

ARMADILLOS
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The following was transcribed and edited from a taped interview conducted by Peter Eisenman in the fall of 1977.

I say these things in great trepidation; they are like a confession. I guess I am becoming more Catholic. I was born a Catholic and moved away from it. But I was always intrigued by the ritual. Not only was I intrigued by the ritual of Catholicism, but in fact my first understanding of fear came through my catechism lessons and Catholic school. It was on a Wednesday afternoon. We had catechism and I was both fearful and at the same time elated because I would meet those nuns in their black habits with their black hoods and white trim; they became symbols for the introspective and retrospective nature of my work.

I have been investigating particular antecedents. My work might come out of fear of a Judaeo-Christian condition, out of being born in New York. Also encapsulation back into time seems to be appropriate at this moment. One night last summer I watched a Red Sox-Yankee game. I had not looked at a baseball game since I was about sixteen or seventeen, since I entered academia. Before I was accepted to Cooper Union, I always used to watch baseball games. When I entered the so-called academic field I stopped looking at baseball games. But last summer I looked at my first baseball game in some thirty years - it was a marvelous experience. I just sat there and reconstituted those certain thrills, certain smells, although I wasn't there on the field. So I have been putting baseball games, nuns, and Catholicism all together.

I believe one should look back, not just forward, at the work one has done. I saved everything, every drawing, every piece of work for thirty years. It was valuable to me, not in a historical sense. It was very important for me to keep all my drawings. I am like a squirrel. I took them all over the world in a big tin box.

There is another aspect of saving material. I bought a house in Riverdale, a tiny little house, seventeen by twenty-two, and I'm meticulous. I go outside, and there's a big apartment house right next door. Every morning I go out there and sweep up. I like doing it. And the guy across in the apartment house is filthy. I mean junk, rats. So I went across and asked him if it was possible to keep his place clean. It's nice to have it clean, I said. And he said, "Why don't you do it?" So I said all right, I'll do it. And I did it. Now that house is absolutely impeccable, and he comes every Tuesday and brings big garbage bags as a gift to me.

In 1947, I was accepted to Cooper Union. Previous to that time, I really did not know that there was a Manhattan. I came down to this strange place. I was accepted as a control student, one of a group, because I only had a sixty-six average in the High School of Music and Art. The high school was in Manhattan, but just across from the Bronx at 135th Street and College Avenue. Thus began an illicit affair with Cooper Union which would profoundly affect how I would do things in the future. At Cooper Union, which was only a three year course at the time, you would get a certificate and then were supposed to move on. Most people went up to Yale. Yale was just beginning to be a good school.

I went to Cooper Union from 1947 to 1950. Looking back I can see the influences on me. I know where I come from, and I want to pay homage to those influences. The first influences were three magnificent teachers at Cooper Union. One was a drawing teacher by the name of Robert Gwathmey, who is the father of Charlie Gwathmey. He was a great drawing teacher, extracting the abstracted essence of form through the figure. He was number one. Number two was a guy named George Kratina who was a sculpture teacher. Kratina, I believe, did some sculptures for the Parkchester housing. He was a Catholic, and he was a Catholic sculptor. Basically a very religious man, religious in the sense of his Catholicism and another passionate teacher who never saw anything bad in your work, he always pulled out whatever was good in it. A little too much that way. I could never manage sculpture. I drew very well, but I was a very bad sculpture student. I didn't know how to transform an idea into three dimensions. I would cut away at that block and it never worked. It always looked static and uptight. That's how it was. That was my experience of three dimensions. It just didn't work.

The third teacher was a really magnificent experience. She was a lady by the name of Henrietta Schutz, who taught two dimensional design. Apparently she is still alive, in her sixties or seventies, now living in Mallorca. She taught

me, I think, the very essence of my architecture. I look back at her, and I see what she taught, and I can recall now in pieces what I did at that time, and relate them to my very recent work. She would give you a jar of white paint, a jar of black paint, a piece of white paper, and ask you to make a shape on it, in black and white. She would say, "The upper left corner, you have to do something there. Put the white paper on there and fix that shape up." Sometimes she would stand in back of you and hold your brush and show you how to do it. She would tell you, "take off that thing on the top," and then you would do it, and obviously she had you. Because you had taken away something from the top left corner, and she would say, "Oh, now you'll have to take the black paint and add something down on the lower right corner." And we spent one term with that, making that shape. And what we learned was about black and white and about the craft of the brush, because we worked with the brush and learned how that toll could be manipulated. Fundamentally what we were learning was not only addition and subtraction; we were learning about relationships.

Also in the class of Henrietta Schutz I made drawings of animals: a sick lion and a sitting lion who had just killed a deer; a town and country mouse; a grasshopper and the ants turning white as they went under the dark tree; the tortoise and the hare. This represented a particular kind of Cooper training, which carried over into architecture.

At Cooper we learned how to make curves. I'm talking about positive and negative space. We learned how to use the brush for curves and their relations. The colors of my early drawings are basically the Bye House colors. Right in that three color range. It pops up some thirty years later.

I had two good friends at Cooper, a sculptor by the name of Emil Antonucci who was also a calligrapher and a graphic designer, and Gloria Surma, who was a graphic designer. She was the daughter of a Ukrainian. He used to bring in honey. We teamed up on every project while at Cooper, practically every architecture project. The first project done at Cooper was a little church. Emil did the drawings for the sculpture, very elemental. The second was a little footbridge. At that time I was deep into the Yoshida book on Japanese architecture. The little footbridge has Japanese detailing. Then we had to do a ski lodge. Then we had to do another chapel. Funny about the programmatic conditions at that particular time after the war - the ski lodge, a couple of churches, the bridges. The chapel was an important project for me because it was again the idea of looking back, of recall. Then I did a cemetery for the war dead in Hawaii with Emil. We put the cemetery in the crater. I have to laugh about the recent manifestation of the earth boys. That project was earth mounds that surround the chapel. Then thirty years later you get the Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought which sort of captures the same idea. We did a competition together for a pub and a saloon. It is interesting, apropos again of the time sequence, of the so-called capturing of the spirit of the place. You had to know the difference between a pub and a saloon. Emil and a guy named Don Mallow, a New Jersey architect now who has done very Wrightian houses for many many years, and I entered that competition. All of these projects are still pretty fresh, in terms of the planning, the shapes, and the drawings. They have the kind of sensibility, of someone working with his hand and eye. Many of the images that were initially there I am using today. I'm not talking about squares and things like that. I can already see the wall houses coming. What I'm getting at is that for me work has always been additive. I take one project, use what I received from it and go on to the next - reject what I don't want and then add, you know - so each is a progressive condition of going from one thing to the next. In the process you discard heritage because you have become so sophisticated, but somehow or another your essential early thrust begins to creep back again.

The next relationship would come for me in 1954 when I met Bob Slutzky. He was in the studio painting at Texas. He was doing these incredible painting. I already had a prejudice in favor of that kind of painting, because I had a landscape architecture teacher at Cooper Union. His name was Bryan Lynch, an incredible old Irishman who did the Eldorado down in Puerto Rico, which I hear is one of the great pieces of landscape architecture. Lynch's one act for me was to hand me a book called Plasticism and Pure Plasticism by Piet Mondrian in 1948. He handed it to me and said, take a look, read it. For years I could never get past the thirty-ninth page. I didn't know why he handed it to me. He took me to a studio on 96th Street at that time, to a sculptor by the name of Jose di Rivera. I saw Rivera's sculptures, a wall full of his metal work.

It was in Texas that I met Colin and Bob. Bob had just come from Yale where his teachers were Jose di Rivera and Albers. I then looked at Slutzky's paintings and began to see a second phase of what I call a "relational person." Shutz was the first relational person and certainly Bob was the second.

I also learned during the 1947-50 period by doing tract housing for my uncle, who was an architect. I am always amused by those people who talk to me about built form, details, all those specifications, you know, builder-architect, because I did my time. I guess I did a hundred tract houses. What we did, we started on Friday night. My uncle would be on one end of the dining room table and I would be on the other end of the same table. My grandfather was going to come in and start playing pinochle at a certain hour. We would knock out a set of working drawings by Sunday night and hand it to the contractor to build by the following Sunday. So there was a parallel, practical experience that I was getting while I was getting my education.

In 1950 I got accepted at the University of Cincinnati School of Architecture. It was a school of applied architecture, where they had a work-study program. This meant that you could work six weeks and go to school for six weeks, and that's what I did. I commuted from Cincinnati to New York, because in Cincinnati they would give you a job for thirty-five dollars a week where you carried plaster on your back. I was making at that time a hundred and thirty-five dollars a week, which was a lot of money, doing access roads for the New Jersey Turnpike, which at that time hadn't been built. So I became very good at making curves.

I spent two years out in Cincinnati. In Cincinnati my projects were a zoo, a country fair, and a biological center. In Cincinnati I had my first taste of Academia. The dean was going to fail me if I didn't play ball and do my work the way he wanted, that is in whatever imagery was in at that particular time. When I did my thesis, he was not going to give me my degree; you see, there was a prize of two hundred bucks for the best thesis. And I needed the money badly. I really needed it, and I broke my back to produce that thesis because I wanted to get that two hundred bucks. And they gave it to somebody else. The dean said, "But we're going to keep your thesis because we want to show it around the country as representing the University of Cincinnati." I ran out of there, went into the hall, and took all the drawings down. I said "Keep your degree, you ain't having these drawings if you didn't give me the two hundred bucks."

I thought it was very amusing that Mike Graves went out there. (He also went to Harvard after I did, always after.) I applied to Harvard and I got accepted. I did meet Gropius. I remember coming in there trying to get a scholarship from him and he gave me half a scholarship. That was my first introduction to a Germanic mind. There I got my first introduction to the Modern Movement. At Harvard my teachers were I.M. Pei, O'Neill Ford, and Kay Fisker, all of whom were good; they knew when to leave me alone. At Harvard, I ran into one of the leaders of the Modern Movement. Alfred Roth. And Alfred Roth said to me, "Hey man, if you don't play ball and do it the way I want you to do it, you ain't going to get your degree from Harvard!" Just like that. That was my second encounter with that kind of Germanic mind.

Then I was fortunate enough to get a Fulbright to Italy. I spent the year 1953 to 1954 in Rome. While I was in Italy, I did a few little decorative drawings, no architectural drawings. When I came back from Italy, I did a project for a cathedral in the summer just before going to Texas.

During the time I was at Cincinnati I went to work for Fellheimer and Wagner. They built the Cincinnati railroad station which later I was to go to every year, one of the magnificent transportation pieces in the world. I met a guy in the office by the name of Bernhard Hoesli who had just come from working in Le Corbusier's office. That was in 1950. Before that I was a rabid Wright fan. I visited all his work while I was a student at Cooper Union. The Usonian houses were being built at that time up in Pleasantville.

I had a hatred for Le Corbusier. In fact I took over a class at Cooper Union teaching one night a week. In it I jumped up and down about the horror of the Marseilles block and the Mickey-Mouseness of its architect. I was ready for conversion. You get converted very rapidly when you hate somebody that much. Hoesli had just come from two years in Corb's office. He had done drawings for that beautiful house down in La Plata, the Currutchet House. He had come to America to visit Frank Lloyd Wright. He had a passion for Wright. Hoesli and I came to be friends. He then went down to Texas. When I came to Texas he had already been there a year. It was Hoesli who called me up in September of 1954 and asked me if I would come and teach at the University of Texas. He called and in one week we were down there. Harwell Hamilton Harris, a magnificent wood detailer from the Greene and Greene tradition, was the dean. He was terribly disorganized. He wanted to bring in so-called young blood down there. I had no teaching experience. So 1954 began a second phase of my architecture.

From 1954 to 1964 was the next phase. I was in Texas, Cornell, and Yale. At the time I went down to Texas, I went into the library, and there was a guy smoking his pipe, you know puffing away at books, and the librarian introduced me. I remember that. He had first come from California and had been down there a year, and that was Colin Rowe. That was the first time I met him, sitting there, and he hasn't changed in thirty years. He was brought there by Harris. He was doing something with John Entenza in California. He was working in Bakersfield. Then there was a whole bunch of young guys coming from Yale whom Harwell Harris had hired. There were two of them, a guy named Lee Hershey and a guy named Bob Slutzky. They were brought in to do drawing and to do color, a la Albers, because Harris knew about Yale. He had taught up there, and wanted freehand drawing and color brought down to this isolated place. Somehow he picked up the phone and they happened to be there in the summer. They said, okay, we'll be right down. And they arrived at the same time. And so began my second phase of architecture.