

Women Who Are Architects

Date of Interview: October 29, 2019

DeNadai, Mary Werner ~ Oral History Interview

DeNadai, Mary Werner. Interview by Sarah K Filkins. *Women Who Are Architects*. Offices of John Milner Architects in Chadds Ford, PA. Date of the interview: October 29, 2019.

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Mary Werner DeNadai, FAIA Interview, October 29, 2019

Background

Interviewer: Sarah K Filkins

Interviewee: Mary Werner DeNadai, FAIA
John Milner Architects, Inc.
104 Lakeview Drive
Chadds Ford, PA 19317

Date of Birth: 1947

Date of Interview: October 29, 2019

Place: Offices of John Milner Architects, Inc.

Other People Present: None

Background Noise: Office in Country Setting

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audio-technica AT899 Subminiature Omnidirectional Condenser Lavalier
Microphones

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Transcriber: Sarah K Filkins

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Interview

[00:00]

Sarah Filkins: This is Sarah Filkins, the Interviewer, with Mary Werner DeNadai, FAIA, in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania at John Milner Architects on October 29, 2019. Good afternoon and thank you for agreeing to share your story with us as part of the Library of Congress Occupation Folklife Project.

Mary Werner DeNadai: You're quite welcome. I'm pleased to be part of it. Thank you.

SF: So please state your name and your current position.

MWD: My name is Mary Werner DeNadai. I continue to keep my maiden name which is Werner, to keep it alive because we were all girls and it ended with my father. And my occupation is as a licensed professional architect. And I practice just about all the way to the Mississippi [River] and then up into New England and have even done some projects in Florida. So it takes me far afield sometimes.

SF: And you are a partner at John Milner Architects?

MWD: Yes, I've been—John [Milner] and I actually started working together in 1977. I joined his firm and I became a partner in that firm in 1984. In 1989 the firm—the other principles in the firm were going in a different direction than John and I wanted to go. So we left the firm and started up this practice here in Chadds Ford in 1989. So it's actually thirty years this year that we've been practicing here in this—in this office.

SF: So when did you first become interested in architecture or in the built environment?

MWD: A lot of different things coalesced in that regard. And I was a little girl growing up in a really sweet, small town outside of Buffalo, New York. It was founded by a German religious sect in the 1840s. They were called the Ebenezers. They—I actually grew up in the building that was their school. So I was in this historic schoolhouse building when I was little and then my parents moved into a larger house that was also—that also was built by the Ebenezers but it was a country house. Anyway, I could walk to school, I could walk to church, I could walk a block away to Mrs. Ferrand's General Store, and I could go to Lefty's Drug Store where he had a soda fountain, and go to Dubel's Market, et cetera, et cetera. So it was this small town—even had a little park with a carousel. In the 1950s, after [President] Eisenhower created the interstate highway act [Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956], they plowed through the town and took down just about everything. The house where I grew up no longer stands. And it really touched me, deeply, and that's where I started caring about the built environment. Not too far around that time one of the big demolitions in Buffalo's history, the Larkin Building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, had occurred. I believe that was 1957. I'm not sure about that but it was somewhere in the 50s. And so that was—that gelled in my mind. My grandfather owned an

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awful lot of the real estate in the town and he always put us up—put us to work, for free (laughs), unpaid labor, and I would paint and I would even as I got older, tar roofs. So I learned a lot about building.

And then I went off to college. I went to the University of Detroit—at that time it was a Jesuit school—my father had gone there. They had a good architecture department but it was the 60s, and it was urban renewal time,

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and I have to say that in 1963, the worst (heavy sigh)—the worst piece of demolition to take place in this country happened in New York—and that was Penn Station [Pennsylvania Station], nine acres of marble, alabaster, limestone. Anyway, all these things were happening but they were teaching us in school brutalism architecture style, like Boston City Hall. And I went along with it but—and then we went to—we used to have these trips to Bloomfield Hills from Detroit to Cranbrook [School] which is where the Saarinen's [Eliel Saarinen] had a school there. The boy's school was Cranbrook and the girl's school was Kings [Kingswood School Cranbrook]. And the girls were taught textiles and weaving and everything. And boys were taught more about the building arts and architecture and I became fascinated by all of that, and not so much by the hand arts and crafts. So we then took a trip, our class in Detroit, took a trip to—and this is really what turned the tide for me, for sure.

We went to Egypt. They were building the Aswan Dam at the time and Lake Nasser was being created to flood the Nile River Valley. As a result of building the lake which was being built by the Russians and the Germans, they were going to submerge over one hundred-twenty Egyptian temples, buildings, historic resources. And we were there during that whole process and when I was there, I was put to work documenting the Abu Simbel Temple which was going to be dismantled, one of twenty some buildings to be dismantled and moved up out of the water level. All of that occurred for only one reason—at least in my recollection—Dean Rusk was Secretary of State at the time. He was the one who raised the money to undertake the preservation of some of these antiquities, otherwise they were all going to be lost underwater. So when I got close up to Abu Simbel Temple and the sandstone creations that were done and close up—the polychrome finishes that had occurred, that none of us really see any more—that's when I changed my mind about modern architecture. Although, I love modern architecture. If I were to design a home for myself, it would be extremely modern.

But, I also appreciate what we have here in this country. And I lecture all over the world actually on classical architecture in the regions. This year I was in Morocco, Canary Islands, Madera, Portugal and Spain. And then I was in Peru, and the Amazon and Cusco Machu Picchu or “Peet chu” as they correct you. And then I was in Iceland. There's no architecture there to speak of (laughs) but the geological landscape is just unbelievable. It's like being on another planet! Okay, so getting back to what I did. Then I left Detroit and then I met my future husband who was graduating—he was a senior civil engineer. And we moved here to Pennsylvania cuz that's where he's from—he was from—and for maybe five years, I just didn't go—I raised a family. I have two children and I have two grandchildren now. And then I went

back to school because I knew I had to finish. So Drexel University had an evening program. So I couldn't afford

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a full-time day program at the time. We were one income and raising two children so I went to night-school and I got a job during the day as a draftsman in architectural offices here in West Chester. And I'd work maybe a thirty hour week, come home, make dinner, and then take off for Philadelphia three nights a week.

SF: Did you know any other women architects at the time or did you have mentors who were...

MWD: I had one person. Her name is Ann Capron. Ann was—I worked for her when I was still a draftsman—and she was—she was inspiring. She was a modern architect. She used to be with DMJM in LA [Los Angeles] so she did a lot of modern architecture. But I must say that if there was a female inspiration in my career, it was Jane Jacobs.

SF: And her book? [The Death and Life of Great American Cities]

MWD: Oh my God! Just what she did was just almost impossible to imagine, what she overcame. So she was—she was a role model for me. Julia Morgan, probably the most famous female architect and the first member I think of—one of the first members of the Fellows—the College of Fellows [American Institute of Architects College of Fellows] and I think she got a posthumous Gold Medal [American Institute of Architects]. The first female architect who was a member of the AIA was Louise Bethune and she designed the Lafayette Hotel in Buffalo, New York which I—Buffalo has a great, great collection of architecture and that's where I grew up. So I really got to appreciate the built environment there and a lot of it is—a lot of it's still there in the city, thank God.

So, to make a long story short again, I finished my degree at Drexel. I graduated in 1979 but I had been working the whole time and as I said I joined John Milner in '77. When I was at Drexel, John Milner came and lectured at one of the classes that I was in and he was talking about a historic preservation project that he was working on. It was the [Thomas] Massey House in Broomall [Pennsylvania] and how they had done archaeological digs around the site, how they found a lead came. He knew then that the windows were leaded glass even though none of the sash remained. I was fascinated, so I sort of waited around the classroom until the class was over and everybody left and then he and the regular professor of that class walked out and I walked after them and I said to him, I said, "Are you hiring?" (laughs) It took everything I had. He said, "I—actually, we are. Do you want to call my office and ask for a time that you can come in? I'd love to talk to you about it." So that was the beginning of that story. And then, John and I are still business partners, have been now for since 19—partners since 1984 so that's what, thirty-five years and knew him for another five years before that, so forty years. We've been very fortunate. A lot of partnerships, I think could be difficult to manage. We have never had a

problem. And we're so blessed. He and I both have different interests, different skill sets, and have 100% trust in one another and respect for one another. So I couldn't be happier you know to this day.

SF: You said that at one point your—the practice split?

MWD: Our previous practice split.

SF: Right and so in what direction were they going verses what direction you decided to go?

MWD: That practice had a planner—besides architects—they had a planner,

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they had archaeologists, they had materials conservators and they wanted to become much bigger in size with lots of satellite offices all over and profit centers. I was the Director of the Architecture Department and it became—it became uncomfortably competitive. And it's almost—people weren't—didn't have their focus on the future of the firm and the big picture. They were more focused on their little departments and how much money they could bring in. Okay, so—and John and I didn't want to have any of that. And, that's why we both agreed. There were six of us partners. One partner went on to work for the National Park Service, David Hollenberg. David then became the head of—the chief architect for the University of Pennsylvania [University Architect]. He just retired last year and David went there. And then another partner actually retired and went to—to live in Florida with his family. So there were four of those partners left when we took off. So that's the reason why we left. It was not an easy decision. Anyway...

SF: And so you chose to focus—what was your focus then, when you redirected?

MWD: Okay, my focus then as Director of Architecture was doing historic preservation commercial—tax credit, a lot of historic tax credit projects. During the 70s and 80s, that whole field took off and most of the projects you see in the old cities, like the old industrial buildings—for example, in Philadelphia worked on what was called The Chocolate Factory, The Hoopskirt Factory (laughs), The Ladder Company—and they were all converted, to what they like to call, luxury apartments. But then they took the tax credits for those things. That was my focus then. My focus since then—John and I have sort of divvied up the work that's done here in the firm. John will do a lot of the eighteenth century historic preservation work which is—he started—he started out with Independence Hall [Philadelphia] in the 60s. He worked on Independence Hall.

SF: With Penny Bachelor?

MWD: with Penny Bachelor, Lee Nelson and had—they had their office on the second floor of the First Bank Building. Coming full circle, I was just awarded the contract to restore the First

Bank by the National Park Service. We just kicked it off last week. And you know, I went to see Hamilton. Have you seen Hamilton?

SF: No, I haven't. I wish I had.

MWD: Oh gosh, you've got to see it. Not once did they mention Philadelphia in there and most of that happened in Philadelphia—what was happening on the stage. And it was Hamilton who was one of the founders of that very building, that bank. So it's—they're going to make it into a museum on the history of finance in the US, which is going to be quite interesting. So we're working with exhibit designers in that regard. So I'm also working on a number—I've done—we've done over one hundred National Landmarks and most of them since John and I started our practice in '89. Right now we're working on Old Christ Church in Old City [Philadelphia]. We are working on the Independence Park Hotel which is right across the street from the America—Museum of the American Revolution. Those are two

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of the projects on the front burner for me. John is doing a lot of custom residential work and I do all the commercial work. I've done a number of Federal courthouses. Right now I'm also working on the Montgomery County [MD] Courthouse where a lot of, a lot of—a lot of interesting things have happened recently—and that's coming along. We are working with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill on that. They are putting a big addition on, and we're doing the original building. I've done a number of—well, I worked on the Perelman Wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I've done work at the old Barnes Museum [Merion, PA]. Also right now finishing up a big project in Kentucky, the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, where it's probably the most intact settlement of Shaker architecture in the country. The last Quakers there—Shakers, oh, what am I saying, I'm here in Philadelphia. Take me to Shakerville. The last of the Shakers died in the 1920s and there are forty-eight original buildings dating from 1805 onwards and they're thirty-five hundred acres of ground on the Kentucky River.

SF: And you're working on how many of those—the whole plan for the...?

MWD: Yes, we did the Master Plan for the entire site and as they raise the money they've been restoring some of the primary buildings. They're being used as—for hospitality—they rent out the rooms, they have biking, they have river kayaking, and the Dixie Belle party boat. They have lots of wedding events there. And it's just a spectacular site, just spectacular. That's a long story.

SF: That's a long-term project?

MWD: It's a long term project yes—but they have been very successful in getting their financing. So...

SF: Let's go back just a little bit to when you were graduating from Drexel and starting out and then you're—you're managing family and I'm guessing studying for the registration exam.

MWD: Correct, my drafting board was in our bedroom (laughs), in a corner of the bedroom. This is the 70s so there was no computer assisted drafting or anything like that. So I was—I'd—I'd come home—sometimes classes usually took from seven in the evening until nine-thirty in the evenings and I'd get home by ten, ten-thirty. And then some nights I would stay up and study and go to bed and my husband was sound asleep; the kids were asleep. And it was always—it was a very strenuous schedule. And my one goal, one of the things that kept me going during those years, was one day I'm going to get to read the Sunday paper. Literally, I didn't even have time to read the Sunday paper or a magazine for that matter. And my husband didn't cook so I did all of the cooking, and the cleaning. And—but I was also—I also felt a huge responsibility to be home when my children were home. So, I'd put them on the school bus, I'd go to work and then I'd be home by the time they got off the school bus. So that was something that was really important to me. And they both live near here. My son is a chemical engineer and my daughter is a physical therapist. And my grandchildren are now twelve and fourteen.

SF: It doesn't get any better.

MWD: Doesn't get any better. But they've grown up to appreciate architecture because I mean every time we're in the car together, "Oh look at that, oh look at that, oh look at that." (laughs)

SF: So, you've passed it on to the next generation—the next two generations.

MWD: We hope so.

[25:00]

We hope so. But that also got me into volunteer work. But I really wasn't engaged in volunteer work when I was in school. There was just—there was no—no way I could that. But then, I was approached to become involved with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. And I became, at that time, what they called the Board of Advisors. And each State had two advisors and these were all people like myself who were in the grass-roots of things. And we would bring our ideas and our problems to the Board. Excuse me. And that was three, three-year terms. But then in the last two years they made me Chair of the Board of Advisors, and with that was ex-officio participation on the Board of Trustees. And so when my tenure ended Richard Moe then was President of the National Trust [for Historic Preservation]. That set of meetings was in Santa Fe, New Mexico and I remember we were at the Hotel La Fonda (laughs). Where else? Right? Dick—and I still remember Dick approaching me and he said, "Mary, we would like you to become a Trustee". And I was completely shocked. It was not something I expected. And I said, "Well Dick, let me, let me talk with my business partner," because that would have been not only a time commitment but a financial commitment as well. So, I said to John, I said, "John, they've asked me to be on the Board of Trustees of the National Trust." And he said, "Oh my

God, Mary you can't say no." So it's been a great—that was a great—that was three—then it was another nine years—three, three-year terms tenure. And that was the time during which I got involved with Hemingway's house down in Havana, Cuba.

So balancing home—and I never really got to go to a lot of my children's soccer games and things but in those days kids didn't have all the commitments they have today. I have to make appointments with my grandchildren. So I did get to some of those things. I wish I could have gotten to more—but it was my work that paid the tuition, you know. And so otherwise if it weren't for the program at Drexel I'd never—and I graduated—I graduated second in my class.

SF: Of course.

MWD: And the person who got first in the class—he was a single guy with no kids and no family and he lived right in the city, right? (laughs) So—and I've stayed involved with Drexel. They've given me many awards, as well, and they've honored me. So, I feel—I feel very lucky. And you just can't—you just can't keep taking in all of the great things that you've had the opportunity to do and not give back. And I just really believe—here in Philadelphia at least, I chair the Preservation Alliance [Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia], which is the local preservation organization and we have made some huge headways.

SF: In legislation?

MWD: In legislation. What has happened—we were quite a bit in the red when I joined the Board and we are now way in the black. And it was—

SF: Congratulations.

MWD: And yes, it was with a lot of hard work. Last—a year ago June we made our last payment on our loan, so we're loan free. Also, last year Philadelphia

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was named a National Treasure by the—by the National Trust [for Historic Preservation]. They—each year now, they do one National Treasure and they came in, I worked with them and we have come up with—there was a group, a task-force put together by Mayor Kenney to look at all the carrots and sticks for historic preservation in the city, the zoning, and all the legislation. And by golly, it is being enacted by City Council, as we speak!

SF: Wow, and his Planning Department went along with it and supported you?

MWD: Yes the—we made a lot of friends there but it was really the National Trust who brought the experts to the table and steered the Task Force in the right direction. We, our Alliance, Preservation Alliance, we've hired a lobbyist who has been meeting with the City Council members on historic preservation and it has done an immense, immense change to attitudes and

perspectives on the history that the city has to offer. It's why tourists come here, you know, so—but people take those things for granted. We are very—we've had some losses. Jewelers Row was one—I worked very hard on that one but could not save it. I'll still go back and watch the—Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Laurence, *Silver Linings Playbook*. Did you see that movie? And the final scene where they're walking down Jewelers Rows and the overhead light says, "Seasons Greetings" on 'em. That's going to be gone. It's gone. Yeah.

SF: But you've had some real successes and probably some real disappointments through the years. If you're involved in preservation, that's sort of the nature of it.

MWD: Right. Right. But I've been—I was very active on the lecture list circuit. And I went—I went back through this—this was the application for the College of Fellows [American Institute of Architects' College of Fellows] here [shows notebook on table]. And this one section—of accomplishments and I—you list all of your professional organizations, positions you've held. You talk about all of your lectures that you've given. You've talked about all your publications that you've participated in—these are all—and your activities with the AIA, all the awards—these are all of the awards you've received over the years. So, I was just going back through this, this was 2003 and I was just looking at the list of lectures that I would give at Drexel [University] or Penn [University of Pennsylvania] or in Washington, DC, for that matter, on historic preservation and why downtowns and small towns are important because that hit home to me a lot. I put together—put together a PowerPoint—we used to call them slide lectures, so I have to keep thinking current terms, a slide lecture on the history of women in architecture. I should share that with you, I could share—I could share at least the narrative, yeah, because these are slides and it goes all the way—it traces all the way back to the eighteenth—eighteenth century.

SF: They would probably appreciate that too at—at Virginia Tech where they have the International Archive for Women in Architecture.

MWD: Oh, do they?

SF: And then also the Beverly [Willis Foundation]—the foundation in New York—Beverly...

MWD: It's not striking a note.

SF: Okay. Which is a foundation

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that was created to promote women in architecture.

MWD: Oh, I was not even aware of that.

SF: I'll get you the names of both of those.

MWD: Yeah, or I can send that to you and then let me know and I can send it to those two resources if they'd like them. I do have some things in archives—a number of years ago, I was named a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania.

SF: By the Governor.

MWD: Oh yeah, by the Governor. It was quite thrilling and there's some pretty amazing—it's a humbling experience. It's all women but these are women from all kinds of walks of life who have accomplished so much. And you go to the luncheon where they're honoring the new members and each one of the new members will get up and tell a little life story about themselves in fifteen minutes or less. And some of them are pretty amazing what they've done, without even being touted for it. And the reason that they come to the attention of the Distinguished Daughters Committee is through other women, you know, who know. Trudy Rubin who's a political writer for the [Philadelphia] Inquirer, she's one of our members; Marguerite Lenfest, Gerry Lenfest's wife; my dear friend Janet Klein, Lew Klein's wife. Lew Klein was the producer for—I'm having a senior moment—for—what was the Dick Clark Show?

SF: Oh, oh...American Bandstand.

MWD: American Bandstand, thank you. He produced American Bandstand with Dick Clark. She's also one of the Distinguished Daughters. And then Marty Moss-Coane from WHYI here in Philadelphia is one, and the list goes on and on. A lot of the women are—have moved away. Some of them are national correspondents in Washington now. So it's a very inspiring group of women to be with. And it continues to inspire one. You know—yeah, it's really great, really great.

SF: I'm sure they were inspired by you as well and what you have accomplished. In terms of gender equity and diversity in architecture...

MWD: Oh, gosh, that's another story.

SF: How have you—was it particularly difficult for you either on a construction site or...

MWD: Oh yes, even going to architecture school, there was harassment by some of your male professors, not—not a lot, but—and then you go to a construction site—ugh! When I was young, they didn't give me much credit for what I said, especially working in a lot of the—central Pennsylvania—there's a lot of—I think gender equity is not as good in some places as it is in the urban areas for example. It took quite a bit of (heavy sigh)—it was very difficult. That's all I can say.

SF: Have you seen it change or...

MWD: Actually, in some ways, yes, very much. There's also—there's contractors, clients, some people, who—I hate to say it, I mean, but harassment was always there. And when—I chaired Preservation Action, which is a national lobbying organization, for six or eight years, and we had a luncheon on the [Capitol] Hill. And we'd go and lobby the Senate and the House there and as chair, I was seated at the

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table with a number of Senators. And I had—it was a round table, was about ten people and one of the Senators to my left—under the tablecloth—you know. But that was the 80s—and I guess you can edit this stuff out—I don't know if you don't want to talk about these things.

SF: Yes, it's important.

MWD: And in the 80s you never said a word about anything like that. And it wasn't until the "Me Too" movement came out when those memories came back. Like, I had buried them—I never told a soul about—that senator has now passed on, but (heavy sigh)—yeah, they think they have the power and the right to do anything they want. And women in those times never said a word—unfortunately. So, I'm so happy to see those things changing. But now in my senior years, I will go to job meetings, project meetings with contractors—they want me there. They want my input. They're disappointed if I don't go to those meetings. And—they give me more deference than you can ever imagine, and honor my opinion. So, yes, it's taken all these years and it's taken to become an old lady (laughs) to get to the point where, you know, you've earned that respect. And yeah, I wish what is happening now, with my rapport with these gentlemen, I had that fifty years ago—or forty years ago. I've been in the—I've been working since 1973 so that's what, forty-six years now I've been doing this. So, I used to take my children to job sites, you know and...uh!

SF: So has that impacted how you and John have expanded your firm or—or provided encouragement to women in your...

MWD: Oh yes, I actually think and I wouldn't say this to a lot people. I think women make better architects than men. I think—not because I'm being a female bias person, I'm really not in that regard. I think that women can visualize spacial volumes better than men can. They grew up as caretakers for their home and they know what space means and work space means, in that regard. So I think that they have—they do have a much quicker grasp of three-dimensional design. We have twenty-four employees here now and we have, let's see, besides Maria, our office manager and our bookkeeper Christine Broderick, we have one-two-three-four-five-six-seven—we have seven women out of twenty-four so that's thirty percent—thirty-three percent of the firm, unless I'm forgetting anyone but I think I've got everybody. So they're just as—they have just as much to contribute to this firm as the males, the male architects, so there's no—

there's no discrimination here in that regard, at all. We would not think of hiring somebody because of their sex.

SF: Did you find it difficult to balance family with your work responsibilities and, and...

MWD: Yes, but I was a lot younger too (laughs). I couldn't have done it—I couldn't do it today but I could do it when I was very young. And I was very—whenever I tell young girls who are in architecture school, and I've given some lectures at the AIA about being a female in the profession, but when I talk to them

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I say, "Find out what your skill set is. What are you good at doing? What is your passion? What do you like doing? And put those two things together and you will never fail." And so and that's kind of the way I raised my children. Just what is it you like doing? Don't just go and do something, you don't—and that's where I was lucky. I found my skill set, which is the built environment, through architecture and I was very passionate about it at the same time so it was a vocation and an avocation. (laughs) How lucky do you get?

SF: It's nice when you can combine those. So what—what are the areas that you love in terms of when you're working on a project. I mean, are you on the computer drawing, are you hand drawing, are you—do you like more the programming or the project management? What, what are your areas of architecture...

MWD: When we finish here, I'll show you in my office. You'll see what I'm doing (laughs). I am hand drawing, okay. Okay, both John and I, neither one of us can do CAD [Computer-Aided Design] but we have excellent people here, who can do that. So just yesterday I gave a set of floor plans for this really kind of fun project up in New York, Catteraugus, which is near Ellicottville. And it's—it's in the southern tier of western New York. It's about forty-five minutes maybe southeast—southeast of Buffalo. It's a wonderful little town and they're taking this big building and they're turning it into a boutique luxury hotel and I'm going up there this weekend actually with a set of drawings. But I've been working on those plans, I love doing plans—in fact, when I was a little girl going to Lefty's Drugstore, up the street, kids would be buying comic books and I was buying these magazines of house plans. And I'd bring them home and I'd just pore all over them, you know. Then I actually designed a house for my family (laughs). So I love doing plans and when you're doing plans, you've got to visualize what the elevations are going to be and what that whole space is going to be. So yesterday I took one set of schemes down to Grant and he's now converting them all to CAD. And I have two more sets of schemes to get ready before the end of the week.

What I like most is the big picture. I like getting everything organized so that it is a streamlined process going forward and to get off on the right foot is very, very important. And you have to see—you have to see your way all the way to the end before you even get started. So that is one thing I really love doing. And I'll go to—I like project meetings, as long as they

are productive. I just don't like to waste time and I have a hard time with people—and I've seen other architects do this actually—who talk for the sake of talking. And it's got to be to the point and it's got to be germane to what the topic is, or don't say anything. So I think I like all of that. Punch listing—I get a little bit too OCD [obsessive-compulsive] about it. (laughs)

SF: It's fun.

MWD: It is fun. And the poor painters always take a hit don't they? Yeah.

SF: So where are you in your career today? Do you see—are there certain goals that you have that you haven't accomplished or certain building types that you haven't worked on?

[50:00]

MWD: That's a good question. Right now, I am—I'm very focused on the preservation of Philadelphia. And the reason I took chairmanship of that Board was to turn things around because that was a goal of mine—to make Philadelphia a model of preservation law for the whole country and I'm still working on that. We've had some big steps. And I don't think I'll give up until I think we've accomplished a lot. So that is a goal of mine right now. And I am very goal oriented. If I didn't have a goal—there's not much left, you know? So—and I do travel a lot and give lectures. And I love putting lectures together so—because it takes a lot of research and, for example, I've done some lectures in Greece on the Parthenon. Have you been to—have you been to Athens?

SF: A long time ago.

MWD: So it was before they built the Museum? That was an American architect that designed that museum and one of the best buildings and exhibits I've ever experienced. I'm going in April to the Bilbao [Bilbao Guggenheim Museum] in Spain—I'm giving lectures up there. Frank Geary—the title of my lecture is, *"Is it architecture if there's a toilet in it?"* (laughs)

SF: I would love to hear that one. (laughs)

MWD: Because his buildings aren't like buildings but they function as buildings. So I mean, it's kind of a weird takeoff on that. So I enjoy the lectures and the research that goes in to them actually. That's what I love about them.

SF: It's nice that you make time to do that if that's something you really love.

MWD: Yeah, and both John and I have turned over a lot of responsibility as far as the day-to-day management of this office—collecting the bills and you know, doing all of that, putting contracts together. So we have—we have another partner, Christopher Miller, who's taken on a lot of that. He's more or less the managing partner. John and I still are design partners for that matter and

John is heavily involved in a number of projects. Even at our ages—I don't know what we would do, you know, without—I love coming into work every day.

SF: That's great. Wow.

MWD: So, you know, how lucky can you get?

SF: Well, if—what if you could change the profession, is there anything you would change?

MWD: Well, who was it that called it the “Gentleman's Profession”? I don't know maybe it was Stanford White or one of those guys. Yeah, if I—if I could change things, I would have—I would encourage a lot more women to enter the field. There are a lot more—I hear now that something like fifty percent of women in architecture schools—which is fabulous. When I went to school in the 60s, I think it was like four percent and I was the only one in my class, the only female in my class.

SF: But I think there is a lot of attrition between graduating and getting registered and that that's where the drop is. And also between,

MWD: I think you're right.

SF: Working and then being promoted. That those are the two points of—can you take off time to raise a family, and/or maybe not take off time, but not be so beholden?

MWD: Yeah, and I think that there has to be more, more efforts made for maternity leave benefits. Every—we have one-two-three—three of our female architects are all mothers. Three of them—and they can work from home. They take time off for their kids and that's the way its got to be but not a lot of firms do that and I wish that could change. Yeah.

[55:00]

And I also support them, an awful lot, and I try to help them and mentor them any way I can. When we're working together on a project, I'll show them sometimes a better way to do something and they appreciate that. I never had that, from a female.

SF: What—is there anything that you wish you had known before you started into the architecture profession?

MWD: Ah—I sometimes think if I knew everything then that I know now, would I have even gone into the profession? Given how—given the challenges that I had as a female, as a mother, as someone with not a lot of money—I don't, I don't know if I would have done it knowing all of that but once I got into it, I'd never want to change it, you know? So I would say that my—somebody asked me, “If you weren't an architect what would you rather be?” My immediate

answer is a philanthropist (laughs), and then my more realistic answer is a blues singer but I'm tone deaf (laughs) so I can't do that, and so the third—my third option was an architect. So that's where I am (laughs).

SF: Is there—what do you see as your greatest legacy?

MWD: Oh, my greatest legacy—besides my kids, yeah and my grandchildren for that matter—they would be the one. But professionally my biggest legacy, I think, is I've made a lot of changes in preservation in the United States. And I've made changes for the good. And I would like to think that I'd be remembered for making a huge difference in the future of Philadelphia. That's what I hope my legacy will be, professionally speaking.

SF: Is there—are there any stories that you'd like to add about any specific projects?

MWD: Oh, I think the Hemingway House in Havana—is probably—if you were to ask me what is my most memorable project—that would be it. And this was back in 2005 and it was during the time when the sanctions were heavily in place down there. Jeb Bush was governor of Florida, his brother was the President. And one of the Hemingway grandchildren went down there in 2003 and saw the condition of the house which is owned by the Cuban government—saw the condition of the house—and was horrified because when he [Ernest Hemingway] left there it was with the expectation of going back but he eventually committed suicide and he never went back. So everything was there. And it was mold, termites, hurricanes, damage in the roof, the windows were broken, the sashes were rotted and eaten by termites and he had 6000 pieces of works on paper in that house, some stored in the basement, if you can imagine. When we went there we were very careful because we didn't know how they were going to treat us. Margaux Hemingway, Margaux or Mariel—one of them committed suicide—the other sister came back to the American Literary Guild and told them about the situation there. They in turn got in touch with the Hemingway Foundation which is in Boston. And his archives—his archives are at the Kennedy Library in Boston.

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The people there at the Hemingway Foundation went to their Senators and their Congressmen. They could not get the Treasury Department to give us, to give anyone a license to even go in there legitimately because they hold the sanctions, the Treasury Department. So they then went to the National Trust, [Richard] Dick Moe, and Dick Moe put the house on the “11 Most Endangered [Historic Places] List”. That transformed the entire outlook by Congress. And we were given a special license to go down there for six months—a six month license—we weren't down there for six months. So they selected an architect which was myself, on the team; a structural engineer which was [Robert] Bob Silman out of New York; a museum MEP [mechanical, electrical, plumbing systems] engineer for environmental conditions, Michael Henry out of New Jersey, he did that; and Sandra—Sandra Spanier the wife of Graham Spanier,

who was the President of Penn State [Pennsylvania State University], who was ousted after that scandal there.

SF: And what was her expertise?

MWD: She's a Hemingway scholar. She was on the team. She did all of the research. Hemingway never threw anything away. So there was a bill for every time the house was painted or the plumbing was fixed, whatever. So we had a complete chronology of the house. When he first bought it, he bought it with the—he sold the movie rights for *Whom the Bell Tolls*. I think he was—he got a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for it. He used that to buy the house in—outside of Havana. It was his third wife then, Martha Gellhorn. They had been renting that house and then he finally bought it. So, since that was 1930, 1938 is when he bought that house. And so he lived there longer than he lived anywhere else in the world. So we went down there and we assessed the situation with our team. And we—we were horrified. And I could show you pictures. It's horrific. So we had to play friendly and not come in there like Americans always did to take over the Cubans, you know. So we just took a back seat and they finally, after a number of visits, really came to embrace us and to take our word and trust us. So, we—we brought all the US technology to bear to a place that had no technology whatsoever. And because of the sanctions we could not take, physically take, anything there. But they were able to get things through corporations in Mexico and Canada—some of the supplies that were needed to do the conservation work. We built a studio after restoring his house and the tower and the swimming pool and the pilar. And I took all of the paint samples from all the surfaces there, brought them back here and we analyzed the paint because they didn't have that technology and so everything that's been painted, including the boat, has the paint colors that existed when he was there. So that's all authentic work. And that was something that we really enjoyed being able to contribute. We had the studio almost done but because of what's happening in Cuba right now—them being cut off from the Venezuela support that they had. American tourism, after having been—

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after flourishing with Obama—has now been completely cut off and actually they are saying within six months, no American's going be able to go back to Cuba, at all, even the ones that have families there. And that's all changed under this current administration. So they can't finish the project right now because they don't have the finances. My friends are actually on food rations and they are lucky to get beans and rice. That's how bad it is there. It's very bad financially.

SF: So, were you able to stabilize the house so...

MWD: The house is totally stabilized. My biggest concern is the amount of traffic on that site. It is the most—it's the most highly visited tourist attraction in all of Cuba. And they get 125,000 people on that little, little plot of land. And so, the last time I was there was maybe a year ago.

We still have a license to go back and forth but because they can't do any work now anyway, we haven't been going. We did get an exception to bring in conservation equipment, I mean hard, hard equipment, for their new lab so that they can conserve the works on paper. They are digitally making copies of every one of those 6,000 books or pieces. We have special digital copying equipment for books and things like that. And the—Wendy Jessop, the curator from the Smithsonian, she was on our team. She does works on paper. So, we each had our own little things that we were focused on when we went down there. And, I remember staying in a room—had no windows, a hotel room with no windows. Another one, where it was loaded with drywall buckets and drywall. And others where the windows were taped—they were so broken they were taped from hurricane damage that you couldn't, you know, even see out. So—but I have given tours down there now for National Trust [NTHP], the big-givers for the National Trust; they've been arranging tours down there so—but that's done now. There's a law, a US law now that travel agents here cannot book rooms in Cuban owned hotels. Well, all the hotels in Cuba are owned by the Cuban government. So the people who are going there now are living on ships and they'll dock, and they'll disembark for the day, come back to the ship, go around the island to another port. It's very sad and the people there are suffering so much.

SF: You've become friends with so many of them?

MWD: I have great, great friends. They are wonderful people, wonderful people. And one would think they would hate Americans for what we've done to them all of these years. So I've become very (heavy sigh), very sad because all those guys are terrific. Yeah, and they learned a lot from us. Yeah, we taught them a lot of preservation technology which they just never had the opportunity to learn. So but they're good architects, they're good structural engineers down there, great conservators. We became friends with the Minister of Culture, which is like our Secretary of State and were entertained in their homes. And you know, yeah.

SF: So they're taking what you taught them and they're using it in the community.

MWD: They're using it everywhere else. Yeah, yeah they are. They're saving Havana.

SF: So you are not only saving Philadelphia, you're saving Havana (laughs).

MWD: (laughs) They learned a lot from us, yes they did. There's a lot there to save.

SF: So, well are there any other projects you's like to share?

MWD: Oh, my God, they're so many.

SF: I don't want to keep you too long. I don't know...

MWD: What time is it?

SF: I don't even know. It's three o'clock.

MWD: Three o'clock, wow that's—that's—

[1:10:00]

time flies, huh? Yeah.

SF: But I mean—I am happy to record as much as you like so if you have—if you have success stories or challenges that you'd like to...

MWD: I, like I said, the Penn Station in New York—one of the biggest losses you could ever imagine—how they could do that? And now they are actually talking about rebuilding it. You can't—

SF: They don't get it I guess.

MWD: You cannot—you could never afford to rebuild that, you could—you know, as much as you could rebuild it in gold, let alone in stone. But my more current—I've had a lot—I've been so lucky, oh my God, I've been so lucky—working on projects in New York City, a lot of Carrère and Hastings work—the New York Library on Fifth Avenue.

SF: That's a great building.

MWD: It's a great building, it's a great building. And when you get in there and you're touching these places that have so much history. I've read a lot of the biographies of some of those guys, you know—Stanford White, now McKim, Mead and White. I was up in Kykuit, the Rockefeller home up there, which was first built by John Rockefeller, and did a little work on that one. And getting close to, in Washington—I did a lot of projects in Washington but a lot of them were for historic tax credit projects, you know, so they weren't necessarily the monumental ones. I did do a lot of work for the National Trust at their headquarters on Dupont Circle which is a National Historic Landmark. Paul Mellon's apartment was on the top floor of that and he founded the National Gallery [of Art] while he was living there. So I did—I did all of their work during those years. And I'm thinking—the tower, the Miami tower [Freedom Tower at Miami Dade College] which is basically the Ellis Island of the South, where all of the southern immigrants came through there. It's now a museum, the Skya. I'm trying to—oh, one of the best places—Beaufort, South Carolina. We did this plan for the entire city to preserve it. And I was on that team, it was with my former firm. And I did all of the drawings for the book and its been republished, I don't know how many times. Every single historic building was documented. We did drawings of those that needed to be improved upon and we put them together in this book. So the Beaufort Design Guidelines have been copied all across the United States. So that was—that was one of mine—I really enjoyed that one. The Cotton Exchange in Savannah, Georgia was another one. It was converted from The Cotton Exchange into a hotel. It's right on the Savannah

River. I really enjoyed that project as well because you don't want to destroy the historic components or features of the building when you're adapting them into something else. So it's a challenge and I really like that—to keep everything so that it's totally reversible. And that's a project that is totally reversible. And you're in there and you're thinking all the years of what was going on, before you set foot in that building. And the factors—that's where the word “factory” came from—the factors would come there and they'd buy cotton from the planters and buy it,

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they'd warehouse it right there and then on the other side of the building is the river and they'd put it in the boats and carry it away. And you think about how—how many slaves it took to do that, yeah.

SF: Just one last question. What do you see as the challenges ahead for historic preservation?

MWD: The economy (laughs). When the economy and there's money, flowing, everybody wants new and they tear it down. And so when you have an economic recession, you don't have to worry about historic preservation. The other big challenge is gentrification. What we are trying to do at the Alliance is to educate people to appreciate that the housing stock that they have is better than moving into an urban, you know, city building. And so we're trying to go into the communities, and show people what riches they have, and to appreciate them, save them, fix them up, and not have to go into public housing somewhere else. So, that's a big challenge, I think everywhere. And I see what's going on in California—it's pretty sad with all the homelessness that they have there. They don't necessarily have the kind of historic housing stock that we do on the East coast. And so you think about the carbon footprints that have already been put down—you don't want to destroy it. It takes, I don't know, something like over six million BTU's [British Thermal Unit] to make bricks that will make a ranch—a little ranch house. You think about that. So try to translate that into what you already have on the ground.

SF: Like trying to convince people go keep wood windows instead of replacing them with vinyl windows.

MD: Oh, I know—that's—but that's almost a minor thing. You know, you gotta save the building. True.

SF: Do you usually go to APT [Association for Preservation Technology] conferences?

MD: I don't do APT so much—AIA conferences, preservation conferences. I'm working on a house in Palm Springs right now. It's a mid-century modern—Albert Frey who is one of the prime mid-century architects there—restoring the house and putting on an addition and building a casita on the site. Because the original plans I was able to find, show a footprint for a future casita. And the house was laid out, I swear, with the intention of putting this other addition on

the other end. I mean it was just, just—it was planned—you could tell. So, that's one thing I'm working on and it's under construction right now. And I have an architect friend in LA who's doing the on-site, you know, and he's more of a technician—he's not a designer—so he's doing on-site project meetings. And we just got the first approval, inspection approval for the HVAC [heating, ventilating and air conditioning] and MEP stuff—so that's underway.

SF: Projects everywhere, that's exciting.

MD: Yeah, yeah—Chicago, done a lot of work in Chicago as well, historic preservation projects.

SF: Well, thank you.

MD: Oh, you're welcome, Sarah.

SF: This has been so wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing your journey. Oh, I have one more question. How was the architectural registration exam?

MD: Oh, my God (laughs). Let's put it this way, when I finally got registered it was anticlimactic. You know. Actually took me three times. I had (laughs)—

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I had passed all the written—passed almost all the written ones the first time. Didn't make the Design Exam—that was when you did it for 5 days in one week.

SF: Where did you go? In Philadelphia?

MD: In Philadelphia—in Plymouth Meeting [Pennsylvania] at the LuLu Temple—you know, talk about inspirational architecture. Those were the days. And I passed a number of the written parts the first time. I think the—I forget what the project was. I did an airport. I did—I forget what the other two were. But the last time I went to the exam, a female colleague of mine, she went to the doctor and got some bee pollen, to keep her awake, and she took the bee pollen and the exam—when she got there the exam was an hour and a half late—so she crashed an hour and a half before—(laughs) before it was over. Yeah, the second time I didn't make it was because I didn't get there in time. It was an ice storm and there was a huge jackknifing on the highway and I got there an hour or so late and they wouldn't let me in but I started crying (laughs) and they let me in. But I didn't have enough time to finish so... You have the same sort of remembrances of that?

SF: Yes.

MWD: Yes, it's different now.

SF: Yes, very different.

MWD: They just—very different. It was almost inhumane if you think about it.

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End of Interview