me about art. Did anyone influence you? Had you known in high school, maybe, that you --

RR: Not a soul. It just wasn’t -- I mean, there was perhaps one art class in Austin High at the time, and it just wasn’t in my radar. I remember when I was a little bitty boy, my mom and dad had a café in Hillsboro, which is part -- and also the Greyhound bus station was there. And I would sit at the end of the counter, and they had very thin paper which was -- I guess they put down, you know, when they -- sort of like a placemat, but very, very thin -- and I’d put that over comic books and I would trace comic books. So that was about my only exposure to art. And that was when I was very young. [00:05:00] And then when I went to UT, it just -- this wasn’t something -- because it was not a profession that one could make a living at, presumably -- in reality, for the most part. When I was in the Air Force, as I said, I saw this book on industrial design. I thought, Hmm, that’s a combination of art and designing objects that were sold. All kinds of things -- because just about everything is designed one way or another, whether it’s by a skilled person or someone not so skilled. And you see a lot of that around the marketplace. And when I got to Pratt in 1955, I just -- it was Valhalla. You know, New York City, Brooklyn. This was the age of abstract expressionism. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where we would go and sit on the floor and do sketching. And [00:06:00] all of my colleagues were a little bit younger than me, because most of them were just out of high school. And quite a number of them had gone to music and arts high schools in New York and they could already draw like Michelangelo, and here I was just learning how. But I caught up. And so the whole atmosphere of, you know, a couple of hundred arts students who are going to go off and major in professions that -- not just fine art, but industrial design, advertising design, illustration. So we were all in the same boat -- you know, working half the night, trying to come up with an artistic solution to designing a refrigerator -- which I did later in years at Frigidaire. (laughs)

TT: It must have been an exciting time for you, though, to be in New York and --

RR: It was extremely exciting. It was very safe. We would go out and walk in the middle of the night, walk over the Manhattan Bridge into Manhattan. Never a thought [00:07:00] of being accosted or mugged or anything like that. And all of my buddies were all -- you know, they were thinking the same way I was. You know, let’s do some art, let’s make some money at it, and let’s get a job and a profession. And I happened to have -- my fiancée also was an industrial designer. That was Nancy Winberg. And so we had a relationship together. A lot of students -- in architecture school --

TT: I’m stopping this.

(break in audio)

TT: Okay. Carry on.

RR: So where do you want to go next?

TT: Well, you finished Pratt and you must have gone off to work then, huh?

RR: Okay. Well, more than anything, I wanted to work in New York City as an industrial designer. That would be -- and then, perhaps, go back to Dallas -- go back home. You know, somewhere -- being [00:08:00] home. Well, I happened to be -- in 1958, one of many recessions that I experienced through my career in art and architecture. And I would walk into an industrial design office and I’d say who I was and I had just graduated from Pratt. And in New York, they would say, “Well, congratulations” -- and the interview was over. So I got a job with General Electric in Syracuse in the military division. And that was about the furthest place I wanted to go, but it was the only job offer I got. So here I go off to Syracuse, which is the snow belt of the world, right?

TT: Yes. My ex-husband is from there.

RR: Oh, is that right? (laughs) Fortunately, the department I was in, even though it was a military division, was about industrial design [00:09:00] and illustration, and they built models of all kinds of things. For example, in the illustration department, they would show the GE equipment inside a submarine, but they would cut away the submarine, and it was under water, and they would show the console of some kind for the Polaris missile. And the illustrators were doing that, and they were terrific. And the fellow I worked for was really more an architect than he was an industrial designer. And the vice president wanted his office redesigned, which was a very terrific place for me to sort of settle in -- my first job. And Herman Miller had just come out with a big lounge chair -- the big, you know, very famous lounge chair. And I think we bought the very first one that came off the assembly line from Herman [00:10:00] Miller for the vice president. And I designed a conference table. And the chairs were the first ones -- the indoor/outdoor chair it was called at that time -- which was made of aluminum with a sort of plastic sling in between. And that showed up in the Herman Miller catalog one year. So that was fun. Also, we wanted to do some kind of decorative things on the wall. At that time, there was a sculptor in New York -- I can’t even remember his name -- who was doing a lot of sand casting. He would take a container, fill it full of sand and sculpt it, and then pour plaster into it. And so we did something like that -- sort of looking at the space world from the standpoint of GE and putting it on the wall. From there --

TT: So you were already getting exposure to architecture there.

RR: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TT: Was that really maybe the first hint you had that [00:11:00] that was of interest to you?

RR: Yeah. Yes, it was. And then I did a conference room -- selecting, you know, all the furniture and the materials -- the colors and all that. And that was an interesting mistake -- mysterious -- a mystery that I came across. We chose some beautiful -- I think they were Jens Risom chairs that were covered with leather. And I had a beautiful blue carpet that I chose. And I thought, Boy, wouldn’t gold leather on those chairs look dynamite? Well, it didn’t. (laughs) It looked like a greenish sort of slime. (laughs) And then the next job was, there were six or eight managers in one of the buildings -- these are old, tilt-up slab buildings -- that wanted to have their offices all redesigned. [00:12:00] And so I was put in charge of that. So this was a long series or line of managers, one right after another -- pretty high-level managers. So I measured the first office, and I said, “Okay. All the other six are going to be the same dimension.” And then I talked with the secretaries of the all the managers, put what they wanted in their office -- the kind of furniture, the storage, et cetera. You know, and then there would be sort of the anteroom for the secretaries and then the office room for the manager. So we proceeded to build all of the built-ins for all of those six or eight offices. Well --

TT: They weren’t the same --

RR: -- the building wasn’t square. (laughs)

TT: Oh, no!

RR: So they had to do a lot of re-cutting to get those to fit in.

TT: Good lessons you learned there, huh? (laughs)

RR: Good -- very good lessons. So then, fortuitously, about that time, [00:13:00] I said, “Boy, I don’t want to be on a military division at this point.” And I was married by then, and my wife was working as an industrial designer, but doing interior design for an architectural firm in Syracuse, and she didn’t really like doing interior design. And she was -- through a friend, who was one of -- somewhere within the GE corporate ladder -- said, “Well, I wonder if she might be interested in doing a model house with products for General Electric that we would show to the stockholders.” And she jumped at the chance. So she designed this house, which is all glass, and it was just wonderful. And then she came up with lots of different ideas right out of her head -- really bright young woman. Such things as this: a telephone that didn’t have a wire [00:14:00] to it; TV sets that were only this thick. And she would illustrate those and make little clay figures. And all the little models -- little things like that. And General Electric built the model of the house. And then she put all her little figures in there -- little -- I mean, that sounds kind of -- not very respectful, but they were little. They were small.

TT: Scale figures. (laughs)

RR: Scale figures. You know, terrific. They were little cartoon characters. And it was photographed highly and it was presented to the board of directors of GE and then became an advertising -- thing for their GE newspaper and their yearly report, and it went into that. Nothing ever came of it, but she got a big boost from that. And I decided, well, [00:15:00] it was time for us to try to get back to New York. So I applied for Henry Dreyfuss, who was a well-known industrial designer, and was offered a job. And we said, “Well, I don’t think we can really afford to live in New York.” And about that time, very fortunately, a friend of Nancy’s -- and Kathy’s -- at the time was working for General Motors on the 1964-’65 World’s Fair. So he contacted -- Nancy and me both said would we be interested in interviewing for a job working on the World’s Fair in the General Motors pavilion. So we said, “You bet.” So we went to -- moved to Detroit and met Kathy there, as well -- just within the first year that -- and so we’ve known each other for 50, 60 years.

TT: And we should introduce Kathy, who’s sitting in with us today. What is your last name, Kathy?

KATHRYN RENFRO: Renfro.

TT: Before Renfro.

KR: Yes. [00:16:00] I didn’t hear if there was a question there?

TT: What was your name before Renfro?

KR: Oh, Kathryn Snow.

TT: Snow. Okay.

KR: Uh-huh.

TT: Well, just to explain for the transcription that you’re Bob --

KR: I’m sorry, I can’t hear.

TT: Just to explain for the transcription that you’re Bob’s current wife.

KR: Yes, okay.

RR: So we went to work for General Motors, and we had a -- not at the Tech Center -- that came later -- but a building that was about six blocks from the Tech Center. It was an old industrial building which was set up just for -- to design for the pavilion and all of the exhibits inside the pavilion. And it was going to open in 1964 and then for ’65. That was the 25th anniversary of the 1939 World’s Fair, which I got to see when I was a little boy. And I remember it very well.

TT: Where was the ’39?

RR: In New York. In Flushing Meadows, where the one in ’64 was going to be. It was going to be on the same grounds. [00:17:00] And Nancy went to work to design the kitchen of the future. Which she did. And she came up with incredible ideas. You know, recycling paper products and plastic products -- so that you didn’t really have dishes, you’d just recycle everything. It was really going to be pretty exciting. And I was working on the theme ride, where you would be on little benches with headsets around you with speakerphones -- speakers -- and off to one side, you would see all of these things of the future -- how the world was going to look in the next 25, 50 years. Well, this is -- a couple of years ago, it was the 50th anniversary of the ’64 World’s Fair. And I was working on the exhibits of those -- city of the future, Antarctica of the future, space of the future, [00:18:00] the rainforest of the future. So I was working on building designs. You know, these were just sort of interesting sculptural ideas of what buildings might look like in the future. So I started -- Boy, architecture’s really interesting. Even though I was just styling. And these were going to be buildings anywhere from a foot tall to ten feet tall of some future-looking thing. They weren’t really buildings -- not architecture, per se. But they were supposed to give sort of a look of what the city could look like. And today, many of the buildings look like some of the ones we did over 50 years ago.

TT: That’s great.

RR: So the World’s Fair ended. And shortly before it ended, they decided -- even though they had told us initially that they had unlimited budget and they were going to [00:19:00] spend every penny of it. So one of the things they said -- “Well, sorry, Nancy, but I think we’re going to have to cut out the kitchen of the future.” And then she said, “Well, if you do, I’m quitting.” And they said, “Oh, no. Nancy, you can’t quit. You have a future here.” And she said, “I’ll quit if you cut out the kitchen of the future.” They did, and she did. She quit, and then started working for an architect in Detroit. So I said, “Huh. Architecture. I don’t want to be an industrial designer anymore.” I had sort of reached the top of what I thought I was going to ever achieve -- styling, basically. I was sent back to the Tech Center, which Eero Saarinen designed, as you know. And fantastic buildings. And, you know, just this -- sort of a -- a building with all the possible things that anyone would possibly want -- all the watercolors, the brushes, the [00:20:00] paper, the d’arches paper.

TT: How exciting.

RR: -- (laughs) I could possibly want. So I had more at home than I did at work. And I was put as just one more designer on refrigerators -- after doing all of these buildings for the World’s Fair. I said, “I don’t think this is for me. I think I’m going to go to architecture school.” And then so I started looking around. I said, “Well, Yale just had a new building built by Paul Rudolph” -- of whom I had no idea even who he was at the time. I said, “Boy, that’s really interesting.” So I contacted Yale. And they said, “Well, have you had calculus?” I said no. So I took a calculus course in night school. I had never had trigonometry, so I taught myself trigonometry, figuring I might need that. And applied to one school: Yale. Real cheeky, you know?

TT: (laughs) What confidence. [00:21:00]

RR: I had no idea how difficult it is to get into Ivy League schools. And I sent off a portfolio -- it was about a foot thick -- of lots of artwork I had done, and photographs. And then they gave me a year and a half advanced standing. And I’m going to have to ask you to shut that off for a minute.

(break in audio)

TT: Okay. We’re back.

RR: So while I was still in Detroit, a friend of mine and Kathy’s at the time -- who had gone to Pratt with him and Nancy -- and we both decided, let’s see if we can do a little photography and make some money at it. He was a pretty avid photographer. At that point, Nancy was working for an architect in Detroit. And we went to him and said, “Well, if we can take some good photographs of your buildings, would you be interested?” And he said, “Sure.” So we bought a four-by-five [00:22:00] view camera with tilts and swings and all that stuff. And Jack and I would go out and photograph his buildings. And we learned all the tricks that Julius Shulman, the great photographer from California, had -- even had a book at the time. One of which was, take a branch from a tree along with us to have a little foreground (laughs) embellishment --

TT: Interest?

RR: -- to something that didn’t have a tree around it. And we would go -- you know, drive -- quite a bit through -- around central Michigan to take pictures of his buildings. We’d get there, get the camera all set up, and then the clouds would come over. So we’d wait and wait and wait. And all of a sudden, the clouds broke, and we’d put the branch out in front of the camera and take the photograph and get home. And he would develop and then print them. And then we did that for quite a long time. So then it was time [00:23:00] to go off to school. And Nancy sort of went one way and I went another way at that point. We were having problems. However, she got a job with the old Saarinen firm -- Eero Saarinen’s firm. He died a few years before that. It was Roche-Dinkeloo at that point. And she was working for Warren Platner, who was the -- mostly furniture and interiors. And they really liked her, thought she was a really terrific designer. And she did some of the work on the remodel of the TWA building that Saarinen had designed. And at some point, she said, “I don’t want to work for someone else. I want to work for myself.” So that’s another sideline. Anyhow, I’m at Pratt now. And I go into this class with about 30 guys. There was not a single woman in the class at the time. And --

TT: Was this Yale?

RR: [00:24:00] This is Yale. And most of them were Ivy League guys. You know, and here I was, I had gone to funky UT and Pratt Institute, which is a little funny school in Brooklyn. But none of them knew anything about drawing or art. I mean, they loved to talk. They really talked the talk.

TT: (laughs) I know those people.

RR: (laughs) So I was thrown in with a bunch of guys at mid-term who had already been together for a year and a half. So they knew all the tricks of the trade -- you know, they knew all the professors -- and I was going in absolutely fresh. Well, I was over my head, even though I could draw well and had ideas. I just -- I was still an industrial designer. I had moved into the world of architecture. And I got through the semester, and I passed. And I said, “I think I need to repeat first year” -- or actually, second year. So then I got in with the second-year students, which is where I would have been. And [00:25:00] so I knew them well. And then went through architecture school and did quite well. And when I graduated, it was my 20th year being out of high school. And they were having a 20-year reunion for Austin High. And I said, “Boy, I really want to go to that.” And it was the same week that graduation from Yale was. So here I said, “Well, I’m just going to get in the car with my wife and dogs and then we’re going to drive down to Austin, go to graduation.” Well, if I had been there -- I got the highest award --

TT: Oh, no! You missed it?

RR: -- of the graduate students (laughs) graduating from architecture school, which carried with it a fairly hefty 1,500-dollar prize to travel. That’s all I had to do, was travel. And they looked all over for me, and I wasn’t there.

TT: You were travelling. (laughs)

RR: I was travelling for about a year. (laughs) [00:26:00] And while I was in architecture school at Yale, I worked several summers with Victor Lundy, who was a very well-known modernist architect who had spent most of his time in Florida. And he and Rudolph had been big competitors at Harvard right after World War II. And Lundy had gotten the Rotch Travelling Fellowship from Harvard. And he’d beat out Rudolph. So they were enemies the rest of their lives. So I worked for him a couple of summers in New York. And I built a model of the US Tax Court which was to be built in Washington -- which was a very modern building. And I kept -- I looked at it -- you know, this big cantilevered structure -- [00:27:00] huge cantilevered structure that was held up by cables all the way down, and there was very huge monoliths with concrete underneath. I said, “Well, Victor, why don’t you just put a couple of columns in.” I thought he was going to fire me right this minute. (laughs) That was an interesting experience. And then, while still in school, Charles Moore invited me to come work for him, which I did. And I was probably the most experienced person in this really amateur hour of an office. Everyone in there was an amateur. (laughs)

TT: Where was his office then?

RR: Right across the street from the A and A building at Yale. And he had come from California -- Berkeley -- before that. He already had his firm, which was quite well-known, in San Francis-- in California.

KR: Did you and Nancy travel? Take that money and travel?

RR: We did, a couple of years later. And I was kind of the [00:28:00] most experienced guy in the office -- which didn’t say much. I really hadn’t had all that much experience in architecture. But was an interesting, fun place to be. Moore was trying all this -- you know, the tricks of his -- which he became famous for. What happened at that point? Well, we had another recession which came along. And all of us went on unemployment compensation -- for one -- you know, we’d go one day and then come back and work at the office with the guarantee that we’d be paid at some point, which we were. And in 1971, Nancy and I decided we just didn’t want to be married anymore. So I came down to Texas -- to Austin. And was already registered by then -- had taken the license exam -- well, that’s another little thing. I had passed all seven parts of the license exam the first time, which was kind [00:29:00] of unheard of. Not that I was a brilliant student, but I just kind of knew how to take the test, which is a -- this all sounds very --

TT: I can relate. Excellent test-taker here.

RR: Are you?

TT: Mm-hmm. Gets you all kinds of places you probably shouldn’t be. (laughs)

RR: Right. (laughs) So I came down to Texas. Didn’t want to particularly stay in Austin. All the guys in the AIA were still wearing white bucks and (laughs) polyester, and I said, “Eh?” I had just been on the East Coast all of those years. So I went down to San Antonio and called in at O’Neil Ford’s office. I pulled out my portfolio and he said, “Oh, man! I’ve got to go bring in the other two guys” -- Carson and whatever the other guy’s name was. And then they looked at it and said, “Yeah” --

TT: Powell and Carson.

RR: Yeah. Powell and Carson. [00:30:00] Yeah. Boone Powell. And so they put me to work. I spent a summer there and decided I wanted to go back east. Nancy and I had gotten back together again at that point, which was a mistake. And she had had some mental health issues. And we knew that we needed health insurance. And so General Electric contacted me. They knew I had graduated from architecture school, and the guy who was in charge of the major appliances was about to retire, and he said, “Hey, this guy’s an architect and an industrial designer. He might just fit in as my replacement.” So we were in Texas at the time, and I drove up to Lexington, Kentucky, and had an interview. Didn’t have a suit and a jacket, so I sort of went in pretty casual-looking. [00:31:00] And was interviewed and looked at all the things. I said, “Refrigerators and stoves and stuff?” And I had been working for -- you know, doing pretty interesting stuff. And they did not offer me the job, thank goodness. But GE did offer me the job doing industrialized housing. There was a program that had gone in under the Nixon administration to try to build moderately priced houses in factories that could help alleviate some of the housing needs around the country -- which was a brilliant idea. You know, GE, Westinghouse, and quite a number of other companies were starting to build factory-built housing. So I was going to be the chief architect of this. Well, that department had been an aerospace department. And the aerospace industry was in a decline. And so their [00:32:00] big project was cancelled. Well, there were 20,000 aerospace engineers in Philadelphia who were out of work all of a sudden. So they said, “Well, what can we do to use some of our facilities and maybe retrain some of our aerospace engineers?” And that was the biggest problem. I mean, these guys wanted to build housing to the same tolerance as that you would put a satellite up on the -- you know, plus or minus less than a millimeter. So I dealt with all of these guys. And all they wanted to do was meet and shout at each other. (laughs) So that lasted about a year and a half. And we built several thousand units in the factories. One of the interesting innovations was, they had a conveyor belt that they put wet plaster down with fibers in it, and then they had [00:33:00] a steel frame stud wall that they would press down into the wet plaster, and then at the end of the conveyor belt, they could stand it up, and those were the interior walls. Great idea -- I mean, instead of sheet rock and wood studs and -- but it was not viable -- financially viable. And then Nixon cancelled the whole project. So at that point, Bob Venturi, whose office was in Philadelphia -- which is where my office was -- I had gotten to know him pretty well at Yale. And I went down and said, “Well, I’m being fired at GE. Would you be interested in taking me on?” He said, “Sure. When do you want to start?” So I started working for him. And I was the most experienced guy at the office there -- at that point. (laughs) And that was great fun. That was the most fun I ever had in architecture. [00:34:00] So I stayed there for about five years. And my parents were elderly and in bad health. And Nancy had never wanted to move to Texas, but she said, “Well, let’s give it a try.” So we came down to Texas. Which was a really good move on many accounts, because my father died a year later. We got to really know him well after being gone for 20-something years. And Hal Box offered me a job at UT, part-time. Steve Izenour, who had been one of the authors of “Learning from Las Vegas,” had been offered just a six-week job at UT teaching as a visiting critic. And he said, “Well, I don’t want to spend six weeks in Austin. How about you take it -- you take the job -- and I’ll come down a little bit.” So I [00:35:00] walked into the classroom -- with a big beard -- I had just come back from Egypt on an archeological dig -- and all the guys in there -- there were some women in that class at UT -- and they applauded when I walked in, because they thought they were going to get a Venturi surrogate. Do you remember Cy Wagner?

TT: Oh, yes.

RR: Well, Cy was teaching the class. And he had been using “Complexity and Contradiction” as his bible. So here, a guy from Venturi’s office walks in as the visiting critic -- after all those guys had had Cy Wagner. And I got a standing ovation. (laughs) You’re right.

TT: And what year was that?

RR: Sixty-eight -- no, no. Seventy-eight. So we did a project called, “Learning from Burnet” -- instead of “Learning from Las Vegas.” And then so we studied Burnet Road and all of its things. And then I had all the students design a [00:36:00] gasoline station -- and design all the graphics on it and understand all of the things that go on strips.

TT: The programmatic things.

RR: The programmatic things. The strip commercials. You know, you’re going to be competing with those as an architect someday in how you deal with that. The whole thing about “Learning from Las Vegas” was, no, don’t just copy what Las Vegas is about -- learn from it. Because you’re going to be doing things like that -- all you young architects out there. You’re not going to be doing museums -- because they’re hard to get -- or high-rise buildings right away. You’re going to be doing additions to buildings. And that might be on strip malls. And how are you going to work with those? So I continued on teaching at UT. And had -- started an architectural practice. I worked for Sinclair Black for a number of years, and then [00:37:00] Robert Steinbomer and I decided to branch off and start our own firm, which we had for a number of years. And I continued teaching. And we stayed in that. We decided to build our own spec office building on South Congress --

TT: I remember that.

RR: -- which was an interesting building -- a Venturi knock-off. (laughs) Then, another recession came along. The 1986 tax laws were all changed, and that’s when doctors and lawyers were putting their money into real estate. And so many of them -- their names were in the Austin paper of having declared bankruptcy. And we lost the building. And so I went into full-time teaching at that point. And then retired in 1997. And Kathy and I have been doing art [00:38:00] ever since -- painting paintings. And travelling. We do a lot of travelling in Mexico. We’ve spent a lot of summers in Mexico, doing a lot of travelling -- and a lot of drawing and sketching. And now we’re painting -- the two of us.

TT: Well, you’ve had the most interesting career. If you could sum it up in one word, what would you say about your career?

RR: Checkered. (laughs)

TT: Checkered! Oh, no. (laughs)

RR: Well, it was -- not one word, but I can say, if I had to do it over again, what would I do? And I keep ruminating on that. And one of the thoughts was, instead of working for boutique architects -- Charles Moore and Bob Venturi and Victor Lundi and O’Neil Ford and Sinclair Black -- I think I’d have probably gone to New York and worked for SOM or a firm that’s doing buildings internationally. And I think that was one of the -- in your question sheet there, what would I advise young architects to do? I’d say, [00:39:00] get with a firm that’s building buildings all over the world -- not a boutique architectural firm. Because you’re not going -- you’ll learn so much and you’ll have a lot of fun, but then you’re sort of stuck in one place. That would be my sort of --

TT: Your advice.

RR: -- old man’s advice. For whatever it’s worth.

TT: Let’s see -- as I look through our questions to figure out where we might start again. Well, tell me about some of your projects in the Austin-Travis County area -- that you’ve worked on.

RR: There’s not a whole lot to talk about, really. I didn’t do that many buildings here. Mainly because of teaching and the recessions. I think that the best building -- [00:40:00] is on Forty-fifth and North Lamar -- is the Austin Child Guidance Center. And Robert Steinbomer and I did that. I was the main designer on that. And then the 1711 South Congress, which I think was a departure from all the other buildings along South Congress at the time -- where the parking lots were on the front, right on Congress Avenue, and the buildings were at the back. We did it just the other way around -- which I think really held the street better than the patterns that were going on then. Since then, I think, the lesson has been learned. Hopefully, we have had some influence on that. Did quite a few houses, none of which are findable. Just don’t have a whole lot of things that I did here in Austin.

TT: But you did work on the museum, right?

RR: We were the local architects for the [00:41:00] Laguna Gloria Museum -- with Venturi, at the time.

TT: And that’s where I got to know you, because our office -- Fred Evins worked for me, and so I knew through him --

RR: Yeah. Yeah, Fred was a terrific guy. Really, really liked him a lot. The project really -- if it had been built -- would have been a real destination place for people from all of the world. Because Venturi was so famous then, and there hadn’t been a whole lot of museums built since the war. It would have put Austin more on the map than it is today. Sadly, it got caught up in -- I’m sure you remember -- with political machinations and a recession. That’s too bad that it didn’t get built. But then Venturi went on to build the one in Seattle, which had a lot of the same [00:42:00] ideas that the one in Austin would have had, but it would have been the first. If that building had been built, it would have changed the whole complexion of that area -- west of Congress.

TT: Which is happening now, but I agree -- the museum would have sped that process up a lot.

RR: When the building was still possible, Venturi would come down from time to time. And I was teaching a class at UT. And I said, “Well, we have a surprise going to come, and so we’ll meet in one of the rooms inside the hall. I’ve got a surprise for you.” And I invited him. He said, “Sure, I’ll come talk to you about the museum.” So he came in. So they were all, “Bob Venturi!” (laughs)

TT: (laughs) That is a nice surprise.

RR: By the way, he’s a very nice fellow. And he has some pretty serious mental issues right now, [00:43:00] which is very sad to hear.

TT: Oh, no! I’m sorry to hear that.

RR: It was great fun working for him. Very decent. Very, very bright fellow. And everyone loved working for him, because he would give you a lot of responsibility, and then come over. And he had no qualms about making changes. “Yeah, that’s a lot better than what I did. So yeah, that’s terrific.” But a really terrific guy. So sad to see him having slipped.

TT: Well, the city still has those drawings.

RR: Do they?

TT: They’re locked away. I’ve been trying to get them moved to the Austin History Center. They were filed away by Iron Mountain, and I’ve been trying to get them brought back over to the History Center.

RR: Are they going to do it?

TT: I’m still working on it. They’re reluctant to take more drawings right now, until we start to move into the old Central Library -- which [00:44:00] is just starting, so we’re starting to take collections again.

RR: So will that be the entire History Center -- in the old building?

TT: No. We will maintain the old building for exhibits and meeting spaces. And we’re not sure yet how much of the old Central Library we’ll get. But some Architectural Archives will probably move over there.

RR: Oh, that’s terrific.

TT: More space.

RR: Yeah.

TT: We have about -- we have over 40,000 sheets of drawings now. But I keep cataloguing as people keep bringing them in.

RR: Well, I gave my collection of things to UT a number of years ago.

TT: Alexander Archives?

RR: Yeah, Alexander. So it’s on file now.

TT: We work together -- the two. And sometimes they receive things that are more [00:45:00] Austin-Travis County related, and they will donate them to us. And sometimes we get things -- too much of something that’s not in Travis County, and we’ll send it over to them.

RR: One of the really priceless things they have are Louie Kahn’s drawings of the Kimbell.

TT: Oh, I didn’t know that.

RR: And we -- once I was able to get by with -- I think with their permission -- I think the floor plan -- the original floor plan -- to show it to my class. Not at the Center, but at -- but we were very careful with it.

TT: You got to take it out, though?

RR: Got to take it out. Yeah.

TT: Wow. (laughs) That is something. So tell me about your art.

RR: Well, Kathy and I, we started -- I really got started in art -- even though I’ve done a million sketches as an architect -- when we started going to Mexico. [00:46:00] And Kathy had never had any training or done much art, but she picked it up just like that. And about the first hundred drawings that she did were drawings of me drawing something else. (laughs)

KR: (laughs) As we were driving to our next destination.

TT: Yes. (laughs)

KR: He’d drive and I’d sketch.

RR: And Kathy does -- did a lot of animals -- portraits of animals. And portraits of people. She did -- well, you know, if -- part of your tour, we’ll take you around later and show you things, if you’d like.

TT: After. Okay. Sounds good.

RR: And I started out doing buildings, of course. And then did some landscapes. And then started doing portraits, which I really prefer.

TT: Painting?

RR: Paintings. And we do all acrylics. And we work -- that’s our studio right there, which --

KR: You’re [00:47:00] looking at our studio -- our dining room.

RR: This is the [dining room?]. (laughs) Which about half of the year is a mess, and the other half, it’s --

TT: Well, it looks very tidy for a studio right now.

RR: (laughs) It doesn’t when we get going on a...

TT: Tell me about some of your travels -- and did your travels influence your architecture?

RR: Well, starting way back, when I was just a child, my mom and dad and my brother, they were travelers themselves. This is way back in the ’20s, when people really didn’t travel much. Right after they got married, they went off to New York and Washington. People just didn’t do that. The highways were terrible. Starting around 1938 or so, my dad and mom said, “Well, let’s travel around the country.” So they put us -- all of us -- in the car, and we started driving around. [00:48:00] And then we did that three consecutive summers, including seeing the World’s Fair in 1939 -- the one I worked on 25 years later. And I got to see that then. So it was all -- starting on the West Coast and then the Northeast and the Southeast. And so three summers, we did that. So, got a lot of -- by the time I was eight or nine, I had seen, like, I think, 39 of the 48 states at the time. And let’s see -- European travels. With a travel fellowship, spent six weeks. And another time, Nancy and I went over for nine weeks -- all over Eastern Europe and then got into Central Europe and then into Austria and Czechoslovakia, Greece. So I’ve been to all of those. [00:49:00]

TT: And what would you do when you’d travel? Look at architecture or everything?

RR: Yeah. Got a camera. Got a camera, and I took a zillion pictures -- slides. Didn’t do any sketching at the time. I was too busy taking pictures, which was -- we changed that later on, when we started going to Mexico. Let’s see. Then, in ’77 and ’79, I was invited to go to Egypt on archaeological digs, where I was recording cenotaphs, which were little burying shrines for the people who wanted to be buried in that area where the Osiris god was allegedly to have been buried. So everyone in Egypt wanted to be buried in Abydos. So I spent a total of four months in Egypt, drawing cenotaphs. And then going back through Europe [00:50:00] and spending time there. On my 50th birthday, a couple of British friends and I went bicycling off in France to the wine country. European trips, mostly. And then in 1988, my first wife, Nancy, was a puppeteer, and she had written 20 books on puppetry -- most of them in education. But also, she was a lecturer, and she travelled all over the United States lecturing about puppetry and education -- particularly for handicapped. She was invited by the Japanese Puppeteer Association to come to Japan along with international puppeteers -- six or eight or nine from England, France, the United States. So I tagged along on that. So we spent about [00:51:00] three weeks in Japan. And she would do workshops with children -- all these little children. She would show them how to make talking mouths with an envelope. So all these little children were sitting around on the floor. And she was a rock star of puppeteers, then. So, quite a bit of time in Japan. And Kathy lived in Japan for three years, so she knows Japan very, very well.

KR: It’s a beautiful place.

TT: What years were you in Japan?

KR: Late ’50s, ’60s. Got to live there for -- I’ve forgotten now -- two or three years. Most wonderful place in the world. Have you been there?

TT: I have not. No.

KR: Oh. Put it on your list of must-gos.

TT: Okay.

RR: And then England.

KR: Yes.

RR: And you traveled.

KR: Yes. But this is about you.

RR: No, I think it’s about us. (laughs) [00:52:00] Because we do this -- I mean, we do art together.

KR: We’re very connected.

TT: And how long have you been married?

KR: We’ve been married for 22 years now. We were married when we were in our sixties. Started then (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

RR: Highly, highly recommend second marriages.

KR: It’s been beautiful.

TT: Oh, there’s still hope for me, then. (laughs)

KR: Yes, there is. You haven’t hit 60 yet, have you?

TT: Oh, I’m about to turn 66, so I better hurry.

KR: Sixty-six? Oh, you look wonderful. Good for you, honey.

TT: Oh, thank you.

KR: That’s marvelous. Well, we travelled a lot in Mexico. We were very, very fortunate to meet a couple -- the Alessios -- who -- he’s an architect in Mexico City. And he had some interest in teaching here -- just -- what do you call that? Just visiting --

RR: He was a visiting critic at UT a number of times -- Jorge Alessio.

TT: I know that name. [00:53:00]

KR: And we became good friends with them. And so we started going there a great deal to see them. And then they would set up some place for us in the mountains for us to stay -- which was hard to do in those days. You couldn’t find places just to live then. But they would do it for us. And we became very connected to Mexico -- I think a great deal because of this friendship. We became deep, deep friends. And they have two children -- or now three children -- who are all grown up. And then one of his son -- his brothers moved here to Austin with his family. And we have been family with them --

TT: That’s wonderful.

KR: -- and watched their children grow up. Now, they’re in college. But they were little tykes when we first met them. So our bond was very strong in Mexico. And consequently, we got to know -- [00:54:00] see many, many marvelous places and stay a great deal of time. Every summer we would go for at least a month. We went for longer sometimes, didn’t we?

RR: Sometimes two to three months.

KR: Two or three months, yes.

TT: And what were your favorite places?

KR: Oh. Oaxaca. Of course, everyone from here knows Oaxaca. Pátzcuaro. Mexico City.

RR: Querétaro.

KR: Querétaro.

RR: Guanjuato.

KR: Yes.

RR: Taxco.

TT: You like it all?

RR: Uh-huh. They’re all -- it’s such a rich country. And Texans -- most Texans -- go to Europe instead. But it’s such a rich country. But a major part of what we did -- I would sketch every day. I’d go out and I’d take a stool and a little sketch pad and pens. And I drew everything in pen. (laughs) [00:55:00]

KR: Yes. He was a sketcher in those days. When we stopped going to Mexico, he switched over to painting. And now he’s become a marvelous painter. I mean, his sketches were amazing. He put together a book of his sketches, so we have all those collected.

TT: Oh, that’s wonderful.

KR: Uh-huh. It’s very special. But you haven’t sketched in a long, long time, honey, have you?

RR: No. Well, I stopped going out in the sun. I think the Texas sun took it toll on my skin, so I don’t go out in the sun much.

TT: Well, it looks beautiful, so you must have stopped the damage by not going. (laughs)

KR: That’s happiness you’re looking at.

TT: Oh, okay. (laughs)

RR: That’s it. True happiness.

TT: Tell me about teaching at UT. Did you teach design or --

RR: Yeah. I taught the beginners all the way up through graduate students. My favorite students were, I would say, second-year, because they had already had a year of [00:56:00] -- you know, so they kind of knew all the jargon and they had all the equipment they needed. But also, it was fun getting the youngsters who had just come out of high school. And there was also a lot of coaching. You know, as you get further into the semester and say, “Well, why did you want to become an architect?” And many of them -- I would say most of them -- really didn’t have a very good reason why. They just thought, “Well, that was -- you know, it sounds cool. Oh, building. Okay. That sounds cool.” And I certainly counseled more than one to find another profession -- which they were glad to do. I think they just needed the permission. Some of them would say, “Yeah, I really don’t like architecture.” And I’d say, “Well, by all means, go into liberal arts or dance or whatever that you would like.”

TT: Because it’s hard.

RR: It’s hard.

TT: It’s really hard.

RR: And I tried my best to be very realistic about what the profession was. I think a lot of the teachers don’t. The one who are real -- just professional teachers and never had much of a practice. [00:57:00] But they’re not -- they don’t really tell the reality of the ups and downs of economies. And you’re always caught up in that, one way or another.

KR: That’s right.

RR: But I enjoyed it very much. I team taught a lot. I taught with Lance Tatum, Sinclair, Dick Dodge. Did a lot of team teaching, which was fun. I enjoyed that. Well, I enjoyed the single teaching, as well. I would have like to have gone away from the teaching saying, “Yes, Bob Renfro was a great teacher.” No. I think I was a good teacher, but I don’t think I could be considered a great teacher. Which is kind of a disappointment, you know? I can look at a number of teachers, oh, and they say, “Yeah, they’re great teachers.” I wish I could have been like them.

KR: But you also had people who thought you were the best teacher they had. [00:58:00] And I have heard -- I sat beside a young man -- a student -- early on -- was talking to him in an auditorium. And he said -- when I told him who my husband was -- he said, “He’s the best teacher I’ve ever had.” And I said, “Have you told him that?” He said, “No, I haven’t.” I said, “Tell him that.” But he never did. But I could pass that on.

TT: That’s good. Good compliment.

RR: You know, teaching is -- I think teachers are born, they’re not made. I mean, you can certainly improve your teaching abilities. I think every former architect who decides to go into academia needs to get some teacher training before they’re allowed to become teachers.

KR: Sort of like a marriage -- you should have some training before you get married.

TT: But it goes the other way, too. I wish that more of my instructors and professors at UT had had actual [00:59:00] office experience. It would have been helpful in some cases, I think.

RR: Yeah. Well, I think so, too. I think it’s a real mistake for some guy or some gal going straight from architecture school into teaching. Which is -- a number of the old timers -- I’m not going to name names -- who never really had any architectural experience.

TT: It’s true. And those were the ones I had.

KR: That was a big surprise to me. I thought that all architects, whether they’re teaching or not, had had lots of experience. And it simply isn’t true.

TT: No. It’s not.

RR: Yeah. I would take the students out to some of the projects I was working on. You know, you’d look at two-by-fours and nails and say, “Hmm, so this is architecture.” There’s some -- UT Architecture is a really high-ranked and terrific school. Even though I went to Yale, which is, you know, highly rated, I think -- even at the time -- they were getting a better education at UT than I got at Yale.

TT: Interesting.

RR: I think [01:00:00] one of the things, as I mentioned before, is that most of the Ivy League -- the ones who go directly from Ivy League colleges right into architecture school -- you know, they’re really bright people -- men and women -- but they like to talk. A lot. And that’s probably changed since then. But I watched all of my colleagues at Yale -- yeah, why don’t you put something on paper that we can see? I remember once just filling -- you know, I always waited -- I either wanted to go first or last when I was -- when I was at -- in the architecture school. Most of the time I wanted to go first. And then a few times I’d see the stuff that the guys would put up -- it would be, like, two or three scribbles on a wall. And Jim Sterling -- you remember Jim Sterling?

TT: (laughs) Yes.

RR: He would sort of look of those, roll his eyes -- and he had a six-pack underneath his chair, [01:01:00] you know, which he drank. (laughs)

TT: (laughs) During reviews?

RR: And then toward -- it was getting quite late in the afternoon and I put my stuff up. And I covered the wall -- you know, all the way down. And he said, “Finally we see something to talk about.” And they gave me really good crits -- a lot of which they thought was terrific, a lot of it, they’d say, “Well, you need to make some major changes over there.” And I’d say, “Well, that’s why I’m here -- to learn from you guys.”

TT: I think you’re right. I think Ivy League schools have a type, and they tend to admit the same type of students. And I think you’re right. They’re outgoing and talkative and --

RR: Yeah. UT is dynamite now. I mean, the teachers over there -- like Juan Miró. I mean, he’s a very outstanding architect and does a lot of terrific buildings, and he’s a fabulous professor, as well.

KR: Who is this, honey?

RR: Juan Miró.

KR: Oh, Juan. Yeah. [01:02:00] Oh, yes. Definitely.

TT: What’s your favorite building?

RR: In the world?

TT: In the world.

RR: I did a lot of thinking about that, and I went from a very tiny little building to one of the biggest --

TT: Or you can give me two favorites, then.

RR: I’ll give you two. Okay. The two are: Saint Peter’s, and the other one is this big -- it’s the Woodlands Chapel in Stockholm by Aspland. It’s this big.

TT: What about in Austin?

RR: The State Capitol.

TT: I hear that one a lot.

RR: Which I think is light years better than the Federal Capitol and most of the other capitol buildings that I’ve seen. I think Elijah Myers got everything right on it. The proportions. The fact that it’s on a piece of property that you really can’t add to [01:03:00] -- so they went underground -- you can’t add in any direction, because it’s so well-contained by the city. So none of the façades have been --

TT: -- changed. Right.

RR: -- altered. And it’s just absolutely sensational. And since they did the remodeling of it, it’s better than it was when it was new.

TT: Well, I think we’ve covered all my questions. Is there anything we didn’t talk about that you would like to cover?

RR: I think another piece of advice that I would strongly advise -- and I’ve told a number of young high schoolers who thought they might want to be the architects -- I said, “Get a job before you make a decision on what you’re going to major in in an architect’s office and see what it’s like.” Run prints. [01:04:00] Run off and get whatever is needed by the office. Look over their shoulders -- how they’re doing it. Now, no one has pen and paper anymore -- it’s all computerized -- but there’s some old guy, probably, sitting off with some butter paper with a drawing board making some sketches, which he turns over to the guys on the computer. Get a job, and make sure that’s what you really want to do. Because I don’t know what percentage of graduate architects stay in architecture, but I think it’s relatively low. They wind up doing something else. You know, I mean, maybe becoming contractors or going to the banking industry. I think a lot of it, because they just haven’t really prepared themselves -- you know, at eighteen, you don’t really know what you want to do the rest of your life.

TT: No. You don’t. Good advice.

RR: Yeah.

TT: Thank you so much for talking with me today. I appreciate [01:05:00] it.

RR: Well, it was our pleasure. And I think (inaudible) my beloved muse, Kathy.

TT: Yes.

KR: I enjoyed hearing it.

TT: Thank you for joining us today.

KR: It’s my pleasure.

END OF AUDIO FILE