

# Women Who Are Architects

## McCurry, Margaret Irene, FAIA ~ Oral History Interview

Date of Interview: June 25, 2020

Interviewer: Sarah K. Filkins

McCurry, Margaret Irene Interview by Sarah K. Filkins. *Women Who Are Architects*. Remote recording due to the covid pandemic. Interviewee in Home Office in Chicago, IL; Interviewer in Home Office in Washington, DC Date of the Interview: June 25, 2020

This oral history was produced in 2019-2020 as part of the *Women Who Are Architects Oral History Project* with funding from an Archie Green Fellowship provided by the Library of Congress Occupation Folklife Project.

## **Background**

**Interviewer:** Sarah K Filkins

**Interviewee:** **Margaret Irene McCurry, FAIA, FIIDA**  
Tigerman McCurry Architects, Ltd.

[REDACTED]  
Chicago, IL [REDACTED]

Date of Birth: 1942

**Date of Interview:** June 25, 2020

**Place:** Remote Recording: Interviewee - Margaret McCurry in Home Office in Chicago, IL  
Interviewer - Sarah Filkins in Home Office in Washington, DC

Other People Present: None

Background Noise: Some Microphone Feedback

**Equipment Used:** Each on Private Computer, using Chrome Browser, Zencast Hi-Fi Podcasting Audio Recording Platform, and Headphones and Mic

**Recording Medium Used:** Digital 24-Bit/96 kHz Recording Resolution WAV Files

**Transcriber:** Sarah K Filkins

**Key Words:** architecture, licensed professional architect, woman architect, Fellow American Institute of Architects (FAIA), design partner, architectural licensing exam, history of art, history of architecture, modernism, Mies van der Rohe aesthetic, design, interior designer, Meis and Golden Section, American Academy in Rome, Ed and Judy Niesser, classical architecture, Stanley Tigerman, Davis Allen, Skidmore Owings and Merrill, enfilade, Archeworks, Brownsville, Harvard Graduate School of Design, apprentice, mentor, proportion, art, construction sites, John Hancock Building, Paul D. McCurry, Art Institute of Chicago, American Society of Interior Designers, clients.

**Interview**

[00:00:00]

Sarah Filkins: This is Sarah Filkins, Interviewer, speaking with Margaret McCurry FAIA, FIIDA on Thursday, June 25, 2020. Due to the covid 19 pandemic we rescheduled our March 2020 in-person interview in Chicago at the offices of Tigerman McCurry Architects on Lake Shore Drive. We are now recording this interview remotely with Ms. McCurry at her office in Chicago and Ms. Filkins from Washington, DC. So good afternoon and thank you for agreeing to share your story with us as part of the Library of Congress Occupation Folklife Project. We are so honored to have you with us today.

Margaret McCurry: Well, thank you Sarah

SF: Well, let's begin. If you could state your full name and year of birth for the archivists.

MM: It's Margaret Irene McCurry [REDACTED], 1942. Just for fun the Margaret I was named after—I was born during the war obviously, named after Mars the god of war and the Irene is my mother's name and it's the goddess of peace.

SF: So what is your current position with Tigerman McCurry and your job responsibilities?

MM: Well, I am the principal and the owner. My husband who was the Tigerman part of Tigerman McCurry died last June so I am now the sole principal of the firm.

SF: And let's step back and talk about when you first became aware of architecture and the built environment.

MM: Well my father [Paul D. McCurry] was an architect and he was a principal and partner at Schmidt, Garden, and Erikson, one of the oldest firms in the city and so I grew up—growing up with an architect father of course you hear conversations all the time. You're taken places all over the country to look at architecture as a child. I am the oldest of three children so we would pack up the car every summer and go hunting architecture and hunting American history. So we've been all the way from coast to coast to all of the major cities that had interesting architecture. And then also he used to take me with him on some of his job site visits. So I loved the smell of fresh sawn lumber and the sound of nails being driven and just the whole atmosphere of building. When I was really young and I grew up on the—initially on the South Side of Chicago there was some construction going on and I would go to construction sites and snoop. At that point none of them were closed off and I'd run inside and I'd climb up ladders and I'd hang from the roof beams and I'd pick up the slugs that you get when you punch out the outlets for the electrical power and use them as play money. So I was always around and very conscious of architecture and through my father, as well conscious of the history of the country and architects all over the country. I think that the only thing that was a problem for him was that he was very concerned that the field of architecture was a very difficult one for women so he

kind of thought since we had a lot of teachers including my grandmother, his mother, who was a teacher that took a stagecoach west—the train and the stagecoach to teach in a remote part of Oregon—that being a teacher would be a very good profession and it certainly is it just didn't happen to be one that I was as interested in going into as I was into the built environment. So...

SF: So when you were growing up if someone had said, “What do you want to be when you grow up,” what would you have said?

MM: Well, I think it depended on the age. I also had an imaginary companion that was named Trigger, it was a palomino horse and I used to canter around on that so at one point I probably would have said a jockey. So I didn't because my father wasn't saying my daughter the wanna-be-architect that I would have said that straight away.

[00:05:00]

Certainly to be something in the arts because my mother was an artist and also had taught art for years before she had her children. So you know, and I always painted with her and sketched and drew. So it would have been something in the arts certainly if I'd been asked as I got a little bit older beyond the imaginary companion stage.

SF: Did you know any women who were architects?

MM: Not as a young person, no. I don't think women in my firm.

SF: And did your Dad convey to you why he thought architecture would be difficult for you as a woman?

MM: It was the world at the time. Everything was difficult for women trying to be anything other than mothers and housewives. You know, Rosie the Riveter was fine during the war but the war was over and she put her apron back on again. So I think he knew. Architecture is a hard profession anyway. It takes real love and dedication to perform at the level of being really good at what you do. Obviously there are architects that are facile at taking exams and understand about structures and things but for us it was always the aesthetics of architecture, creating things of beauty. Philosophically it was very important. And that's very hard to do. It takes a combination of just the right client and the right architect and all the skills that you can put into being an architect which aren't just design skills. You have to be a philosopher; you have to be a psychiatrist; you have to figure out how you are going to accomplish what you would like to do at a high level of design and get your client to buy into what you're doing. So you're both problem solving all of their particular programmatic issues but you're also at the same time, for me anyway, creating something of beauty. So...

SF: So that made sense for you then to go on to college at Vassar to major in art history, thinking then you were going to be then an art teacher.

MM: No, not an art teacher. You know, it was the early sixties. Life was not complicated at that point. It sort of got complicated as the sixties went on from the Vietnam War to movements, protest movements, and all the rest but early sixties was almost a backward time. It could have been the fifties. So when I was taken around to look at different colleges, mostly women's colleges because I think that was important to my parents at the time, that I could perhaps get an education where I wasn't in competition with men. And so the reason I chose Vassar was because I remembered when I got home that the art history department was above the front gate so that seemed to be a very important spot for it to be. And of course Vassar has a history of a very high level of professors in their art history department so that was an automatic for me to major in it and then figure out later what it was I was going to do with it.

SF: So what did you decide after you graduated? What were your thoughts then?

MM: Well, there weren't even—none of the schools I don't think—well at least not Vassar had any program to bring in people who would counsel you as to the next steps with whatever particular major that you had. I think that if you weren't going to go on into higher education to get a masters or a doctorate in something, then there was no recourse in job description. So many of us from the Seven Sisters—actually when I got back to Chicago, we all had to go take typing and shorthand courses. We could—I could type with two fingers and it was pre-electric, just the beginning of electric typewriters so that was a real chore pushing down the buttons and of course you didn't get—if you made copies they were carbon copies. So I think I, when I hired—so after I took that course with everyone else and I now had my speedwriting—because the jobs that were available for women at that time if you weren't teaching and you didn't have an extra degree

[00:10:00]

were in the secretarial field so that's what you were. So I actually hired a source to find jobs and had three interviews. One was wrapping packages for Marshall Field and Company, our major department store in the city. I'd be up in their attic somewhere wrapping Christmas packages in July and that didn't sound like a very interesting thing. And then I was also offered a job at Scott Foresman being a copy editor and that sounded a little boring and not particularly creative for someone studying the arts. And the third one was being the secretary to the head of package design at Quaker Oats. The one thing about that was it had the word "design" in it. So I took that job because at the time I wasn't interested—I didn't know exactly where to go in graduate school. At architecture at the time, I was not the greatest math student in the world and of course everyone kept saying well, you've just got to know high math and physics and things to go to architecture school. So anyway I took the job at Quaker Oats and within six months I was promoted to being a package design coordinator and I was one of only, I don't know, maybe four or five women in all of Quaker Oats that had a job higher than a secretary. So it was a difficult world then. It's a long story but after a year and a half or so there, they decided to disband the package design department and put it under advertising. And the head of advertising didn't want

any of us with divided loyalties so he just fired our little group. So at that point I was offered jobs in advertising in New York because I'd been working with some of the major companies there that Quaker Oats had hired to do their advertising and also I had been doing photography work for some of their packages with photographers in New York. So at that point my architect father stepped in and said, "Well, why don't you go over and talk to a friend of mine at Skidmore Owings and Merrill [SOM] and see if you can put some of your skills into the firm." So I did and I talked my way into the interior design department and spent eleven years there.

SF: Had you taken drafting during high school?

MM: No, I took what architecture—history of architecture courses Vassar offered. And I also was painting the whole time I was there. So I took six subjects instead of the usual five so I could also be a painter. But no, I learned drafting basically on the job, I learned everything on the job but a lot of what we did was not so much drafting, especially in interiors, it was more doing layouts of furniture, layouts for corporations, choosing fabrics and color palettes and things like that. So what was interesting about SOM was that most of their jobs were fast-tracked which meant that they would both do the exterior architecture and the interiors at the same time to save the client money which was based in how long it took to actually do a project which the time was shortened so it saved money for the client. And that was one of the many selling tools that Skidmore had as to—in their job getting department. So I was taken along to many of the job sites while the building was being built and before so I was always around the architects listening to what they had to say talking to the client, how they talked things through, their sales point. So I absorbed a great deal about the making of buildings in that process, particularly office buildings, mostly what I was engaged in. So after eleven years of Skidmore, I—and also Skidmore had the habit of whenever the recession came on and they had to reduce their clientele, I'm sure they're doing it, even doing it now, the last couple months—they would choose sort of the middle level because that was the group that was making more money and they

[00:15:00]

could start afresh with a younger group so they would always try to get rid of the mid level. And when you've been there over ten years you're certainly at the mid level. So I had always escaped that process by having long-term jobs that would take three or four years in the doing such as high-rise office buildings and things but at one point all of that work was finished. I also was engaged in doing a Holiday Inn, which is not the highest level for a firm like Skidmore to take when they would do some of the most prestigious banks and office buildings in the world such as John Hancock in Chicago. But they took it because it was a recessionary time and so at that point after I'd finished it and had it published actually—that was over, it was still the recession and so they decided they could dump a number of us. So I was let go at which point I decided I would simply open my own firm. I'd been working—moonlighting because as a woman without an architecture degree at SOM it allowed them to pay you a minimum, hourly rate—about as minimum as you could get especially compared to the men. Even the ones that were in the interior design department were paid more than I was. So I was always trying to augment my

income by taking on clients on the side whether it was meeting a art gallery dealer who sold art to us for our clients, when he wanted to do his own gallery. I was working with him on his home. So I would work at night on these different projects to make some more money so when I was let go, I just immediately said, “I’m hanging out my shingle.” And that’s what I did for five years before I joined up with my husband which is a whole other story.

SF: Well, let’s back up just a little bit—if you could maybe talk about some of your learning experiences working at Skidmore with Davis Allen. Didn’t you have an opportunity to work with him and learn from him as well?

MM: Oh, yes. Davis was—he actually came from a suburb of Chicago—and had gone to Andover and Yale and ended up in the New York office running the interiors department there. So he was a very civilized, educated, interesting man with a lot of diverse interests so I got to know him while I was working with him. He was head of the interiors for a job that the Chicago office was doing but they wanted Davis because he was the most famous of the SOM interior designers. And so they needed someone in Chicago to back him up so that’s how they connected the two of us. And it was a wonderful learning experience because at this point, Davis had to be in his fifties and he had worked on jobs all over the world for Skidmore including one in Monaka in Hawaii. And he had been to Morocco, he’d been all over, buying special antiques for some of the corporate offices. So I got to follow him around, not necessarily around the world, but certainly to work together on this corporate office in Tennessee where we were looking for antiques for some of the corporate officers whether it was someone who actually was hunting birds so we could put together a decoy collection. Which while we were doing that I managed to have some wonderful decoys myself. And working with Davis I began to have a real appreciation for American folk art. Of course, in Nashville, Tennessee when he wanted to buy some of the local, simply made furniture, he was told, in no uncertain terms, that that was cabin furniture meaning that that belonged to Black people and that was not necessarily the way they wanted to go. So you had to buy English or French or something— mostly English that would be fine. So very early on, working in the South I discovered certainly levels of segregation that were in Chicago

[00:20:00]

as well but certainly at a higher level as you travelled further south. Even with my father, when we drove to a job site of his in Florida, for one holiday when I was in high school, was the first time I discovered when we stopped at a gas station that there were men and women and others, Blacks, and that that was a level of discrimination I hadn’t observed before. But a very interesting time. Anyway, so Davis not only honed my design skills because he was such a—he would have input from all segments of the design world and history. So from collecting decoys to collecting quilts—I have a very large, well, quilt collection I’ve been giving—deaccessioning some of them to the Art Institute of Chicago. I’ve become—I’m on the Textile Committee of the Art Institute, have been for at least ten or more years and so that’s a very interesting part of an outgrowth of my time with Davis. And he would design furniture too. We designed, to give the

office building in Nashville a sense of southernness. He took the idea of a Chippendale chair but made it into a very simple format made out of downed wood. So we worked on that together. And later he refined it at a much higher level called the Andover chair which was handled by Stendig and I have the original mock-up that we did for the national company. So it was Stanley's favorite chair cuz it had nice arms and a cushion and it was easy to get out of. But it has a very Shaker quality to it so every since doing the designs with Davis we would design end tables and tables—somebody who was a hunter also, or a fisherman I think—we took fishing lures and put them under glass for a coffee table for his office. So I learned all kinds of interesting ways to incorporate a client's sensibilities into their furniture and I've done that since. I did it recently just a few years ago for a Mrs. Armour, of one of the meat-packing Armours in Lake Forest here, who had an interesting collection of snuff boxes and so we actually made all of her snuff boxes into a table for her living room. So the skills I learned from Davis—and he was marvelous at convincing a client to do things also. I learned that skill as well, that sort of psychological political skill which is partially learning listening. You have to listen very carefully to all the client voices that come in because I've remodeled condominium lobbies and done all kinds of things in my tenure as an architect designer. And if you listen to all of them then you figure out just when to step in and let everyone have their say and then you can coalesce what they've said into a design idea. And you usually get them to buy into it at that point. But you don't start with being an aggressive person saying this is the way it has to be. You have to be quick on your feet. Years ago when I was at Skidmore when we were doing a Holiday Inn, there was a young project manager who was—he had to be able to visualize what he was going to get—he couldn't just let you explain a design idea and so—and he was always looking for marketing ways to—we were doing one of the, the bar at this Holiday Inn in Chicago and it was at the Apparel Center which Skidmore was also designing. So all the apparel stores in the whole Midwest would come into Chicago for their meetings and to have their showrooms in the Apparel Center. So this was the Holiday Inn that was connected to that building. So when he suggested at the bar that we put all these people in these wicker baskets that would be hanging from the ceiling, I was actually sitting there. This was also the age of the mini-skirt so I had on my mini-skirt because you couldn't wear pants at the time

[00:25:00]

which went all the way back to my being in grade school when I was sent home for wearing my bib-overalls and told that I—my parents were told I had to wear a dress which was my earliest level of discrimination as a young female. Anyway, when he said, “Oh, we've got to—we'll put all of these people in these hanging wicker baskets,” and I thought, What a terrible idea. But I was sitting there and I sort of crossed my legs and with a mini-skirt that was—you know it sort of crept up pretty high and I wiggled my toes and said, “Gee, well that's a really interesting idea but you know if I snag my panty hose on that wicker, I'd be really upset.” End of wicker baskets. But what I said instead was why don't we take all the labels from all of the little ma and pa apparel stores around the Midwest and they can submit their labels for their clothing and we'll put it under glass and it'll be underneath the bar. So that's what we did.



SF: That was brilliant. You're a psychologist as well.

MM: Well, you have—I think you have to be to work at a level that I like to work at which is to feel that your design talents are such that it would be nice if they got realized and how to do that. So...

SF: Well, while you were working with Skidmore and working with Davis Allen, you're it seems, being exposed to very different opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of design aesthetics because with the folk art and then with Skidmore with its Miesian aesthetics and then to be mentored by a gentleman who incorporated both of those seems very fortuitous in terms of learning opportunities.

MM: You know the eleven years I was there this was just a three year period when I was with Davis and then I was on my own doing other projects with them. So I think Davis came in probably at about in the middle of my time at Skidmore. And but mostly I was mentored more by men starting with my father and with the architects at SOM. There was only one woman architect at an associate level when I was there and she'd been sent from the New York office to be made an associate partner in Chicago because they didn't want to do it in New York. But even when the partners all went out to lunch at their private clubs—they discriminated against women—so poor Natalie was left out of the corporate meetings. So she struggled and she was of a generation just ahead of me. But she built the Equitable Building in Chicago and I'm very careful whenever I go on the boat tours and they mention SOM, I also mention that this is Natalie de Blois who was the principal architect and designer of the Equitable Building which is right on the river and Apple is now at it's base. So it's a very important structure on the Mag [Magnificent] Mile in Chicago.

SF: So when you were with Skidmore it was really inappropriate, I guess, for women at that time to discuss salaries or advancement or professional training, anything like that, with the hierarchy at Skidmore and many other architectural firms.

MM: Well, I think if you performed well—I mean, I did get raises certainly because I did a very good job with Davis Allen, backing Davis up on this high-rise building for a number of years. But whenever I worked for Bruce Graham—his wife was an interior designer, they'd actually met, it was a big scandal at Skidmore, she came to run the interiors department but was married to another interior designer and met Bruce and that was that. So he was not—

[00:30:00]

you know, he was fine with promoting women but you had to be very competitive with men. But at one point after I had done this really very good job on the office building with Davis Allen, I was also given the SOM apartment in [John] Hancock [Building] which was a place where they could put up clients who would come to town. I was assigned that duty which I had a lot of fun doing. We had a stainless steel floor. It was very dramatic. And so I was in a good position at that

point working with Bruce Graham. There were three partners at the time, Bruce, Walter Netsch who did most of their—many more of the schools. He did the University of Illinois in Chicago, North Buildings at Northwestern, and at the University of Chicago. And then there was a third partner, Michael, sorry not Michael—Myron Goldsmith. So everybody wanted to work for Bruce because he was the most powerful. He and Walter couldn't stand each other and, you know, you were on a team and it was sort of like red state/blue state. You just didn't speak to the other person. So in any event, after two very successful projects, I was going to have one of my own but unfortunately Walter had run out of work at the moment, so some of his people had been reassigned to Bruce. So one of them was going to be the head project architect for a large bank in Milwaukee and Bruce decided I should be his interior designer. Only he didn't want me, he wanted two young men who were part of Walter's team where he had been working for so long. So he actually set me up to fail. This is the bad side of Skidmore. He fed me incorrect information on this particular project and so when I made a presentation to Bruce it was all wrong. Well, that was enough for Bruce. I hadn't been able to figure out in my twenties how to get around this guy in his forties. So I was put back under somebody else again. So it was the brick wall that I hit at Skidmore. And to this day I wish that particular guy ill. He's still alive but he's not very well and I just hope he hasn't done this to too many other people in his life but...he is no longer at SOM either. So, anyway...

SF: What was the impact of SOM's design philosophy on your own design aesthetic—as you left then and went out on your own and then evolved in your own practice and as a partner with your husband?

MM: Well listen, these were the days when Skidmore was very much involved in the modern movement. They only embraced postmodernism after I left so it was really all about understanding scale and proportion. You know, Mies [van der Rohe] and the “golden section,” what that meant. What—even down to the way you would put different materials together. Historically, for example if you had a wall meeting a ceiling, you put a crown molding up there. And the molding beside being decorative hid the difference between the wall and the ceiling so if there's any—and you attached the crown molding only at the bottom. Nobody would know this, but it wasn't attached at the top. So if there was movement in the house or settlement or anything else of the building and on even ground, or whatever happened to move it around, maybe even sort of little minor earthquakes or something, the crown molding hid those two attachments of the ceiling plane and a horizontal and vertical plane. So when you're modern and you've just got the two [planes] meeting, the least you can do is put a very tiny reveal up there. And it was hardly noticeable but at least it would allow two different sometimes materials to move and not interfere with each other.

[00:35:00]

So there were many things like that that you learned in modernism—how you knew that things would shrink and expand with heat and cooling and so you learned about that and how you could design in the modern era around those things that were handled differently historically. But at the

same time as you're learning that—because I would always travel and I'd traveled with my father so often too, all over the country that I saw wonderful historic architecture. Say for example in Charleston, South Carolina, I discovered that the reason that the buildings were very skinny on the street facade and deep was because the prevailing winds came through in that direction and so they would add to air movement. And also because the buildings were taxed on their street facade so anybody made a skinny street facade so they didn't have to pay so many taxes. So you're learning all kinds of interesting things in the history of architecture that just enriches what it is that you do. I've always encouraged wanna-be-architects to not go right to architecture school but to go to a good university and take courses in history, take English because you have to be able to express yourself well. Religion, philosophy—you need depth as an architect I think to be able to talk with some authority about linkages back to history and what it means now when you're building and why. And so I've learned about ways that where you didn't have to have air conditioning. Our little cottage in Michigan that Stanley and I built together wasn't air conditioned for many years. We had a rotating ceiling fan and we had cross ventilation with all the windows. And we had a double height space in the center so we drew air out of the smaller rooms on the side into this double height space and that's called the Bernoulli principle. So there's so much. Architecture is just such a rich field if you look at it historically as well as contemporaneously—how you can solve current problems by looking back at things in the past as well. So that's going aside a bit but that's what I would say to young people and I've often counseled children of friends who are thinking they want to be architects. And I just tell them, “Be sure you go to get civilized first because architecture's a profession that you can do for the rest of your life”. You know, if you become a vice president of a company and you retire, you're no longer a vice-president, you're just a retired person. But you're never not an architect.

SF: That's great. I like that. So what prompted your transition from interiors to architecture and then your decision to sit for the architectural licensing exam?

MM: Well I had—when I was on my own for a few years, I got very tired of putting bandaids on bad buildings which is what you have to do as an interior designer often. You don't—so when—by then I had met Stanley and between Stanley and my father—and my father was very involved with the American Institute of Architects [AIA]. He was president of the Chicago chapter. He gave Mies van der Rohe the Gold Medal from the Chicago Chapter. He fought the [Chicago] Crosstown Expressway which would have done to Chicago what the Embarcadero did to San Francisco and they've since torn it down but fortunately we never built ours. So he was very engaged with the profession. So he knew. He was on NCARB [National Council of Architectural Registration Boards] and he would grade exams and things. So he knew that if you had practiced in an architectural capacity of some sort for eight years and you had a—combined with a BA from a university and someone who you had worked for signed a document saying that you had worked in an architectural capacity under them that you could sit for the licensing exam in architecture without having a degree from a licensed architecture school. Sadly this is not true anymore but this helped so many women

[00:40:00]

who stopped their careers to have children that could go back or worked part-time and earned enough hours to be able to qualify by doing two jobs at once, raising kids and also doing drafting and things like that for architecture firms. So it's very sad that it didn't happen but actually interestingly enough, my husband Stanley Tigerman was also—got his license on the apprentice system because—it's another long story about Stanley but he came from a kind of poor family. His grandmother was a chef at the Belden-Stratford Hotel, and ran a boarding house. He was raised in a boarding house. And he took drafting in high school at Senn High School. And so he went to—he was told—he wanted to be an architect when he first read *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand's book on architecture and an architect I think based probably on Frank Lloyd Wright, a very arrogant architect, but Stanley wanted to be one. And so he asked what was the best architecture school in the country and was told it was MIT. So he applied. He did very well in high school, he was a smart kid and he got into MIT on a scholarship and then he went to his classes and realized that he was more of a design architect than a scientific, structural, mathematical variety. And some of these high math courses that he had to take and things were sort of beyond his can. I think he also probably you know—and he decided very early that this probably wasn't the place for him so he also became the stroke of the varsity crew, he was—I think he fell in love, he joined fraternities, he did everything and the only course he passed was English. So he flunked out with probably the worst grades in all of MIT. And went to work for architects in the City of Chicago because he had drafting skills and he learned a great deal but when he was thirty years old he decided he was missing something and so he talked his way into Yale and got two degrees in two years, a bachelors and a masters, under Paul Rudolph. So he was a licensed architect before he went to Yale because he had worked for George Fred Keck and some other very good Chicago architects and he had passed his licensing exam under the apprentice system. So once I had both Stanley and my father on my case, I figured I better do the same so I got one of my mentors at Skidmore to sign documents that I'd worked under them which was true, in some capacity, because interiors people always worked with the architects. Anyway, I sat for the exam and I managed to pass it on the first time and Stanley, it took him two times because was too cavalier about it the first time. So that was one of the many things that we always had fun joking with each other, that I had managed to do it all in one fell swoop. Of course now it's very easy because if you take the exam you can take one part at a time and then you go study another part and then life is much simpler then than it was then when you had to sit for the whole thing all at once.

SF: So you sat for five days and had to complete the design problem in twelve hours?

MM: Yeah, well there were two years where they broke the exam down into professional parts and other parts. So yes I had to pass all the first part which was at least four days, design and everything. And then you took the professional part which had to do with permitting and contractual work and things like that. So if you didn't pass the first four days, you couldn't sit for the last fifth day which was six months after the first group but that only lasted for two years and then they went back to everybody doing it all at once. So, yes so then, of course, I realized

that I needed some more credentials. Well actually before that I had gotten—I had sat for the interior design exam with

[00:45:00]

ASID [American Society of Interior Designers] and passed that one so was then a member of ASID but it was great to have the AIA [American Institute of Architects] after my name for sure and then years later when I was admitted into the Fellowship of the AIA, that was a very important part of my life. You know, my Dad was a Fellow and actually we got—I was inducted into the Fellowship in Washington, DC at the convention years ago and it was the same Washington DC that my father had gotten his Fellowship twenty-five years before so it was a very moving time.

SF: I'm sure

MM: Stanley of course was a Fellow—had been one of the younger Fellows.

SF: When you and Stanley merged your practices then how did that influence your work or did you set up any boundaries in merging your practices about working together?

MM: Well, I had my own clients when we merged. I mean Stanley and I—well I met him I think in I think seventy-five and we were married in seventy-nine. We didn't become partners until I think eighty-three, five years later, so I had many of my own clients but it was actually his son's, my stepson's idea that we merge the two practices and so I still—it wasn't Tigerman Fugman McCurry. It was Stanley Tigerman, Architect. That was the name of the firm for a long time and I just had my own separate section. And we occasionally worked together on projects but usually it was when it was for friends. So we would review each others projects off and on but we really maintained a separate practice for a very long time until it did become, at first it was Tigerman Fugman MCCurry because he had a young architect that worked for him that had been for a long time and he wanted to honor him as well. But then he left to start his own practice and then it just became Tigerman McCurry so, But it took awhile, Stanley had an ego, obviously, and was used to running things his own way. But after many years of marriage one figures out how to do with these things. So I think the important thing was because he was so well known, when we were married, that finding and maintaining my voice was always a very interesting and well difficult, only not so much from his standpoint, but from being separated from what it was that he did. I mean he was obviously a major influence on me. He had a great sense of humor, a sense of whimsy and a good sense of history too and so he would sort of loosen me up quite a bit where some of the projects that I did were very fanciful and fun. And I think I did some work with him as well that he really appreciated so it was a long learning curve with our practice together. Obviously we did our cottage in Michigan together and the plans were really mine. It's a very symmetrical, organized little eight-hundred square feet and it won a National AIA Honor Award. It has a great double-height space, it's almost like a piazza—the rooms open into it. They're just a kitchen bathroom combined so you can hook up the plumbing

together and then two bedrooms on the other side of this double-height space so with monitor windows. So we talk about it when I lecture. I talk about it being both a basilica plan which it is and a barn as well. And in a barn, the upper windows are called monitors but in a basilica they're clerestory windows so they bring light in from above

[00:50:00]

in the double height space. So there's a lot of history connected with this particular form but as I said I drew the plans. It's in corrugated metal because we went to visit Frank Gehry who is an old friend of Stanley's and we were out in LA when he had just finished doing his first house in Santa Monica that took an old pink house and added parts to it. It's one of his still—Frank's most famous projects, was the Santa Monica house. But it had corrugated metal and chain link fences and so we realized that we could use corrugated metal on our house rather than the traditional wood that you would find in this little part of Michigan. So of course it shocked some neighbors and it shocked the plan approval groups where at one point they were trying to legislate against it because they thought it was an industrial form and it didn't belong in with the ranch houses and the other things that were around in this part of Michigan. But it's now completely different. It changed everyone's minds. It was in *Architectural Digest*; it was published endlessly. And of course it won a national award as well so it was a very significant point. It also could be considered an extrusion, a metal extrusion, because the ends are actually gridded and the grid is a very important part of—it goes anywhere from the modern architecture of Meis and his grids which are the “golden section” back to—all the way in history to how you would build with a cubit. And a cubit was a form of measurement from your elbow to the top of your middle finger and that was a way that you would build in historical times. It was “x” number of cubits was the proportion. So what I learned from Stanley was this layering of history. And some of my favorite authors kind of do the same thing. And favorite architects like in London, Sir John Soane. If you go to his own home, it's a wonderful layering of very small contained space but with so many different layers of architectural form and things, you actually—your eye was caught and it would look through these layers and make the space seem larger. You actually find that in the work of Cézanne where his work leads you up his canvas and so you're moving upward in space and outward in space. So these are devices that have been around historically for a long, long time. Entasis is another one in columns. So I learned that—we were—now I'm sort of jumping all around—but Stanley became the architect in residence at the American Academy in Rome, the year after we were married. And we went off and lived in Rome for a number of months and traveled all over Italy and spent time at the American Academy with important people like the head of—what was he? He was a classical scholar at Harvard and we had other architects come and join us. We had historians; we had musicians; we had photographers; so it was a most incredible time of learning. There were artists there, they had big studios. So it was a great time to be wandering around through classical architecture and things in Rome. So Stanley and I were married for forty years and the times we did work together—we had a wonderful friend Judy Neisser who died the year before Stanley did but we did, when her husband Ed died—we used to play tennis together—they had rented a place in the country where we were. And I think Ed and Stanley were the same age and when Stanley

did go to Yale, Ed was at Yale also I think, and so anyway Ed died very young. We—Judy did several wonderful things for us when Ed died and they had a house that I had done some

[00:55:00]

remodeling for, several architect friends had. She decided that she didn't want to live in the house by herself up in Lincoln Park and so she was going to move into the Four Seasons and get a condominium there. So she wanted both of us to work together on this project and so she knew perfectly well when Stanley and I would work together there was this kind of abrasive quality as to who was having the idea and when. We'd argue over things but our good friends knew that this wasn't going to lead to divorce or anything. It was simply our MO of working and whenever the best idea came out then the other one would sort of accept it. So we'd go back and forth on that. And so her apartment that we did which was written up also—Paul Goldberger I think, wrote about it I think for Architectural Digest and called it “Modern Classicism or Classical Modernism” because it had both. It was enfilade as it moves through rooms but it had very modern detailing bringing me back to my Skidmore level of detailing and proportion and things. And then we built a house in Aspen, Colorado, the two of us for Judy as well, which her daughter Kate now has and we used to go out every Christmas and go skiing and spend time with Judy. She then funded Archeworks' building for Stanley which was a very important part of his giving back to society. He did it with an interior designer friend, Eva Maddox, of ours so the two of them founded it together. And he was partners on it for about fifteen years I think. So, and Judy also helped me when I was at Harvard. I was head of the Alumnae Council of the GSD [Graduate School of Design] for three years and I wanted to bring a studio to Chicago rather than to different parts of the world, a design studio. And so I befriended some of the professors in the urban design studio and made a connection with a group on the South Side, the Near South Side African-American community. And so Judy funded bringing in a studio of young people from Harvard to Chicago to work in what's called Brownsville which was the historic district of Chicago. So we also connected them with IIT, which actually, all the Meis buildings and the school are located in Brownsville. So we had underclassmen and upperclassmen both working together and they published a booklet called, “A Street in Brownsville” which is a very important document for Brownsville. The city still has it. So Judy, speaking just of clients, she was by far one of our most significant friends and clients and remained so, really for the rest of her life. She died the year before Stanley. But she called him her brother. I mean they were like brother and sister, the two of them. So we've had clients like that that you just have lifelong friends as clients. I just lost one this summer. His wife just wrote me to say the house I built on the lake in Wisconsin—and when we put our archives into the Art Institute into the Burnham Library, also the curator for the architecture and design society came by the office and chose different models, some of Stanleys and some of mine, and she chose the model of this particular house in Wisconsin. And he was so thrilled to have the model of his house in the Art Institute. You know, we stayed in touch. If I'd go up by Wisconsin I would call up and stay overnight with them and it's part of what has made the profession, at least for me, such a wonderful one that you're making people happy, you're solving problems and you're making their lives better. In this covid

—I’ve built a number of second homes all through, well, one on Martha’s Vineyard, one in the Sonoma Valley in California but most of them have been

[01:00:00]

around in Michigan in what’s called Harbor Country which is just about seventy-five to eighty miles from Chicago. You go through Indiana and pop up the other side and I’ve had some friends call to tell me they have been sheltering there since March in homes that were normally just weekend homes or something and how happy they had been in these homes and how wonderful they were now that they were there full-time in them. So that’s the very comforting thought and certainly that’s the way my cottage has been for me. I go back and forth, but I’m spending more time in it away from the city which is boarded up. I live in Streeterville and that’s right at the end of the Magnificent Mile and of course the rioters managed to get through there. And some of the important streets right in the neighborhood like Oak Street, all the stores are boarded up because this was like Rodeo Drive and they went after those shops. So walking around the neighborhood is difficult. Going to the bank you can hardly—you have to hand them something and then they come and bring you a slip of paper. And most of the grocery stores around are closed so you have to go farther afield. So it’s much easier to be in rural Michigan where there’s less covid and people are walking the streets and walking their dogs and we put on masks when we go into any environment and we can social distance on my screen porch. So I have friends that come and we do that. So I think I’m finding, certainly from my other architect friends around the country that they’re all very busy building more houses, second homes for people, because of what’s happened in the covid days. Even the real estate market which was very dull for a number of years has heated up tremendously, and rental markets and everything, as people are trying to escape the cities.

SF: Well, when you’re working with people on something as personal as their own home, how do you help them understand the design process, or proportion and scale, or color selection, details, massing, things like that? How do you help them understand what you’re doing and decisions you’re making while you’re creating the design?

MM: Well the first thing I do with a residential client is to ask each—ask the husband and wife or the partners, the two partners—to put together a list of things, a checklist, things that are important to them and to do it without talking to the other person. So then they bring them in, in secret, and we meet and I look at the list and you can begin to tell things already by the fact that—the hierarchy of the list. What’s number one and then you start to talk about it with both of them and you reach sort of a consensus between the two as to what’s important for both. And you talk about the budget because that’s very important also. And if they’ve got a list of twenty different rooms they want and they show you their budget and you say, “There’s a disconnect here. Let’s figure out how we can make some rooms do double duties.” So I’ve had a lot of fun with that. I did a house in the suburbs years ago for an anesthesiologist actually and his wife and they had such a bubble diagram with a lot of rooms. And I said, “Well, what about the dining room also being the library?” And I said, “Kids can do their homework there and you can read at



the dining room table and also instead of having to put art on the walls you'll have friendly books all over." So we began to do things like that. I've had often the dining room become the center of a larger house because when you're dining, you're facing inward and connecting with each other so you don't necessarily have to have a lot of windows. Instead you can have vistas that you look at. I have a house in Michigan that I did for clients that I've worked for, for twenty years and because it's a

[01:05:00]

fairly large size house the dining room is in the center so the kitchen comes off of it, the family room does, the stairs going up to the second level are there and it's a double height space so it has skylights above. It doesn't have windows because it's looking through the kitchen to the windows in the kitchen. There's also the entry that has a fireplace and a little seating area. And so the four quadrants all have something interesting to see. It just—it happens to be that there's not a window right adjacent to you. But you can also, when you go up the stairs, they're balconies and so people can be up above and they can look down on those that are dining or if it's dinner time and the kids are up in their rooms you can sort of shout up. So they're lots of ways to do it. I've had—they're also interesting ways to attract—some of my clients have been older and they want to attract grandchildren to come especially to the house in the country. So in one case I figured out a way where we actually were remodeling an old house and I put the kids on the second level. And we put what's called a hyphen, historically, which would be the main house if you think of Palladio and some of his villas, you'll see the main house and then you'll see lower linkages on either side to either dovecotes or something else if it's a farm building or if it's just a very large house and they're ancillary things. So we have a—so this particular house has this little link called the hyphen and then you have the master bedroom that I added on. And it has a flat ceiling but in the pitched roof you can go out on the balcony of the link. As a kid you open up your window and you crawled out and you got on to the flat roof of the link and then you went in the window of the attic above the master bedroom and there was a playhouse. So I've enjoyed finding unique ways to make for family interconnectivity and togetherness. I've put bunkbeds in for some kids or I've put in a bed with a ladder to a little play loft up above so they could create their own space. So making a lot of pitched roofs which also has to do with the vernacular of the region, one historically, lets you tuck little things into roofs in different places. So it's the fun I think of working with families and creating happy spaces for them to be in. Also tranquil spaces, I'm a Libra born in September—actually Stanley was a Virgo although our birthdays were only six days apart. But Libras have to do with the scales, the balancing of things and that's always been important to me, is to achieve a level of sort of tranquility and order in what I do. And I think it just goes back to my basic makeup. Stanley, very different, which is...

SF: He said that your mantra was “a need for quiescence in design”.

MM: Well, you know, what he would say also was that I was like a little bull-terrier dog. I would sink my teeth into a client's ankle and I wouldn't let go until they were on board with what I was trying to do. And I had a long attention span which he didn't. He would design very

quickly and then move onto the next thing. And I would stick with something long enough to figure out how to talk a client into accepting what it was that I was trying to do and if they respect you enough they will do that, basically. So there's a certain level of trust you have to achieve

[01:10:00]

with them as well and of course we would make models. They weren't the virtual models that everyone does now where you can go in and toss it around. They were hand-made and we had a little model scope where you could put it down and you could look through the different rooms. And we would take rooms apart or if it was a very important room we would make a great big model of it that was maybe two feet by two feet and then you could see everything in the room, depending on the level of the project actually. So and sometimes we would take people through other houses we'd done because we maintained these friendships with all of our clients.

SF: Have you found that climate change or passive environmental design is now a larger component of your conversation with clients?

MM: Um, sure because it's in the air, I mean, except for the climate deniers that voted for you know who. It will be again. I own some stock in a wind making company, a windmill company and it's doing very well. You know, if you look coming down—I was traveling once with a friend, we were up in Canada and we were coming down into Montana and there happens to be a mountain range that creates great wind currents there. And we just looked out and there were all these beautiful wind turbines everywhere. They're whole parts of the country that are off the grid because of it and this will—I could see wind turbines in Lake Michigan at some point. And certainly solar panels—I've done, the last houses that I've done have had solar panels and some of them have had, mostly had geothermal systems and they've had radiantly heated floors because those are much more friendly to your breathing than radiators or furnaces, hot-air furnaces and things. So people when they have—the sad part is that these are still costly items. They haven't been so much in the lexicon of everyone wanting them that they haven't figured out a way—I mean cellphones went from very expensive things as did televisions into something that are—and computers because there's such a demand for them. As once we get rid of the current climate in Washington, we will be back to honoring a lot of the environmental concerns that most people in the country do in fact have. Programs will be reinstated. The Arctic will be safe again. Some of our parks will be safe again—they won't be clear cut. And we'll find ways to make building products affordable and not necessarily destructive of the natural world. It's just, you know, as they say, "There's nothing stronger than all the armies than an idea whose time has come". And the ideas are here and we're just waiting for November before they can hopefully, yes unless—you know, I don't know. There will be a lot of machinations to try to stop it but whatever.

SF: Well you've written about pursuing "the achievement of aesthetic effect in creating architecture that attains a harmonious and tranquil relationship to the world". Are there several projects where you feel that you have especially achieved this, that you'd like to note.

MM: Well they're, you know, hopefully most of them.

SF: Yes, but I mean are there several that stand out in your mindAnd s

MM: That's been a goal, well you know, for example one of the very first projects I ever did was an art gallery in an old loft building here in Chicago for a client that I had been doing a number of different—working with when I was at Skidmore actually

[01:15:00]

and it had

SF: That's the Suhu Gallery?

MM: Yeah, the Suhu Gallery, as opposed to Soho, because it was Superior and Huron Streets so it's Suhu. Yeah. And it won a best in low-budget design because it only cost fifteen dollars a square foot to do this whole thing. But the whole point of it was in a way recreating traditional museum spaces because it had knee brace columns that were only a certain proportion apart and you couldn't knock down the columns. You had to work within the rows of columns that you were given. And so I created rooms that were enfilade that you could move through one to the next and the doorway was in the center so you always knew where you were going rather than the more modern form where you'd be slipping around planes and things. So it actually became such a popular art gallery that there were a number of weddings there. And the owner made a lot of money renting it out to major events because everybody could circumnavigate through and know where they would end up at the end like a very large house. So and it was all made of very simple materials. It was all about proportion. It was drywall, and two by fours, and painted wood, french doors so you could look through them, very simple materials. So that's always been important to me as well is that there's a certain honesty in the materials that you use. You know, you don't pick formica that looks like wood grain. If somebody wants a wood counter you either give them a wood counter or you give them a plastic laminate color. But you don't try to fake something. So that's part of the sort of honesty of materials and things that goes into aesthetics as well, I think, is how materials are used. Proportions, I don't know how you explain it better than to say that it's been—they've been tried and true throughout history. The Parthenon has a different—end columns are spaced differently than all the others because it has to do not only with looking at it two-dimensionally but three-dimensionally. And when your eye expands out either the columns would run off at the end or you stabilize them in certain ways. It's entasis of a column that it wants to look its just a totally straight tube but in fact it wouldn't because your eye distorts it and so you figure out ways to distort it itself so that it goes back into plane. Even a sofa if you're designing a tuxedo simple, square sofa, you actually have—the top angles out a little

more than the base only by maybe half an inch or something. But it's that little subtle amount that you change the proportion that your eye corrects it that it looks straight but if you didn't it would bow out. So it's just a lifetime of learning these things that go back forever in history and don't really change what you do unless you want it to be distorted. I mean now it's a whole different thought process that everything is distorted and I think it's a reflection of the chaos of the world. Architects in general have been followers in some form or another, whether it's deconstruction because the French were—the constructionists were important and Peter Eisenman, one of our friends and others were busy doing deconstruction. Stanley would try it. The fun thing he had was to get—he would always get clients that were willing to do unique things and so he could take whatever movement some of his friends were engaged in and writing about and he'd find someone and he could build a house for them. One of his famous houses was a wall house because John Hejduk who was teaching at Cooper Union was an old friend of Stanley's and he was—you know he built very little but he was very engaged in the idea of moving from the outside through a wall to the interior. And so you would exaggerate that wall that you went through.

[01:20:00]

It's like going through a building plane or even in a painting, the same thing with perspective but you go through the wall. So Stanley managed to build a wall house that was also pornographic for a guy that had a colostomy so...

SF: This was the one that visible from a helicopter...

MM: Yes but somebody put a garage on the end of the penis which was really sad. It lost a lot of its—you used to enter—well now you enter off of the garage into the penis but anyway. But he's deconstructed things. He's had a lot of fun. When we were at the American Academy, he came back and did a drive-in bank that looked like a miniature classical language building. I mean, it's never been published much because it was completely by the book. Everything was by all the masters of the classical language. So it's one of the reasons he used to be so kind of upset with schools like Notre Dame trying to teach the classical language but not doing it by the book, trying to invent new forms and they weren't necessarily aesthetically pleasing so...

SF: Well as you look back over your career as an architect—what do you see as your legacy?

MM: Oh, I think there are a number of different ways that the legacy could be construed. Some in the buildings that I've done which you know like, the simple one of the art gallery that people would walk through it and go, "Why is this pleasing and what feels good about it?" The fact that I've written two books and one explains my early career, the first one and the other takes more of the houses and things and I've designed furniture. You know, I get notes occasionally from people all over the country and from people that have worked in our office. It might be ten years from when they did but they'll write back and say, "I learned so much from you." So I've lectured at many schools of architecture around the country and those are young students that if

you can open their eyes to be thinking about the broader picture. I haven't—I've taught studios not that often but I remember one that I taught where I gave them an infill building and said the inside as to be as important as the outside because you don't have many windows and you don't have a chance to create something that's a unique form. It has to fit within the cityscape and so you have to begin to focus on the inside out which is what a lot of my lectures have been—that people live inside things. And you have to have to first think about how it is that they function and live. So I've wanted to have an influence on the profession, also on the public, so hopefully by being published over the years people might keep some of their magazines and think about what it is that has been written about me and if they hire somebody younger they might still think about what that means and why. So I think that's—I mean legacy I'd like it to continue, it's unfortunate that—you know, having the loss of Stanley and the loss of a actual building when the practice is here at home has caused people to think you're retired. Or some people think, Well if I get somebody young they'll be cheaper. But a young person is usually trying out twenty different ideas that they've never done before and so they're not as adept at problem solving quickly so even—it's one of the arguments I use when I try to convince a client that they should hire me. But it's a different era now too. There are different things that are important to young people and it isn't always the things that I think are important. But...

SF: Where are you now in your career then? You

[01:25:00]

continue as a sole practitioner then?

MM: Well it depends on the size of the job. The good thing about, that's happened—if there's anything good about covid—is that so many firms are actually doing much more virtual design. All the large firms are and some people won't ever go back. They'll continue to work out of their homes which will allow more families to raise children in a more reasonable way instead of having to send them to daycare or something. And I will be able to do that. You saw what happened with Craig. We can draw back and forth on the computer. I can sketch something and scan it and send it off to him and he can put it in CAD system so I don't need to have an office with a lot of overhead. I can have people on their computers and then they can come and meet on my dining room table at some point, when we can speak to each other again, and we can have some creative time but then they would disperse again and develop things. When I talk to some of my friends that are busy—and I have a very good friend in Mill Valley, building all over that part of the San Francisco suburb area. She's very busy because she's got a lot of people that are virtually doing. So I'm hoping. Also I'm still involved with different groups of younger architects. Stanley and I had a salon for the last two years that we had the practice at home—a Sunday afternoon salon with the younger architects because he always believed in passing the baton. And so I'm still in touch with some of them and when we can meet again we will start to put some projects together. A lot of our library is at the Graham Foundation so I still will have a very active life engaged with architects. I'm hoping that I might do some teaching. One of my neighbors down the hall actually in our Mies van der Rohe building, is the new dean at IIT and

we've talked about, when he has enough funds to set up more of an interior architecture department, that we'll do some more talking about that and I might be engaged in that. I'll certainly be traveling more with the Committee on Design which I chaired some years ago. It's the Committee on Design of the AIA. And I've mentored some of the architects that are now heading it up. I have good friends all over the country from my time on the Committee on Design especially in New York and San Francisco. And so it will be—right now it's an emailing time and a face whatever time. But I will be back traveling. I had a trip scheduled to Switzerland in August but I think the EU is not going to let Americans in, thanks to all the states that opened too soon because they were told to do so and they made a big mistake and so now the fact that Chicago is now—Illinois is in its fourth stage I think as of tomorrow. Where the whole South and West is all still peaking because they didn't follow the guidelines. So I think that I can't see my ending up in Switzerland with my friend Heidi and her husband Michael but I will—there's wonderful architecture to be seen there. The Committee on Design went last year and I would normally have gone with them but it was right when we had a memorial planned at the Art Institute for Stanley which it took me months to plan. But we had some of his best friends, Frank Gehry spoke, and Peter Eisenman spoke, and Bob Stern spoke and then the younger generation spoke. Jeanne Gang who would be someone you should put on your Library of Congress list because she's actually, I think, broken through a number of ceilings to where she is now being considered at a level of Zaha [Hadid] in a way, maybe not quite the artist that Zaha was but with the influence all around the world now. She's getting a lot of work, so.

[01:30:00]

And Carol Ross Barney is going to be up for the Gold Medal this year. I just played golf with Carol yesterday actually and she's a very good friend. So you know, I would be traveling with friends and hopefully still engaged with young people and doing some writing probably and I also enjoy photography.

SF: Well, now Stanley prepared his memoirs, would you think of doing the same?

MM: Well, all of our work is at the Art Institute so I've written two books, Stanley wrote one autobiography that I edited, so outside of maybe having a few more things published, I think some of my memoirs are there. Whether I write a story about the two of us, I don't know. There's certainly—I've been hired by the Mies van der Rohe building that I live in and Stanley and I lived in separately and together for fifty years. I'm going to be writing stories about our life in the Mies Building that will be part of a new logo that they're putting together. So the board has hired me to write stories and I like to write things and so I will probably do some more writing and I'll do some more painting. I have a good friend in New York that—she's written maybe twenty-three books on child-rearing and parenting and her most famous book, *Mind in the Making*, just made the Billboard on Broadway—it's, it's ten year anniversary so she was one of my college roommates and we're very good friends. And we went last summer, we went driving through Route 66 through Illinois portion and she's photographed all of the other portions of Route 66 over the years and we were going to put our photographs together. She likes to do art

ones reflecting through window glass into and I like the historical part of the old farms and the old buildings that are there and things so we were going to put our work together and hope to get a show on our photography. So that's sort of—so I have to do some more editing of my photographs and I just got a new computer with new editing skills on it that I have to learn so I will be busy doing that. So lots of projects to engage me with but you know, I love to write, I love to take pictures, but I also love to build things. So I would really like to build again. It's just a creative act that keeps you young and vital I think.

SF: Well you titled one of your books, *Distillations: The Architecture of Margaret McCurry*. Why did you choose the title "Distillations"?

MM: Because in a way what my work does is to—when you distill something, like if you distill wine, you get to the essence. Like sherry is distilled. If you—they're many ways of doing it. It's like getting to the essence of something so what is the essence of the building? It's about how you live in it, how you feel when you're in it, how you look out at the outer world when you're in it, how it makes you feel. So these I find are all sort of distillations of life in a way with the building and then it's also about a Shaker quality. The Shakers distilled their art forms into very simple shapes and forms that were very beautiful in their simple proportions and their simple materials so that's part of it too, that a lot of these have taken architecture and the program of the client and distilled it into something that's like a little microcosm. One of the first houses that I ever designed was for a couple Michael and Bryan, who were friends of ours. And Bryan wrote of my work, I used to put it in my biography often, that I was "like the Jane Austen of architecture." That I could take a space and make it the microcosm of things. So Bryan has maintained a good friend.

[01:35:00]

Michael died years ago of AIDS and sadly Bryan, well it's a long story, but Bryan is now teaching at Yale because when I was on the Alumnae Counsel of the GSD at Harvard where I also had a fellowship years ago at Harvard and have been very engaged since. I've been president of the Harvard Club of Chicago. I was only the second woman in one hundred-fifty years and the first one was actually not a Harvard grad but a—the woman's college that was connected with Harvard

SF: Oh Radcliff.

MM: Radcliffe. She was Radcliffe and I was actually Harvard at that point. But I got Bryan into the GSD studying landscape history and then when he got an MDes [Master in Design Studies] and passed, Stanley helped him get into Yale and he's now the Mr. Chips of Yale. But that house that he and Michael—that I built for both of them was just torn down last week—my first house.

SF: Oh no, it was a beautiful house.

MM: It was the kind of house that Hansel and Gretel would have found their way to, I think, in the woods. And you know it was a small house. It didn't have a big master—the master bedroom was upstairs, you actually got there through the kitchen so you could sit on the stairs and chat with the cook. It had two small bedrooms, the bathroom was connected to the kitchen to save some money so the two bedrooms were by themselves so you know and it had several acres of land, so in a kind of prime spot. So if I'd known, I would have tried to figure out how to move it to a piece of property I own. Then I could have tried to sell it again but who knew. The new owner just tore it down so...

SF: Had to build something bigger and grander?

MM: Yeah, all that and God forbid he should hire me again to do it?

SF: Such a beautiful house.

MM: The art gallery I did that won all these awards burned down very sadly many years ago. But those are the only two that I know of buildings I've lost whereas Stanley, the very first affordable housing he did on the South Side near the University of Chicago is all being torn down. He did it back in the sixties. It was very simple but it was reasonable housing and it was low key, low level, but the university is taking it over so they're getting rid of it. So it happens. At least you have the drawings, you have the photographs. You have them archived so, you know, students can come and learn from them. The reason Stanley and I gave all of our drawings and not just the drawings—the reason he changed from archiving at Yale was—to the Art Institute was that at some point when I leave them the money we've earned together, they will have a study center. Right now everything's archived but they'll be an actual study center so young people can come and not only look at our drawings but they can go through the text, the programs that we set up, the correspondence with clients, the correspondence with contractors. You know designing is just the tip of the iceberg. You have to get it built. And you have to figure out how to get it built at a price that your clients will be happy with. And there's so much of—it's far beyond just design. There's the making of it. And this is what young people will be able to study is how we were able to achieve this aesthetic quality that was important certainly to me and in a strange way to Stanley also. He loved to experiment with shapes and forms but he also was very conscious of history and playing with it. And so we're hoping that this will be a venue for young and old to come and access all of our archives and learn from them.

SF: It's a fabulous gift to leave to future architects.

MM: Well anyway, the Burnham Library has been lovely. The head of it has become a great friend and I can go there actually and open a box and find something if a client

[01:40:00]



comes back to me and we have to reconstruct something. I go back there and visit my box and so anyway it's been great.

SF: Well sort of coming full circle back to when your Dad thought that the profession was not friendly to women and supportive of women, could you share some of your experiences as a woman working in the profession and also on the construction sites or working with contractors?

MM: Well because I've been at it for so long things have really changed. I mean, when I was traveling with—when I was at Skidmore and because as I mentioned they fast-tracked their buildings, where they did both the interior design as they were building the building so you had a double meeting on the progress of the architecture or the beginning of the architecture with how you would handle their interiors. I was traveling—they were all men—so we would get off the plane and go to the hotel in whatever city we were in and they'd start handing out the keys and I would discover that all the men were put next to each other and that I was either on another floor, a different building, if it were a complex of buildings. They would just look at me as though I was not a design person brought along, but a play toy and that went on wherever I traveled. When I was on a construction site, the men would get very nervous because it was—they figured a woman on a construction site was bad luck, sort of like the figurehead on a ship. So they were nervous about having me on a construction site. But this was so long ago. You know, I had a woman client once that was great who hired me. She said, "I have someone who does this and someone who does that." And she had picked different people for their talents and so she just had complete faith in me because of her selection. But, gradually things have changed. There's—you know, when you work with a—when you're in the field and you're working with say a carpenter or something, if you approach them with wanting to learn what it is that they do so well, you can really begin to get their respect, if you listen, if you have them show you things. You don't just tell them something because you might even pick up an easier way of constructing something from them. Then it's a very changed atmosphere, I think. Well, the schools of architecture now are totally equal men and women and sadly, I think some of it is that architecture is the least remunerative profession in all of the major professions. It may be ministers, but I doubt it. You know the Divinity School at Harvard has more money than the GSD. It's just people will still say, "Well how hard is it to do that?" Or they'll go to look at a painting and say, "Well my kid can do that." Or, "My interior designer, he or she can make a room and then how hard is it just to stick up some walls?" They don't think about what has to hold up the walls, the structure of the thing, or anything. So there's still a lot of people out there that find architects as expedient or they can buy a set of plans and go to the contractor. They're obviously contractors that convince people that they don't need an architect—that they're fine with doing it—that they can make a sketch and they'll make it. So I think it's also sent a lot of young men who were interested in more remuneration than in the past, out of the field, into other arenas and it's left more openings for women. But the pay scale has not been commensurate with the level of training and work that we do. I years ago, and I still

[01:45:00]

hope this will happen, had the idea that we needed to have a serial film, a TV program like Law and Order, which is a perfect example. First you had the police, the blue collar group, find a murdered person and then they would find somebody and suddenly the lawyers would have to get involved and take the case to court, so you have blue collar, white collar working together. And our profession is the same way. We have the blue collar builders and the white collar architects and they're always together. But why you couldn't make a TV program where people who tuned in learned that architects—you know, they love, they—it's blood, sweat and tears with us. We care—and we care tremendously. We work late hours. That's why so many husband and wives marry each other because you're together doing it all the time. It just doesn't quit from nine to five. And you want them to appreciate what they do. I think lawyers got a much better rap from that whole series of Law and Order. And I asked a number of architectural writers if they wouldn't do a—I forget what it's called now—write the first story—the pilot, yeah and then I would take it like to Frank Gehry—we're running out of time Frank just turned ninety-one. But Frank is so connected with Hollywood and that world that he would just take it to—or Bob Stern could do the same thing. He built a house for Michael Eisner. You know, I have friends in high places if I could get a pilot written that would really—could be sold to the networks. And then lay people would I think begin to understand how important architecture is to the well-being of society. Right now it's getting a bad rap because of the whole political and social situation that—there are suburbs that—poor Naperville which is a suburb. We had the riots in the city obviously because we have segmented parts of the city, the South Side is obviously has a more congregate group and because they're closer together and poorer, they have been products of covid far more than other areas of the city. And that's I think fueled this whole riots that happened—is out of the understanding that because of the position that their in, they are more susceptible to dying. And so architects in the end—all the schools of architecture, the deans, have been writing almost apologies. They've been asked to give apologies for maybe not taking as many diversity students a hundred years ago but it's a two way street also. There haven't been a lot of young diverse, well young Black students mostly, who have wanted to be architects for a number of different reasons. And also it's hard and the pay isn't great. And it's a long learning curve and so you have to love and be very dedicated to that. It's not a quick fix at all. And sometimes, sadly, young people have been promoted beyond their learning curve to simply know that there's a category that they have to fit in and that hasn't been fair to them either because the process of becoming an architect is a very long and arduous one, I think. And so everyone needs to be encouraged tremendously but there shouldn't be any shortcuts either. So I know so many architects that are certainly engaged in climate and now to win awards you have to show that you've built a building that is environmentally

[01:50:00]

friendly and secure and efficient and things and now also social cause has become a very important one as well. But you're still at the mercy of the client. You can do everything you can to—or you can turn down a job if you don't think the client is doing the right thing socially. That's hard to turn work away when you'd like to try to convince them otherwise but not everyone is convincible so it's... But architects—the reason I liked it so much over teaching was

that I was out in the world with all levels of education, not just students, but the lay public. It's why I've written books that I hope will sell beyond the architectural community so people understand what it is that architects do and appreciate what we do. I've even said that the school books that young children are reading from—I remember Dick and Jane and Spot, their little dog. I mean what you should be doing is saying that when you're teaching arithmetic maybe you teach a brick. What does a brick do? A brick has a certain dimension. A brick turns into a wythe that turns into a building project, so you can begin to say how many bricks make this tall a building or something. But you begin to integrate, since they don't want to teach art in schools any more, you have to inculcate art and architecture into the school programs that are taught, like mathematics. So I'd love to be able to re-write textbooks for kids. And whenever I find a teacher, or find anybody who's doing anything with education, I spout my little theory but so far no one's asked me to re-write a children's textbook but maybe someday.

SF: Well you have so many wonderful ideas in so many different areas. Are there any projects or stories that you would like to add. You've been so generous with your time. But anything else that you would like to add?

MM: Oh, I don't—well, I think that what would be interesting for would-be architects to understand and what the schools of architecture should teach is not just architecture per se but the importance of the interior to the making of and space making to the form of the building. You know, there's that old adage of, "Form follows function," but the function grows out of who lives inside it and it's also the furniture you sit on. You know, some of the great architects from Mies van der Rohe to Frank Lloyd Wright have designed furniture and I've done the same. It's sort of the whole kit of parts. So I would like to feel that schools are teaching more of this from the smallest proportion of what makes for a comfortable chair to sit in to what makes for a space that is uplifting, that makes people feel good about themselves, that puts them in an environment where it's pleasing, that they're serene, they're comfortable, they're happy. And happy people help change the world. So that's what I've tried to do with the different buildings that I've created is to—I would like to do, obviously I'd like to do a library. I'd like to do a police station. Stanley and I together, our last building together, was a botanic garden education building in Michigan for a small botanic garden there and yes, we had great fun doing it. It looks like two quonset huts, and they're anyway two separate buildings so you can have many different functions happening at the same time. Concrete floors and a very simple building but it was very enjoyable to do. And I would have loved to have done a school, a fire station, a police station but what's sad now is the lack of trust in the ability of someone who is say a good designer to be able to

[01:55:00]

build different types. You know, I've interviewed—we lost a job for a zoo, actually to my friend Carol. We were going to do the admissions building and Stanley of course had created something—years ago he did something called Instant City for the owner of the Chicago Bears, George Halas, so this pre-dates the I.M. Pei's triangle at the Louvre. It's lit up. Stanley lit this, well he

didn't get to build it but he had umpteen drawings that looked just like what I.M. Pei did. And so he wanted this building to be that kind of an icon again. And they wanted several different designs so I did another design but we were interviewing with a very uneducated small group and one young woman said, "Well how many reception buildings have you done?" And I had to say, "This isn't rocket science. The important thing is that if I haven't done one, I might be fresher. I might not be repeating forms that I've done before. I might ask you unique questions about how someone comes into the building and how they relate and how the different rooms are structured and where the member's gallery might be and I'd ask a lot of questions like that." But everyone's afraid. If you haven't done ten churches, that's another one. A church is all about a spiritual uplifting and that has to do with the quality of space and proportions, not with how many you've done.

SF: Which is evident in many of your houses—I mean that sense of spirituality and there's no reason it wouldn't be translated to any other building form.

MM: One would hope. But it's not the way the world works. So and we don't have marketing directors. Stanley would always say that, "If you got a job on the golf course, you could lose it on the golf course." We just wanted people to see what we had done and what we had written and choose us for that reason, not because some sales person convinced you that we were—we tried to be our own sales person once we got a nibble on our fishing line. How we would reel that person in had to do with our own personalities not with some abstract person trying to define it for us. So...we'll see.

SF: Speaking of fishing I read that you mentioned one time that you'd love to have a tiny house next to a trout stream, I guess fly fishing, and looking out over the Rocky Mountains so any plans?

MM: No, I'd have to get some more clients to earn some more money to have a house but fortunately I get to visit first Judy and now Judy's daughter Kate—the house in Aspen. And I can put on my waders. It's not next to a trout stream but it does look at Aspen Mountain and I can always go—I mean I still have a realtor that sends me things all the time but that would be another category. So it's always been a dream. I would love to do that but at least I can go fly fishing so...

SF: Well you have so many things yet to accomplish that you've mentioned that you would love to do so I hope that you continue designing and building and photographing and painting and writing and coming up with brilliant ideas for teachers and educators and people who are creating our future and making decisions on policy and things like that don't seem to have the creative energy and imagination that you do.

MM: Well maybe someone will read this and say, "Oh, I'll write that pilot for that TV series," and that would be great so then I would feel that this was—I mean obviously being part of the Library of Congress is a very great honor and I am certainly

[02:00:00]

very happy to be included. But I'm also happy that maybe it sends my voice out a little further.

SF: And this will also go to the Virginia Tech International [Archive] for Women in Architecture.

MM: Oh yeah, you know they've written to me over the years and asked me to send things and I was always sort of too busy to get it underway so...

SF: And also the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation in New York City.

MM: Oh yes, we know Beverly. That's great. That's great.

SF: Well is there anything else you'd like to add?

MM: Well I don't know. We've sort of roamed around so many different arenas that I think it would be if you felt there was something we hadn't covered.

SF: Well I just have to ask—your family dinners must still be very fun—with your sister an architect, and your father was an architect, and then Stanley and then your sister's husband is also an architect. So you must have had some wonderful family dinners and discussions on architecture and issues in architecture.

MM: Well, yeah we certainly did—not always convivial either. You know, Stanley was a force and I, you know was Stanley's third wife so my father was always wondering, "Well, why do we think this is going to work this time?" but of course it did. Even the minister that married us, because Stanley was Jewish and I was Episcopalian and so we went to see the family minister to see if he would agree to marry us. And he asked Stanley why he thought it was going to work this time. And so we convinced him and then actually on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary when Stanley took me to Israel, actually, which was very interesting, a wonderful trip—together we got a letter from the minister who was then retired and in New Hampshire. Father Finney reminding us that he was there twenty-five years before and was still around and was very happy for us so...

SF: Congratulations for all of your many, many accomplishments. Pretty amazing.

MM: That's life with Stanley. Some people would come up and say, "How did you manage forty years." You know it would have been difficult for some people. It just wasn't difficult for me. You know, we might have been very different people but we also came together in the main points that were most important with living together. So you never want—I've forgotten which philosopher it is that talked about the lover and the beloved—maybe it was Sartre—that you

know you have to be very careful not to become the other person because then you've lost what the other person saw in you that made them fall in love with you in the first place. So maintaining your own integrity and personality and persona is very important in a relationship so that's always something to be worked towards I think.

SF: Well Margaret, thank you very, very much and

MM: Well, I enjoyed it very much Sarah and I hope at some point we'll encounter each other in person.

SF: I hope so too, so after this pandemic. You've been very gracious putting up with all of the intricacies of this recording remotely but we're just so glad to have your story as part of the Library of Congress collection.

End of Interview

[02:04:17]