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University of California
Berkeley, California

Arthur Gensler

ART GENSLER: BUILDING A GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN FIRM

Interviews conducted by
Martin Meeker
in 2014

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Arthur Gensler, 2014

Arthur Gensler was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1935. He attended Cornell University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in architecture. Upon graduation, he worked for architecture firms in New York and Jamaica. After moving with his wife Drue to California in the early 1960s, Gensler worked for a few architectural firms, including Wurster, Bernardi, and Emmons. While at Wurster, he played a lead role establishing the design standards for the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, then under construction. In 1965, Gensler opened his firm by pioneering architectural interiors for newly constructed office buildings, including the Alcoa Building (1967) and the Bank of America Building (1969), both in San Francisco. His firm grew fairly rapidly with offices opening around the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s and then overseas in the 1980s and 1990s. By the early 2000s, Gensler's firm was the largest architecture and design company headquartered in the U.S. In 2015 the firm is expected to complete the Shanghai Tower, currently the second tallest building in the world. This wide-ranging interview covers Gensler's family background, upbringing, and education; his early jobs as an architect; and the founding and subsequent expansion of his own firm. The interview delves into topics such as the transformation of architectural practice and technologies, the development of green building standards, and the globalization of professional services firms, among dozens of other topics.

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Introduction: “Arthur Gensler, A Designer Who Listens”

I have known Art Gensler for over 50 years. During that period, all of us have lived through major technological, political, and social changes. And now change, at least in area of technology, seems to be accelerating. Quantum computers, 3-D printing, nano-technology, and DNA manipulation are only some of the new opportunities and challenges that may be coming. But I’m sure that as long as we are lucky enough to have individuals as talented as Art Gensler, we will be able to deal with any of the major changes that we are faced with in the next 50 years.

How does one create one of the world’s largest, if not the largest, design firm? Fifty years ago, in 1965, Art started a firm in San Francisco that has grown into an international organization with over 4700 professionals working in over 70 countries with billings in 2014 of over \$900 million. Corporate campuses, airport terminals, major hotels, multi-site rebranding – interiors, structures, land use planning and product development: the Gensler organization can successfully design anything. I’m sure that when there is a need to design space colonies, the Gensler team will make a contribution.

It is clear that a good part of the Gensler firm’s growth and success has been due to Art’s energy, his endless curiosity about what a client does, and his justifiable self-confidence. And it certainly helped that since the firm’s beginning, Art has had the ability to attract and retain a very talented group of individuals.

The ability to retain talented professionals is not a skill that every creative individual is born with. Besides being a very talented designer who could understand a client’s needs (often better than the client), Art and his colleagues have put together a very impressive management structure. In fact, it is hard to know which of the Gensler team’s skills is more important: their ability to listen to and understand a client’s needs; their ability to find creative design solutions for a client’s needs; or their ability to develop and maintain a management structure that ties these creative individuals into “one firm firm.” While Art continues to give credit to everyone on the Gensler team, it is hard to see how a great team could have been created without a talented general manager.

The Gensler team has done and is doing some very large developments. The design of the 127 story Shanghai Tower deals creatively with major wind pressure problems. A massive multi-billion development in Las Vegas coordinated a number of very strong willed design firms. Designing a way to move six plus million pilgrims in a very short period annually through Mecca is not a task for the faint hearted. Notwithstanding such mega-tasks, Art says: “We’re still doing little jobs, a one-off candy store. Why? Because a candy store might as well be done as well as anything else” (page 363).

I’ve known Art since the early days of his firm. Like so many of his clients I’ve gone back to him time and time again. Art and the Gensler team get repeat business because he and they really are good listeners. And like so many of his clients, I’ve had the additional benefit of having a rewarding friendship with Art. As a fellow director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I know he has made an important contribution to our city. As someone who has been solicited by Art for a major contribution to the Buck Institute on Aging, I know that he is committed to the

research that will help us and future generations. Seeing how his children have developed, I know that he and Drue, his wife, have some fantastic family skills. Family, community service, business, friendship: it all fits together.

While Art's oral history is a good read, I would be remiss if I didn't recommend the companion book *Art's Principles: 50 Years of Hard-Learned Lessons in Building a World-Class Professional Services Firm* by Arthur Gensler with Michael Lindenmayer (Wilson Laffery, March 2015). Anyone interesting in understanding how Gensler works needs to read both the oral history and the Principles.

Art is only 80. He's not finished yet. I for one am looking forward to what he will do next. And I do wonder who has the movie rights to "The Gensler Story."

---Gerson Bakar
April, 2015

Interview History

When I received a call from an acquaintance of mine who works at the global architecture and design firm Gensler that there was interest in having an oral history done with the firm's founder, Art Gensler, I leapt at the opportunity and did what I could to make it happen. I already knew a little about Art and a bit more about the firm he opened fifty years ago – and what I knew suggested to me that here would be a fascinating interview. This interview would provide insight into so many important changes and innovations of the past half century, including: the transformation of architectural design, practices, and technologies; the development of “green” building standards; the revolution of workplace interiors and the rise of the open-floor office plan; the globalization of professional services firms; and the changing of aesthetic preferences from the high modernism of Mies van der Rohe to the sculptural postmodernism of Frank Gehry.

As preparation for the interviews kicked into high gear, I discovered that the story would touch on many more compelling stories. Chief among these was the emergence of a small firm that focused on the previously neglected field of office interiors and how that same firm would become the largest architecture and design firm headquartered in the United States, surpassing such giants at Skidmore Owings & Merrill and HOK. But as much as I learned about the firm – and all of the people and projects that were key to its growth – I kept coming back to the man who started it himself, Art Gensler.

Gensler I knew to be a legend among architects, having been named a Fellow of both the American Institute of Architects and the International Interior Design Association; he was one of the first people admitted to *Interior Design* magazine's Hall of Fame; and he was honored as “Entrepreneur of the Year” by Cornell University, his beloved alma mater. What I learned over the course of conducting many interview sessions with him is that he is a driven, serious, and exacting man who also happens to be a warm, plain-spoken, and down-to-earth guy. Despite having been officially retired for a number of years, he still goes into the office daily and manages a portfolio of a few top-end clients. After 50 years, it probably shouldn't come as a surprise how strongly he identifies with the firm he created, but his pride in what it has become and his appreciation for all of the people who made it happen is impressive. While his work is surely a big part of his life, his personal interests and commitments are truly meaningful, including service on the boards of the Buck Institute and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and on the advisory board of Cornell University's School of Architecture. And I can't neglect to mention his devotion to his wife Drue. Rarely in the interviews I conduct does an interviewee's love for his spouse come across as strongly and genuinely as it does in this interview.

Preparation for the interview began in December 2013, when I first met Art Gensler and conducted a background interview with him in order to get a sense of what he'd like to see covered in our time together. That conversation was extremely wide-ranging and left me a little bewildered. I suspect that he also found the prospect of reviewing his very active 80 years of life more than a bit confounding. To try to pin things down a bit more, I scheduled a series of unrecorded background interviews with friends and colleagues: Jim Follett, Charlie Kridler, Ted Hall, Richard Greene, Mark Coleman, John Parman, Belinda Presser, David Gensler (one of his four sons), and his wife Drue Gensler. Formal interview sessions began in January 2014 and

were completed the following October, after getting nearly 24 hours on tape. All sessions were video recorded and transcribed in their entirety. I performed a quick edit on the transcript before sending it to Art for his review. He read the interview and suggested very minor edits to the transcript, which he returned to our office at the end of 2014. We decided to send the transcript out for an additional copyedit at this point with goal being to smooth out a few rough edges in the transcript in order to improve readability; nothing was substantially changed during this review, however. In early spring 2015 the final pieces were put into place – including an excellent Introduction written by his friend and colleague Gerson Bakar, one of San Francisco’s most respected real estate developers. This volume was finished in May 2015, a few months into the firm’s 50th anniversary year.

The topics covered in these eleven separate interview sessions were extremely wide-ranging: from his upbringing and education, early years as an architect working in Jamaica, and move to California in the early 60s to his bold move establishing a new kind of architecture firm and then the subsequent and rapid growth of that firm. The interview details many of the major projects undertaken by the firm, from the early design of the interiors of the Bank of America Building in San Francisco (1969) through the expansion and diversification of the firm’s portfolio to the near-completion of the Shanghai Tower (2015), which now stands as the world’s second-tallest building. The interview documents the expansion of the firm, which started in space subleased from San Francisco architect Henry Hill, but then over course of time expanded domestically to Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington DC, and, eventually, internationally to Tokyo, London, Hong Kong, Sydney, Sao Paolo, Mexico City, Bangalore, and many other cities around the globe.

My initial enthusiasm about this project was not misplaced. I thoroughly enjoyed the process of interviewing Art Gensler, and getting to know him, his work, and his firm. I hope that readers get as much out of this interview as did I.

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May 2015

Interview #1 January 17, 2014

Audio File 1

01-00:00:01

Meeker: Today is the 17th of January, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Arthur Gensler, Art Gensler. And this is tape number one. So the way that we always start these interviews is for you to tell me your name and when and where you were born.

01-00:00:26

Gensler: Art Gensler. It's really Millard Arthur Gensler, Jr. I'll come back later to why that's somewhat important. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1935.

01-00:00:37

Meeker: What's your birthdate?

01-00:00:38

Gensler: Twelve July, 1935.

01-00:00:39

Meeker: Okay. And, well, maybe now's the time to actually tell me this story about Millard.

01-00:00:46

Gensler: I'm a junior. The official name of the firm is M. Arthur Gensler, Jr., & Associates, Inc., because when I was starting the firm I thought, "Well, God, I've got to have a name." Frank Lloyd Wright, I thought, "Oh, God, they all, you know, da-da-da [three names]." And then there was John Carl Warnecke. And I thought, "Well, M. Arthur Gensler," because M is Millard, and that was my dad's name. He didn't go by it, and I don't go by it. I go by Art. He went by Slats. So it's always been kind of a fun name for me. But it's the name of the firm. Over the years, it then became Gensler & Associates, and then finally, now it's just Gensler. Somebody said to me yesterday, "How do you feel having your name like a generic thing in the industry?" It's like Kleenex. People say Gensler. I don't feel like it's my name, but it is.

01-00:01:46

Meeker: Do you feel like it's become a brand, in that it actually signifies something in particular?

01-00:01:52

Gensler: Oh, absolutely. When I started, I didn't know what the hell the word brand meant. But it is a brand now. People say Gensler all over the world and they think of the firm. They don't think of me. For which I'm very proud. The firm has my name, but the firm is what it is, and it's a group of incredibly talented people, of which I'm one. I think it's not about Art Gensler or Drue [Drucilla] Gensler or my family, although they're involved or were involved more so. It's about a brand now. And I'm very proud of that. It's considered one of the top-quality architectural design brands in the world. We just were recognized

[among] the most respected firms. We were number four in the world but number one in the US. That's not a bad position to be as brand recognition.

01-00:03:28

Meeker:

So let's talk a little bit about your family background. I did, as I mentioned, talk to your son David, and he told me a little about your father's background. I'm wondering if you can tell me a bit about what you know of your grandparents, either through personal experience or stories that were communicated to you.

01-00:03:56

Gensler:

I'm not really big into genealogy, probably because I'm an only child, and my wife's an only child. I knew my mom and dad very well and was very fortunate. They lived to eighty-eight and eighty-five. On my mother's side, I never met any of my grandparents. My mom had two sisters, Mary and Genevieve, and there was one child out of that, a man named Wilson, who's four or five years younger than I am. And on my father's side, I did meet my grandmother twice. She was like ninety-five years old [when I met her], was in bed. Beautiful white-haired woman. I know a little bit about my grandfather. I think he committed suicide by jumping off of a ferry boat going across the river in New Orleans. He was from New Orleans. My mom was from New Jersey. And I'll come back to that.

My dad had one brother, Phil. My grandfather, he, I think, had cancer, and he just said, "I don't want to do this." My dad never talked much about him, and it must have been when my dad was quite young. So my dad was brought up by an uncle and they lived together, the three boys. My uncle, but his sort of cousin, I guess. I don't know who that family is. It's the Lyons family, but damned if I know how the Lyons fit in. I never did talk a lot about it to my parents. My grandmother went to New Mexico and became an artist and taught people, and then finally taught at Newcomb, which is the women's part of Tulane, and was an artist and a potter and weaved baskets and sort of Indian craft stuff. Beautiful work. I have a few pieces which I'm very proud to have of hers. Unfortunately, one of them got broken the other day by a raccoon that got in our house and got on the same shelf. I've patched it and it looks okay. So I don't know a lot about my parents.

My mother's side, I really don't understand it. I think her mother must have died early. She never spoke about her mother. I don't even know her name. Her father was mayor of Hightstown, New Jersey, which is where Peddie School is, and very near Princeton, a few miles away from Princeton. She grew up there in a very nice environment. She went to NJC, which is now Rutgers, the women's part of Rutgers, and Dad went to Tulane. I don't think he ever graduated, but he went to Tulane. I don't know why. I think he ran out of money. I can't imagine, because he was six-four and about the size of a pencil, but he became a cowboy. I can't believe that. But anyway, he became a cowboy.

One of the few things that I know about him, he got on a tramp steamer and came through the Panama Canal to San Francisco and walked up Market Street. Before your time, probably, but there was a Gensler-Lee jewelry store. He walked in and he said, “Are we related?” Then he realized it was a very Jewish family, and we’re not a Jewish family. So they decided they weren’t related. But here in the middle of San Francisco on Market Street was a—and for the first probably fifteen years that I lived in San Francisco, people would say, “Oh, Gensler. You’re part of the Gensler-Lee jewelry family.” I’d say, “No, we’re not,” but that’s okay.

My mom and dad, I’m not even sure how they got married. I came along when Mom and Dad were probably twenty-seven and twenty-nine. It was during the Depression. She taught English, I think. She was an AT&T employee. I think she may have taught diction to phone operators when they were doing jack plugs and things like that. And my dad worked for a company that was ultimately bought by a company called Armstrong Cork Company, which became Armstrong World, and then again just Armstrong. Armstrong in many ways played a little part in my life, in the sense that they’re probably one of the leading construction material manufacturers of ceiling tiles and floor covering and wall materials and all sorts of things. I’ve gotten to know them well. Ironically, and I can tell you more later, but the firm was hired to do the corporate headquarters. I said, “You realize my dad worked here?” And they said, “Oh, no, that couldn’t be your dad.” I said, “Yeah, that was my dad.” He was a great salesman and loved to sell.

During the Second World War—I think they would draft you up to thirty-five, or maybe it was thirty-six, and he was one year older so they didn’t draft him. We were transferred from New York. They lived in Jackson Heights, New York, on Long Island, right across from LaGuardia Airport. Apparently it was a really nice suburb in those days; the Forest Hills Tennis Club was near them. [They moved] to an apartment up in Bronxville, and that’s where I first start remembering anything, was Bronxville, New York, which is just north of Manhattan. And then in 1941, we were transferred to Hartford, Connecticut, and we lived in West Hartford, Connecticut. Dad was asked to run New England for Armstrong, which was really just distributing products. No one was building anything except the factories that were supporting the military. He would supply materials and floor coverings and things for them in New England, and he would travel around. In 1951, ten years later, we moved back to Garden City, Long Island, and he ran the ceiling division in New York. They kept wanting him to go to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and try management. He said, “I’m not a manager, I’m a salesman and that’s what I want to do.”

His whole focus, and Mom’s whole focus, was to get me to go to college. I shouldn’t say it’s not the focus of parents today, but I was an only child, and they were cut out to get me to college and get me to a good school. And so I love them. They retired to Florida, they were there for a year and a half and they came out here, and I’ll tell about that later. But he would stop in the

office and everybody knew him. I mean, Charlie knew him and Jim knew him. Jim Follett and Charlie Kridler. They got to know him, and the early people that joined me. Dad would come to some of our events, and Mom occasionally too.

But they're very important to me, and they were really great parents and really worked hard to have a nice middle-class home. We had a house, and we kept moving during the war. I remember the Second World War, only that we had to move every six months—we rented. Dad didn't have money to buy a place, so we'd rent something. People were away in the army and we'd rent their house, and then when they got discharged we'd have to move and find another house. One time we couldn't find anything, so they had a family summer place on my mom's side of the family, outside of Westerly, Rhode Island, a place called Shelter Harbor, which was where I learned to walk and ride a horse and do things like that. It was right on the Rhode Island coast, which is a beautiful summer place—beautiful beaches. So I had a really positive childhood and a positive relationship with my parents that is important to me.

People say, "Where did you get what you've got?" and I suppose I got it from my dad and my mom. I really think there's a thing about being an only child. You're really close to them, and I was close to them.

01-00:12:41

Meeker:

Was that pretty deliberate on their part, to have just one?

01-00:12:43

Gensler:

Oh, gosh, yes, because they couldn't afford two. A lot of people weren't having kids in the Depression, they just didn't have children, or they had one and that was all they could afford. As I say, their whole idea was to make sure they had enough money that we could have a nice little house in a nice community. West Hartford, Connecticut, where we lived, there was a good school system. Oh, Garden City had a good school system. I went to good places and we had nice friends; many of them have been quite successful. We were in the middle of the pack. We weren't rich, we weren't poor. I don't think my dad ever made more than \$20,000 a year. He could have made more. The example would be he ended up, before he joined Armstrong, just before the Second World War, selling all the fireproofing material for the Rockefeller Center, the whole damn thing. If he was on commission he would have made a fortune. But he said, "No, no, no. I want a salary. I don't want commission. I don't want to go up and down. I want just a salary."

It has taught me. I'm a great believer in singles and doubles, and, occasionally, if you get really lucky, a home run. But I like to earn my money very carefully. So people like Gerson Baker have always said, "Art, you'd have really made a lot of money if you were a salesman, a broker, real estate broker." I said, "Gerson, I can't make my money on three big hits a year. I want to make it every week, get a paycheck, and know that I can support my

family.” So that sort of Depression mentality has still stayed with me. I don’t like debt and I don’t like borrowing money. I just like to know exactly where I’m going. My parents weren’t starving and eating apples but, as I kid my kids, we had a lot of liverwurst and a lot of liver and bacon, which I actually like. I didn’t particularly like it then, but I actually now order it. It was a different world. Tongue and things that you ate during the war. We don’t have a lot of that now in the markets. It was an interesting time.

I was a good athlete and I did pretty well in sports, so when we moved down to Garden City it was tough for me, because I was a sophomore in high school. I was finishing the sophomore year. I had gone to the state championships with the basketball team. Had been one of the top players on the team. I played on the soccer team for them, and played a little on the baseball team. We had a pretty big high school and I was one of the better athletes. And so getting transferred to a [different] school was tough, because the coaches knew the other kids from freshman/sophomore year. I was this kid coming in from outside. But it worked out well and I’m glad I went to Garden City, although I missed West Hartford a lot.

01-00:16:13
Meeker:

I don’t know the geography of the area as well, being a longtime Bay Area resident. Can you just maybe draw me a map, if you will? You were originally raised in Jackson Heights?

01-00:16:29
Gensler:

Yeah. I’ll draw you a map. Jackson Heights is about fifteen minutes out of Manhattan, going east out on Long Island. It’s very close in and it might be ten minutes in the subway. It’s really just over the Queensboro Bridge and right there, out a little bit. Bronxville is just north of Manhattan, up about twenty miles, maybe fifteen, twenty miles north of Manhattan. Riverdale, where my wife grew up, is just on the other side of Manhattan, just north of Manhattan, just over the river, East River. Hartford is the middle of Connecticut, and West Hartford is the suburb. It’s like the peninsula, Marin, to Hartford.

Hartford was an interesting town. There’s East Hartford, West Hartford, and Hartford. East Hartford was where Pratt & Whitney made the propeller engines in those days. Jet engines now. But in those days they made the engines for all military planes that were flying during the Second World War, so it was a very busy industrial town. And the other place fairly near it—in those days it seemed like forever, but now you can drive it in forty minutes—is New Haven, where Yale is. Oh, New London, which is where the submarine base is. That was a big thing. They had a submarine base there. I know it because my dad used to be going down there.

I remember a couple things, but the one I remember most of that time—other than sports, which I always had—my tonsils were taken out at like six, which

is ridiculously early, and they grew back. I don't know if kids have tonsils taken out today. I always used to get these terrible colds and infections. Out of the war, just in the end, maybe in '46, maybe '45, down in New London they had radiation treatments. They would put these rods in my nose and throat with radium on the end, trying to burn these things off. I got some of the very first penicillin too. I used to get these ear infections. So things that came out of the war were really important to people at my age. On the East Coast there were a lot people who came back from the war, doctors and other people.

When we were in West Hartford, my mom was holding an extension ladder for my dad. He was washing a window on the second floor and the ladder slipped while she was putting it up and chopped her finger off. Well, the guy who lived next door to us was a hand surgeon and literally was fast. Raced next door. He grabbed Mom, took her in a cab, and sewed the finger back on. It was fine. Literally chopped it off and then put it back on. These are the crazy things that you remember as a kid. I'm passionate about dogs. We had dogs, we had a cocker spaniel, the first dog I ever had. Loved it. And then a black lab. I really loved that time of life and it was fun.

Then we moved to Garden City, which is really close to the city. You take the Long Island Railroad and it takes about a half an hour on the train. But you had New York there, and I just loved New York. I liked cities and I liked to go to shows and things with my parents, and I went with my kid friends. I played a lot of sports. My claim to fame, if it's a claim to fame, is I played against Jimmy Brown, the famous Cleveland Brown football player, but he was All American in five sports. No human being has ever to this day been—he was baseball, football, basketball, lacrosse, and track. He was All American in all five of them. It's just insane. And I played against him in basketball. He never scored a basket on me, but he had about twenty free throws and he made them all. He was a tough guy. He's the only guy I've ever looked at like in the locker room and said, "Oh, my God." As a high school kid he was just like Adonis-looking, built like, and I'm going to guard this guy. But it was a good time for me.

I wasn't a great student. When I was in West Hartford they had to tutor me, trying to get me to be qualified for college and to do better. I also remember going to dancing school. I was talking to my grandchildren over the holidays. At dancing school, we had gray flannels and a blue blazer and a tie and white shirt and black shoes, and we would dance. I did that for three, four years. I really went to dancing school a lot. At the time I thought, "Oh, God, why am I doing this?" But I really always liked it, and I still love to dance.

01-00:22:27

Meeker:

What steps were they teaching you then?

01-00:22:29

Gensler:

Oh, just the foxtrot basically, and waltzes. There weren't any other steps. Jazz and all that, jitterbug and all that stuff wasn't around. It was dancing foxtrots and waltzes.

01-00:22:41

Meeker:

Do you feel like your parents protected you pretty well from the uncertainties around the Depression and then around World War II?

01-00:22:49

Gensler:

Yeah, I think they did. I think they did. I certainly knew what was going on, and I can remember being in the movies on December 7th when they dropped the bombs on Hawaii. Coming out of the movies and seeing we're at war. I was six years old. I can remember that. It's funny. I think about my life as my grandchildren grow up; I like to spend a lot of time with them, and I'm one of the lucky guys that can spend time with their grandchildren. I used to date girls at twelve years old. We'd go to the movies with them and sit and hold hands in the movies. I think it was in junior high school, in maybe seventh grade or sixth grade, maybe eighth grade. Now my kids, they never go on a date, they go in groups. They entertain—but it's just fascinating to me how they—four of my girls have gone to all-girls schools all through high school, which I was opposed to and I'm still opposed to it. Not that they have social issue problems, but they don't know guys and they're not comfortable. I think that's unfortunate. We had a lot of fun together. But sex and drugs and booze were not so much a part of it as they are now. My parents, entertainment for them was playing bridge. People would come over our house and they'd play bridge. And entertainment for me was playing canasta and playing cards when I was down at the Rhode Island shore. We'd play cards. I didn't play bridge in those days, but I was young and I would love to play cards. Still do, although I don't do very much anymore.

01-00:24:57

Meeker:

Did you follow popular music at all during that time?

01-00:24:58

Gensler:

Not really. I like music and I listen to it. If I'm in my car I listen to talk radio mostly, or sports if I can possibly hear it. I'm a very big sports fan. I follow it carefully.

01-00:25:27

Meeker:

That's before rock and roll.

01-00:25:28

Gensler:

Yeah, before rock and roll. Patti Page and people that you can remember. But I wasn't a record collector. I remember we had a Victrola, and it's a funny thing. The only records my parents had were by a piano player. But "Something in Paris, something in Spain," something in this. A piano player named George Feyer. They were not even twelve-inch records, they were seven-inch records, and we had to fully crank it up. They would play these

piano things. We didn't own a piano. In later life I joined the Bohemian Club and the camp that I joined at Bohemia, George Feyer was a member of it—the world gets very small.

I think the only other thing that I remember about that period was they were trying to teach me music. They tried to give me a clarinet, and I was so terrible that they said, "Maybe the bass. You could play the bass." I remember when I was like in sixth grade trying to play the bass in some band, and they finally said, "I think music is not your strong suit." But it was fine. I went to Sunday school, and I went to church a little. We're not a big religious family. We were Congregationalists, but I wasn't enormously active in that, nor were my parents. We went once or twice, three times a month. Not so involved at the moment. Ask me later about church experience, because when we moved to California it was a weird experience.

We didn't travel a lot. I said we went to New Orleans twice. I went to Washington once. But we didn't have the money to travel. I never had been to Chicago. Nothing in California. Hadn't been to Europe. My mom and dad had actually done some traveling. It was interesting. They always talked about Cuba. They loved Cuba and they went on a couple of cruises. But we always went to this place in Rhode Island in the summers and that was our vacation.

01-00:27:48

Meeker:

Was it at the seashore?

01-00:27:51

Gensler:

It was at the beach, yeah. There's a beach. There's a saltwater pond. It's three miles long and about a quarter mile wide. And I would go down there. We had a cottage that was like 600 square feet, a teeny cottage. They had an ice chest. Not a refrigerator, but an ice chest with ice, and we had a hot water heater which was just a copper coil pipe. You lit it in the morning and it heated up the water as it flowed through, which was not very hot. So you learned to take cold showers. We had indoor plumbing, but that's about all. And we had a little tiny bedroom where I slept, and Dad built a little bedroom where he and Mom slept. He came up on the weekends from New York or down from Hartford, and I and Mom lived there all summer long.

This was a house which relatives of my mom originally owned. A couple of houses away other relatives owned a house. It was a colony, an artist colony called Shelter Harbor. It's a wonderful place. We could walk down to the dock, which was maybe a quarter of a mile, and then I had a little rowboat and a little two-horse-power motor. When I got a little older, I could handle it, get on the boat. We'd go every morning and go on the boat across to the beach, walk to the beach and lie there and swim. I got very good at that. And then come home for lunch and then go back in the afternoon. That's the way I spent my summers until I was fifteen, I guess, maybe not quite that old. Then

because I wanted to work and get a job, I didn't go back. My dad finally sold it to some people in the family.

I had two aunts, a woman who worked for Singer Sewing Machines and a woman who was a schoolteacher. They were also there, as I remember. I don't even know where they slept, God, because it was small. Anyway, they were there. But they were only there part-time because they were working. But it was a nice young life.

01-00:30:24
Meeker:

You had mentioned that you were living in West Hartford during the war. Is that correct?

01-00:30:29
Gensler:

Yes.

01-00:30:29
Meeker:

And then your family moved to Garden City.

01-00:30:31
Gensler:

In '51, my dad got transferred from Hartford. There was a huge building boom after the Second World War and Dad became the expert on ceilings, acoustical ceilings like are in this room. And Armstrong was the leader. There was another company called Celotex that was also selling to the architects and to the contractors.

01-00:31:00
Meeker:

These were mostly commercial settings, not domestic?

01-00:31:02
Gensler:

Yeah, it was all commercial buildings. They were building office buildings like crazy, and he was calling on all those people. He'd go to Lancaster and do some training with the new recruits. He was a coach to the new recruits. He was still a senior salesman, but he still insisted he was just going to be on salary. Wasn't going to take a commission, didn't want a commission. And he could have been—not wealthy, but he would have been certainly better off had he done it. But he said, "No, no, no. I got to make sure I got enough money. I want to know what it is. And I'll put away the money for Art," which he did. So I had enough money to go to college.

It was tough for me to leave West Hartford because, as I said earlier, I was into sports. The team captain and the coach said, "Couldn't you live with somebody for a couple of years and stay here?" We finally talked and I said, "We're a family and so I'll go with you." I finally got into the sports and got on the teams in Garden City [which] was okay. Then I played soccer, basketball, and tennis. I was on the tennis team in Garden City. And in the summers—I'm not positive about the timing, but I worked on construction and actually had a union card. I was a union laborer in building. I worked for a company that my dad had worked with, one of the distributors for his

products. I would carry concrete forms as a kid and work—back and forth as a laborer, pushing the wheelbarrow and lugging cement for the hod carrier. I was pretty strong.

01-00:32:54

Meeker: Was this skilled work?

01-00:32:55

Gensler: No, it's totally unskilled. It's totally labor. The projects that I was working on, I didn't push a broom very often, but I'd move things around, and that's about all I did. But I learned construction. Well, two things happened I should go back on. One, since I was about six years old, I always wanted to be an architect. I don't know why. People have always asked me, "Was it your father?" We had an uncle or something, I never figured out his relationship, who was an architect who lived in West Hartford that we saw very seldom. It was a strange relationship. Anyway, he was an architect and I saw that. But I never went to one of his buildings, so I don't know whatever he did. He worked out of his house or apartment. He was living in an apartment. But I always would build little things. We were talking the other day. We had erector sets and Lincoln Logs. Now everybody builds things out of Legos and all that. But I built all sorts of stuff. I built some model airplanes and that kind of stuff. I liked to do it. I really liked to build houses and draw little floor plans and things. For some reason, I've never been able to identify the point where I really wanted to be an architect. I've always wanted to be one. I've never gone any other way from like six years on.

01-00:34:26

Meeker: It's interesting: A lot of people have those dreams as a kid. Actually, that was my dream, even though I ended up in something else. But I would do the same thing, build things through Legos and draw floor plans of houses and everything. But that wasn't the direction in which I headed, right. A lot of people who wanted to be firemen, for example, ended up maybe running banks. Did you keep with dream throughout childhood?

01-00:34:49

Gensler: Oh, yeah, I did. They had drafting in high school; as a sophomore in high school I took drafting. We had to build a little model house and draw up the plans. I really loved that. I also took typing, which I still haven't learned. I can actually touch type, but I don't do it. I hunt and peck still. I just knew I was going to get from point A to point B, and it was going to be architecture.

The other thing I wanted to comment on, which was a very important part of my life, and I was twelve years old, so I was sixth or seventh grade, I guess. The soapbox derby came to Hartford in Connecticut for the first time. It was a really big thing and the *Hartford Courant*, the local paper, was the sponsor and so they did a big deal. The thing was interesting in that as an entrant you had to buy the wheels, and it came with a steering wheel. I think they were like \$15 for the four wheels and the steering wheel. Then the rest of the car

could not cost more than six dollars in parts. You had to build it all yourself. You couldn't have parents do it. You had to do it yourself. Now, I mentioned earlier Pratt & Whitney. There were some kids over there whose parents were engineers and building engines, and the kids clearly didn't know how to bend metal quite like the—into cars that they had.

But we built a car. I built one and I'd say, "What do you think?" My dad said, "I'd start over if I were you," and I started all over again. But the outcome was that I ended up winning the eleven- and twelve-year-old category and lost in the finals to the thirteen- and fourteen-year-old category. I was a big kid. In fact, next year I was too big. The weight limitation was too low and I couldn't do the thirteen-fourteen. But I was on to other things by then.

It was an incredible experience to compete the first time because they made a huge deal of it, with thousands of people in the stands watching this thing. And it turned out I really liked it. There's a picture of me—I don't know where it is, I think I've got it somewhere—but me sort of sprawled back like this [leaning back]. Before they had all of us down to the *Hartford Courant*, the guys that are entering, and I got right in the middle and I was sprawled like this. I just remember that picture. But I was really into it and my dad would push me up the street. He had a little stick and he would push me to keep it straight, because the track was a road and it had a crown in it, so you had to be careful. I remember they had the military and they came and picked up my car in a Jeep, and we put it across the back of a Jeep and drove it to the course. We didn't have a station wagon or anything that could get it there. The army guys had Jeep, and they moved all the carts around. There were a lot of people participating.

Anyway, I went through four or five rounds before I got to the finals. I raced against a thirteen-, fourteen-year-old and lost by, I don't know, two feet or something like that. But it was really exciting and it was a big time. Then they had a big banquet, which I remember really, really well because Gene Tunney, who was a famous prizefighter—I had heard his name but I had never met a celebrity like that before. I won a trip in an airplane to go see Ted Williams play at Fenway Park. That was one of the prizes. And I got two weeks in a Y summer camp. I might even have gotten a bicycle.

01-00:39:04

Meeker:

So a big deal.

01-00:39:04

Gensler:

It was a big deal for me, and I must admit I liked winning. I really did. I liked it then, and I still like winning. I don't like losing, even if I'm the younger age and I got to compete against somebody else. I like winning, but I like competition. It's been something I've just enjoyed.

01-00:39:26

Meeker:

I'm wondering about the engineering side of it.

01-00:39:28

Gensler:

Well, it was fun. We really did engineer this car. It couldn't weigh more than 250 pounds. I think I may have weighed 150 and the car weighed a hundred or something. But we made it the 250 exactly. I had to borrow all the neighbors' bathroom scales. And I decided that it would be best if all the weight was exactly the same. So I'd sit in this car. We had the scales and my father said, "Oh, no, too heavy. That one says seventy-five, seventy-five, seventy-five, seventy-five," or something. And I guess it would be 62.5 pounds on each tire. So we balanced. You couldn't put weights in the car, but the things that I had tying the floorboards of the car together were plates of steel that were fairly thick and heavy. I got some heavy screws and other things, bolts that I used that were kind of outside, but oversized, but they got me just to the right weight; and how much clothing I had on and a bunch of things. It was fun to do that. I made it with a lot of ribs and slats. Thin slats that were maybe an inch and a half by three-eighths of an inch or something. Bent them around frames and then put canvas over. If you think of old airplanes, that's the way I did them.

01-00:40:54

Meeker:

So for aerodynamics.

01-00:40:55

Gensler:

Yes. It was pointed and went back. Pointed in the back. And it was fun. There were quite a few restrictions, but you had some freedom. Some of the kids, as I said, had these fancy metal things that looked like car parts. Fenders and things that their dads had worked with them on. But anyway, my dad would never touch the car. It's New England, East Coast, and we had a basement. In the basement we had a shop, very crude, a limited shop. There were no power tools or anything. No electric drills. But I did get a jigsaw. I could cut curves and things with this jigsaw. That's the only electrical thing we had. And then we had a pine-paneled game room. You were really in the upscale when you had a pine-paneled room. I played a whole lot of Ping-Pong in that room.

01-00:41:54

Meeker:

Tell me more about how you learned how to create this little car.

01-00:42:09

Gensler:

I think my dad may have talked to me, and he had some friends in Pratt & Whitney who would talk to me a little bit about it. And there were pictures of cars. Other states and other places in the big nationals had these beautiful slick cars, so you could get pictures of what other people had done. As I say, this was a big promotion for the *Hartford Courant*, so they had material for us. I'm a pretty good listener and listener of other things. I knew pretty early on what I wanted to do. It was just how to do it. I had never built anything of this scale or type. I think it was maybe six, six and a half feet long, and like three feet wide with ball bearing wheels. We made sure that they were balanced perfectly and would drill little holes in the webbing so that it would be balanced.

They wouldn't tell you anything. Nobody was going to tell you how to build it, and there was no instructor that you'd go and talk to. Especially because it had never been done in Hartford or Connecticut before. You couldn't go see anything. It was all just what you could see in magazines and pictures. In those days it was a really big thing. And, of course, it's just gravity. You stand at the top of the hill and they drop a board down and you just start going. And you're kind of, "Vroom," you start yourself and get yourself going, start going on this thing. The trick is steering straight and not getting off line—because if you over-steer, you end up going down the course this way and, of course, each time you turn you take speed off, so the idea is don't turn. Turn very slowly. If you're off track a little bit, turn very, very slowly. There wasn't a white line down to follow down. You just had to get yourself set.

My dad, I think, had the idea of putting a gunsight on the nose that was stuck up, that I could sort of look through the steering wheel, and I had a funny little helmet on. If you got so just your eyes were above the slot of the helmet, and my nose was right over the thing and then it was aiming at this little—maybe it was just a nail or something that I was aiming ahead of me, to get things straight. So it was a bunch of things.

It was a wonderful experience for me. It was a good opportunity to spend time with my dad in the evenings at home. I'd come home after school and sports and I'd work on it. Then he'd come down and look at it, and then I'd have to do homework. But it was a nice time.

01-00:45:00

Meeker:

Well, bringing it around, back around to the architecture. And one might say that architecture is the meeting of engineering and art.

01-00:45:08

Gensler:

It is.

01-00:45:09

Meeker:

It sounds to me like your entry into architecture was less the artistic side, more the engineering side?

01-00:45:15

Gensler:

It probably is. I'm not a good artist. I'm not a sketcher who does beautiful little sketches. That isn't what I do. I visualize things very well, but I can't—from my eye to the end of my fingers, pencil, it doesn't go. Part of it, I suppose, is I'm left-handed. I do think left-handed people are very creative. But in our day, especially with a pen, when you write, you smear everything. You write and your hand drags over it. In those days we didn't have ink that dried immediately. You had pen quills, and there were little inkwells on the corner of your desk. You'd dip a pen in, and I would always try to keep my hand up. I could never do that; I'd always smear everything. So I've never done a lot of sketching. Pencils were soft, and the graphite was kind of smearing. It just wasn't my thing. In college I had to take painting and

sculpture. I'm much better at sculpture than I am at painting; I've done some nice things in sculpture. My kids are actually talented—one of them's pretty good in sculpture.

I look at things in an engineering way. I look at how they get made. I'm fascinated by the assembly of pieces together. I like a big concept, and then I like to figure out how to do it and build it well. I can look at a set of drawings, and today it drives people crazy because I'll find the three things that they forgot to work on or haven't thought through on how it's going to work. I say, "Well, what about this?" "Well, maybe I ought to work on it." "Yeah, you ought to work on it." So it's a visualization thing. One of the things that I've learned is that 3D visualization, I call it spherical visualization—a lot of people see things in two dimensions, I see it in three. We were talking about this yesterday. I'm working on a book. We were talking about the idea that you also have to think in time and money about a thing. But I look at it as how do you build it? I'm looking at not only the three-dimensional, but how it actually all goes together. I think that you can't teach somebody how to look and think that way.

One of the things that I've been pushing, and they've been doing now, is that architecture schools have a pre-architecture program between a high school student's junior and senior year. If they're thinking about going into architecture, they run a program for you. They run it just like a college course for six weeks in the summer. My son Doug, who's now an architect, went to the Cornell program and just fell in love with the profession. I've had now one granddaughter who went to Cal Poly's [San Luis Obispo] program and decided maybe she wasn't as good at it. Now she's decided maybe interior design. She really loves design and that side. Not so much the construction and architecture, but more the interior design and interior architecture finishes. She just went into that program last week, as a matter of fact. I have another grandson who's a junior in high school, and he'll be going to the Cornell summer program this summer. He really has got a great hand already. He sketches well and thinks well and is always building stuff, always has been building stuff. I never saw him without his bag of Lego blocks. When he'd come over he'd sit in the corner and build stuff. He's really good at it. He worked for our office in San Diego this summer and it was special. He just loved every minute of it, and they said he did a great job. He had learned to run a computer and run Revit. It was amazing. I never had that kind of experience. When I went off to college, there were guys and gals far more advanced in the drafting and rendering and drawing skills than I was.

01-00:49:36
Meeker:

Well, we'll get there in a second. I just have a few more questions actually about your parents. Did they impart any values around politics?

01-00:49:47
Gensler:

Not really. They were Republicans, but certainly not very active.

01-00:49:53

Meeker:

More Rockefeller Republicans?

01-00:49:55

Gensler:

Yeah. Well, Dewey Republicans probably. I can remember when Dewey lost. We were at the Jersey Shore. I remember Roosevelt giving a speech at the convention that year. It was the Democratic convention. I remember Dewey at the Republican convention. We would listen to the squawky creaky radio shows of that era they were broadcasting. There was no television at the time. I think we were pretty low-key middle class. My mom in the evening would sit and read *Life* magazine or a book, and my father would go upstairs and work on expense reports. He could tell you how much he spent last year in gum, chewing gum. He kept these very detailed expense reports. He did have an expense account, but he had to document it. And he would document fifteen cents for chewing gum, I swear to God. I have some of his records I have kept just as sort of mementos of his attention to detail. He'd be good in today's world where you have to fill out a timesheet and all that, where you have to be accurate and make sure you make the right entries and notes. We have to fill out expense reports here, too.

We occasionally would go to a ballgame. Mom got very interested in baseball, in the Brooklyn Dodgers when they were in Brooklyn. I never saw her do any athletic things. My dad played a little tennis but not when I was around, before I was born. Played I think quite a bit of tennis. He played badminton. That's what I remember. I'd go to watch him play badminton, which is a wonderful sport, actually. In the winter inside he'd play badminton. And we would go to baseball games, the Hartford minor league team, and we'd go to high school football games and things like that. But I don't remember doing a lot of things with him. I don't remember us talking about a lot of things of—I'll use the word significant. They certainly didn't try to influence me. I'm sure they did, but they didn't try to influence me, whether it was politics or other things. I don't know. I feel I had probably as normal an upbringing as you can have without any influences. Nobody died. My mom and dad lived a long time and so I had that. But my dad and my mom were just really nice parents, they were nice people and tried to do the right thing. But it was focused, to be blunt, around me. Getting me through college.

01-00:53:06

Meeker:

What about some of the larger historical moments? We talked a little bit about the war. And, of course, there's the end of the war and the explosion of the atomic bombs.

01-00:53:18

Gensler:

Well, I think all those things were interesting. But we saw them differently. We saw them in newsreels and movie theaters. In the Second World War they would have a Bugs Bunny or Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck cartoon. They would have a newsreel showing the Americans and the Japanese fighter planes and the flames and the guns, and then they'd have a movie. It was

usually a double feature, if I remember correctly. Then I remember when television first came in and I saw the first World Series and the first baseball games. I think the World Series was the first sports event that was ever broadcast. But it was so grainy. I remember we resisted a long time. My dad didn't think we should have television, so I would have to go over to friends' houses to watch television. You'd see Showplace of Stars or something, I forget what it was. Lucille Ball and that kind of comedy stuff. I don't remember any of the serious stuff at all, except sports, and that was fun. Mom and Dad had some very nice friends who had kids, and we would do things together. But it was not that much. I interacted with my friends playing sports and that was about it. I do remember the end of the Second World War; I do remember the whole V-E Day, V-J Day.

01-00:55:21
Meeker:

Celebrations in the streets?

01-00:55:23
Gensler:

Oh, enormous celebrations.

01-00:55:25
Meeker:

Did you go to those? You must have been in high school at the time.

01-00:55:28
Gensler:

Yeah. No, I didn't go to any of them. It's not that I don't like crowds. I wasn't in the war. I think that the pictures that you see of Times Square with all the servicemen, and the famous picture of the guy with the Navy hat on, the girl bending way over and giving her a kiss. We got our news and our opinions primarily from *Life* magazine. That's the one subscription which we had. And *National Geographic*. I got a lot from *National Geographic*. That was the other one. I don't think we always had it. Friends or somebody had it. I can't remember, but I don't think it came to our house. I did follow that, and I can't remember actually where I followed things in *National Geographic*. I didn't read papers much. Now I devour them. I wasn't a big reader in those days. We didn't have *Harry Potter*. We had some books, but I wasn't a very strong reader. Now I'm an enormous reader, and I think I'm pretty efficient and effective and I enjoy it. My ultimate relaxation is to read a book.

But it's funny. As you look back on it, it was a much simpler life. Just really simple. We had one car. I think most of the time, if not all the time, they bought a used car because they couldn't buy a new car. They bought a couple-year-old car. It wasn't a junker. We had jalopies—I remember one time my mom—the tires were no good in those days. We were over in Rhode Island and all of a sudden the rain came and she started sliding and we had an accident. It was the first time I was sitting in the front seat. And, of course, nobody had seat belts in those days. It wasn't a bad accident, but I can remember there was nothing she could do. She just started sliding. The tires were wet and there was nothing stopped. Just [crashing sound] coming around the corner and just smashing this car. You remember that kind of stuff. And

we would go out to dinner very seldom. It was before pizzas. We would go maybe to an Italian place. But I don't remember going out much, even for dinner. We would eat at home. People didn't have big barbecues and all that. We had fun. Thanksgiving and Christmas were big deals in our family. We'd go to my mom's [family's] place in Hightstown, New Jersey, for those.

My mom's family lived down in New Jersey. We'd drive from Hartford down there, which seemed to take us a whole day to get there. It really wasn't that long, I'm sure, although you didn't go very fast. The roads weren't highways or freeways. There were a few around New York, and then they may have built some of the early parkways, like [Interstate] 280 here, really beautiful parkways up into Connecticut. So that was pretty good, where we could actually make some time. But then you'd go through New York and go through the tunnel and get out in New Jersey and go by what's now Newark Airport. They didn't have the big turnpikes like the Jersey Turnpike, which they do now.

We would go there for Thanksgiving, a big family party. I look at my upbringing as—in a way I think I've done the same thing with my kids. Kept it simple. We don't lobby about politics, we don't sit around talking about those things. It's sort of what you're doing and how you're doing in school and what can we help you with. And then supporting them. Mom and Dad would go to the games that I would play in and they would support me. It was very much a simpler time. We weren't members of any clubs or anything. So I'm very comfortable with my upbringing. But finally, in the end, they really had to pull out all the stops to get me into Cornell. It was just lucky I got in because I was sort of marginally on the—they had a test like the SATs. I don't think they were SATs at the time.

Audio File 2

02-00:00:05

Meeker:

Today is the 17th of January, 2014. This is Meeker interviewing Gensler. This is tape number two. So we were about to get started talking about your admission to Cornell. There were just a few little things I wanted to follow up on. First of all, you had mentioned your father's nickname was Slats. Where does that come from?

02-00:00:25

Gensler:

Yeah. Slats is tall and thin. It was slats of wood, I think. In business, his business card said Slats Gensler. It wasn't just a nickname. It was his name as far as anybody—I've never heard anybody ever call him anything else. My grandmother called him Millard; she was the only person that called him Millard. I have actually a chair in my second home down south which was his chair. It's old oak with "Millard" carved on it, a dining room chair with "Millard" carved on it. We have no antiques of the family or anything, but this chair has got to be well over a hundred years old. It's a beautiful old oak chair.

Nobody sits in it because it's probably—it's pretty sturdy, but it was the one remembrance I have of the family's history.

02-00:01:24

Meeker:

You had talked about your interest in architecture vis-à-vis engineering. You also were right next to New York City, and Manhattan's a centerpiece of architectural achievement in the United States.

02-00:01:56

Gensler:

I started really early reading. The other magazine that I did get—I talked about magazines—I got *Popular Science*. I think it then was called *Popular Mechanics*, not *Popular Science*. I would clip articles and sort them. I got interested, and finally I got an architecture magazine and started clipping articles because I knew I wanted to be an architect. I had files, folders of architecture buildings and office buildings and museums, and also model stuff. *Popular Mechanics* had all these wonderful advanced things. Even in today's world, they were always talking about the car that could fly or be a boat or all sorts of different things. So I was always interested in that; I got really interested in it.

I went to the museums in New York, and I liked the architecture department in the Museum of Modern Art. In my senior year in high school, I got a little more understanding of what it was. I can't really remember. I knew I liked going out on construction [jobs], and so I worked construction. What I've been trying to think of is exactly when I started. In those days you could make \$600, and then you couldn't make any more. If you made any more, your parents lost your deduction as a child. And they wanted to take the deduction. So I could make \$600. I would work in the summer as a laborer for probably a dollar an hour, maybe two dollars an hour. When I got to \$600, I stopped working. That was maybe four or five weeks into the summer, something like that. Then I went up to Lake Placid Club. It's a wonderful old historic club in upstate New York. I would caddy and make money by cash [under the table], and I worked in the coffee shop, and I'd bartend and wait on people. They'd have parties and I'd do all that stuff. I was earning that as cash, not a paycheck, so I didn't declare it.

It was a great place. I used to take lessons from the tennis pro there, which was my big expense. And buying beer, which I drank every night with some lady on a golf course. We'd all work like crazy during the day and then we'd go out, all the waitresses and the guys, the waiters and the caddies. We'd all go out and party on the golf course at night. How we ever survived is beyond me.

02-00:05:13

Meeker:

You were young.

02-00:05:15

Gensler:

It was very platonic; it was all about drinking. There were, again, no drugs, no sex, no any of that, but it was sure fun. I would do that every summer. I'd work first and then I'd go up there. That really was a good experience, and I learned a lot of social skills because I was dealing with a lot of very wealthy people who would go to the Lake Placid Club. They had a series of homes around the golf course and other places which they'd rent out, and these people would come for a month and rent the house, and throw parties in their houses. These were forty, fifty people come for cocktail parties and canapés and all that stuff before they'd all go off to dinner. Caddying for very wealthy people is a very interesting experience, how they act and how they treat people. You learn a lot being around them.

02-00:06:16

Meeker:

Well, clearly that plays a role in your later work here.

02-00:06:21

Gensler:

Yeah, very much so. I just think I got very comfortable around people much older than I am. I've always been that way. I started the firm when I was thirty. I had done some important things before that with adults, and now I was dealing with heads of corporations at thirty years old and pulling it off. That was one of the experiences that really helped me. And then the work on construction helped me understand architecture, and it was a way to make money, real money, and that was good. That was my spending money. My mom and dad paid for my tuition, room and board, but all the spending money I had, it was the money I made.

02-00:07:10

Meeker:

So when you did this caddying work and you were working with particularly, one, older people and, two, wealthy people, were there any particular lessons or rules that you learned?

02-00:07:19

Gensler:

Well, I think what you learn, one, is respect for these people, and you keep your mouth shut and you stay out of the way. I love golf a lot; one son is a professional golfer, a PGA professional golfer. If I could play golf every day, which I can't right now, I would do it. I think it's one of the most amazing interactions of adults that I know of. Watching how people behave—some get upset, some get mad, some are rude, some are very polite, some want to chat, take it as what it is, which can be a very good recreation. With a sport, golfing, you can hack around and have a good time and be with the people that you're with, or you can take every putt as a life-or-death experience. I just got to get out and enjoy myself, and if I miss a putt, I miss a putt. I get upset, but with myself. I don't like to go out and gamble. A lot of guys go in every Saturday, they gamble with a bunch of guys. They have choose-ups and they gamble and it's all that.

I just don't like that kind of golf. I love playing, and being outdoors. I'm not a big hiker or any of those things. I was a good skier and did a lot of that. Going back to Hartford, my poor father, growing up in New Orleans and then New York, and he had been in New York a long time. I always used to tease him that he was the president of the New Orleans Ski Club. He would sit by a potbelly stove in a little tiny shack while I would go skiing all day. They had rope tows in those days, where you'd hang on for your dear life as you'd ride up a rope tow. He would take me and he'd sit in the horrible little shacks that they had. They didn't have lodges or anything. And I would go up and down this rope tow and he would sit there and take a look at me as I'd come in freezing, then race back out. He was sitting there. He said, "The guy from New Orleans ski club." Everybody would tease him terribly.

I think golf and that experience, being around people and being in the hospitality industry, watching people interact—some people are very charming and nice and respectful, and some people are a bunch of jerks and then another word for it, other words I don't use, profanity. But people can be rude. We all slept in dorms. The girls were in one dorm. I used to have roommates that were from the Bowery and were dishwashers. They were sitting there with a bottle swigging all night long, and it was a very educational experience for me to see how that part of the world—because, as I said, I didn't belong to any clubs or anything like that. Couldn't afford it. I remember J.A. Jones was head of AT&T, I guess it was, or some big—Occidental Petroleum, or some big company. He'd fly in in his DC3 with his wife and all their friends. The reason I remember was he was a very good tipper. The caddies would sit there hoping that the caddy master would let you go out with them, his foursome. Then behind him was his wife's foursome. She wasn't quite as big a tipper, but she was pretty decent, and that was where the money was made, in the tips. They were probably four-dollar tips. Today they get a hundred dollars for a round; then, it was probably four. But it seemed like a lot of money.

02-00:11:25

Meeker:

You said that you learned that you were basically to shut your mouth and stand out of the way. But I imagine there were also times that it was good for you to speak up and to interact.

02-00:11:38

Gensler:

Oh, yeah. As I reflect on it—I don't think I ever reflected on it while I was doing it—but I loved to understand what people do and why they do what they do, and I like to chat with people. I think I'm comfortable to talk to and I'm comfortable talking to them. So I built up relationships with these people that I caddied for that were terrific. As I say, I've learned to be comfortable around a group of people. I ran the soda fountain. I did that a little in high school. In a drugstore, soda fountain. I went up there and ran the soda fountain in the afternoons and in the evenings and other times at Lake Placid. It was a coffee shop type of an outfit and I ran the counter. You build a relationship, and in

those days you hoped they gave you a decent tip. You got to know somebody, and that was always fun. This place had a movie theater in it. They'd have shows and they'd bring in entertainers. I guess one of the things I learned, "Gee, I'd like to have enough money to be able to do this someday, to stay these places and go see these things." It gave me a little ambition to get out and do things. I never felt I was poor and I never felt, "Oh, if I could be rich." But it showed me there was a part of life that I didn't know much about that I got exposed to, and that was really good.

02-00:13:34
Meeker:

Let's dive into Cornell. What did you know about Cornell before you even applied?

02-00:13:45
Gensler:

It's interesting. I don't know where the first interest in Cornell comes from. I had done some looking and it appeared that Cornell had a really good architecture program. I don't know who talked me into it. They have alums that talk to potential students, and one guy talked me up about Cornell. He was a Cornell alum. I really got excited about it. Buckminster Fuller was at—God—I want to say Virginia, but that isn't it. He was in one of the southern schools. North Carolina, North Carolina State. I really was interested in them. They had an interesting program. I think I applied to one other school, I can't remember what it was. I got into North Carolina State and I was on the waitlist, and finally this guy who was hustling for me said [to Cornell admissions], "Come on, you got to take Art," and they did. They took me at Cornell. It was, for my mom and dad, one of the biggest days of our lives that I got in there.

02-00:15:10
Meeker:

When you applied did you have to submit like a portfolio or anything along those lines?

02-00:15:14
Gensler:

No, they didn't do that. It's interesting. There were fifty of us in the class, and only ten of us graduated in architecture. Many of them would transfer out of architecture into another program. What I talked about earlier, about seeing things in three dimensions and four dimensions. They just didn't have that skill set. One of the things that schools have learned is they want a portfolio, they want to understand how you think and see, because they've realized that they can't really teach that. So we had a lot of terrific people that ultimately said, "I'm in the wrong program."

Now, architecture's interesting in that there are two ways to become an architect. To get an architectural license, you have to have a college degree in architecture. There's the way of the five-year undergraduate program, or a four-[year] and then a three-year graduate program like Berkeley has. Berkeley has a graduate program, mostly. They have some undergraduate, but it's not a five-year program. It's a graduate program. You can take

architecture courses in liberal arts, but then you have the graduate program. Cornell was unique—not unique, most of the schools were originally—but of a five-year undergraduate program. I think if you're passionate about it and you're ready, you ought to do it, because who needs to pay for seven years of college at \$50,000 when you can get away with five.

I went there, and a lot of things happened. I got rushed by a fraternity. When you get off the bus, in those days you went to sort of a three-day camp. They took us offsite, like a YMCA camp or something. All I can remember, you wore a beanie, a little beanie hat. This is in '53. And you learned the Cornell songs. They'd teach you the songs.

02-00:17:26

Meeker:

All freshmen went there?

02-00:17:27

Gensler:

All the freshmen went there.

02-00:17:28

Meeker:

And this was all male at this time?

02-00:17:29

Gensler:

No. Mixed. Co-ed. Cornell has always been co-ed. But we had beanies, and we'd eat together and learn to sing. They taught you all the Cornell songs, not just the alma mater. We actually learned the words. You watch it today, they would go, hum, ha, they don't know the damn words. But it really set us up. The other thing is that fraternities rushed you the first weeks you were on campus. I got rushed by a series of fraternities through people that I knew at Cornell. One of the guys that my father worked with was a Cornell graduate, so he introduced me to his fraternity. One of the guys that was ahead of me in my high school became a member of Delta Phi, which is the fraternity I ultimately joined, which turned out to be a very exciting and great experience for me. I'll come back to that a little bit.

The irony of the whole thing is that this guy named Tad Cameron was the guy who started calling me Goose, which was my nickname in college. I was so both naïve and scared, I suppose, that although it wasn't my nickname—he had actually dropped out of college and seen me play basketball. He'd come back to Garden City and seen me play against Jimmy Brown and other people. There was a famous basketball player from the Harlem Globetrotters called Goose Tatum, and I had a big hook shot. Goose Tatum was famous for a big hook shot. So he started calling me Goose, and I wasn't going to tell this guy, college guy, "That isn't my nickname, don't call me that," because I wanted to get into the fraternity. I just sort of shut up. It just stuck, so nobody called me anything but Goose on the campus. My wife still calls me that occasionally, but not a lot. And my license plate is GOOSE. So it's part of my heritage, but it all started with this guy when I was just sort of shaking, "Am I going to get in this fraternity or not?"

The beauty of the fraternity is it was Ezra Cornell's home. He spent eight years building this home in the late 1800s, and it is a gorgeous mansion, just a gorgeous place. As an architect, you get a history lesson every day looking at beautiful details. I really loved it; it was an outlet for me that worked really well.

I went out for soccer, and I made the soccer team and played all fall. Then went out for the basketball team. Played a couple of games and then just decided I couldn't keep up with my classwork. Soccer is always a Saturday game, and I had to have my projects in Friday night. We had to get our projects in Friday night at midnight, and if you didn't finish your project, you didn't get it in, you got a zero. They were brutal. If it was partially done, you didn't get a fifty, you got a zero. That meant you probably failed the course, which is a whole concept of learning. You have to finish on time, and when your meeting is called you're going to be ready. All of us in architecture school understand that now. I played basketball a couple of times and then just decided—we had classes that go until 5:00, and, of course, you're supposed to be on the field at 4:00 to practice, or 3:00, and I was cutting out of classes or labs for design studies, and I just couldn't get the work done. So I said, "This isn't going to work." They were probably better basketball players than me by then. I was of the "white men can't jump" school. Probably better just playing soccer. But I really began to like it, and I could see that I had a little talent and I got better. I spent five years on the campus, and now it seems like I've spent forever. My wife and I, one of our major philanthropic efforts is Cornell.

Cornell is an amazing institution. It is one of the great universities in the world. You can study almost anything you want. One of the things which was hard in architecture, but not impossible, was to get some time to get some electives. I took public speaking, and I took a course in Russian literature and some other things that broadened me out a little bit, other than just studying architecture all the time, engineering types of things. We had classes in engineering. I fell in love with it, got very involved with our fraternity house and the social programs. I lived in a great dormitory. They had in those days some really great dormitories for us all.

In the second year, I started living in the fraternity and lived there until I graduated—or actually until I got married is a better way of putting it. But Cornell to me is an ideal place. It's totally different than Berkeley in the sense that it's so remote that you don't have a big city. It's the good news and the bad news. What you do is all on that campus. You don't go off the campus. Even College Town, which is adjacent, you don't go too often. But Ithaca, which is down a hill, it seemed like it was miles away. It was probably half a mile or quarter of a mile away, but it just seemed like forever. I got very involved in things on campus, and I was involved with theater and doing set designs, and enjoyed that kind of work. That came back to help me when I wanted to join the Bohemian Club many, many years later.

I found that I was an average student in the beginning, and then I got to be an upper average student, and when I finally graduated I was top of the class. It took me a long time to really get there—and it was interesting because I was a public high school guy. Most of the people were [from] private schools. In the East Coast, everybody went to Phillips Exeter, Andover, Choate, or one of those private schools. My fraternity was filled with those kinds of guys. There were a few of us that went to public schools. That's a whole different crowd. It was one of the four oldest fraternities in the country. We wore coats and ties at lunch and dinner. I started wearing a tie as a freshman in college and never stopped wearing it. I guess maybe this is the second year where I come to work occasionally without a tie on. I've been putting a tie on for so long that it's part of my psyche to wear a coat and tie. They were pretty ragged and ratty and terrible, but Ithaca is not the prettiest place in the middle of winter, I can assure you. It's horrible. But it's a gorgeous place in the spring and the summer, and it's just these gorgeous gorges, which are very big and deep, on either side of the campus. You have to go across bridges to get onto the campus and off the campus. It's a really spectacular place and looks over Lake Cayuga, which is a beautiful lake. So it was a great experience, and I had some wonderful faculty members in architecture.

And things that we'll come back to later, we'll talk about in detail. But they had a program, a visiting critic program, where they'd bring architects, practicing people, onto the campus our junior year and would run classes. They'd usually spend two, three weeks on campus. I don't know how they left their businesses, but they did. We had some really terrific people that would come on campus. A guy named Henry Hill came from San Francisco, and Henry is the reason I'm here today. For a lot of reasons, but Henry, he wanted us to cut all of our classes. We said, "Henry, we can't do that. At least I have to do ROTC," because Cornell is a land grant college. In those days you had to take ROTC for the first two years, and then if you wanted you could take them for the next two years and then graduate as a second lieutenant in the army or navy or air force. I was in the army, and ultimately graduated and became a second lieutenant in the army. I said, "I have to go to those classes." You couldn't cut those ROTC classes. Your other classes you could cut, but the army said, "Damn it, you're not cutting these classes no matter what."

02-00:27:16
Meeker:

Why did he want you to cut classes?

02-00:27:17
Gensler:

Oh, he just said, "I'm here. I have nothing to do. I'm here to talk to you and teach you and show you what to do. So let's sit down and have breakfast and go till ten o'clock at night." And we said, "Henry, we can't quite do that." But he was a very enthusiastic guy. Does beautiful little houses. He's died, obviously. He said, "You'd love California, Art. You'd really love it." When I got out of the army I flew to California, just before I got out of the army, to see Henry and to get a job. I couldn't get a job, so I went back to New York.

Drue and I have established a visiting critic program chair at Cornell in honor of him and because I believe in it so strongly. Because they had stopped doing it and I said, “You can’t do that.” I’m probably one of the largest contributors to the college as a graduate. So I have a little leverage there, and I use it occasionally because I want certain things that I think are helpful to architects. I think I know what they need and what they don’t need. I was for twenty years on the buildings and properties committee of the university and used to go back there once every two months. Now I go back maybe once a year.

02-00:28:44
Meeker:

Is there a point at which you develop your own architectural aesthetic sense?

02-00:28:51
Gensler:

Well, I’ve always been interested in contemporary things—although we had to do a lot of work in history of architecture. I have great respect for what people did in history. I’ve always been interested in more of the contemporary side of the design world—although we’ve occasionally done a historical preservation project where we really do the historic details. We have a few people that really know that, but that’s certainly not my strength or my interest. I think it’s good that it’s done; it’s just that’s something I don’t want to try to learn to do. I’m not sure I like the word cutting-edge, because I don’t believe in that. I like to be second in, and I don’t like to push things too far. But I do believe that architecture and design can move mountains and move people, so we are trying to do design that is the most innovative we can possibly do, within reason, and it works. We do some of the most interesting projects.

But if you went back and looked at my college work, it was interesting but nothing that would be shockingly tremendous. When I got to my thesis, that was a real breakthrough. I won a big prize, which they give very seldom, called the Charles Goodwin Prize, for the most innovative and best thesis. It’s four out of ten years or six out of ten years; they don’t give it every year.

02-00:30:38
Meeker:

Well, I want to get to that. I do want a little more about your development, your aesthetic sensibility of an architect. Were you a Mies van der Rohe fan?

02-00:30:49
Gensler:

No. At Cornell, one of the things they were starting to push when I was there—it got worse when I left—but they were very big into Corbusier. Corbusier was the architect, and the thinking was around his work. I was more interested in a designer named Paul Rudolph, who was a wonderful architect, who was doing wonderful homes in Florida. He went on a different tack later in life, which I hated—brutalist concrete stuff. But at the time I really thought he was the cat’s meow and really was the best designer. Again, I mentioned earlier that I cut magazines up, and when I got into college I had these subscriptions. I would, “Oh, I like that design,” and I’d grab it and file it. I

have, still to this day, these files of magazine cuttings. I still do it. I tear magazines apart, devour a magazine. I'll talk to you later about that.

I devour designs, looking for new ideas. Not to copy people, but to see what they've done and why they did it and how they've done it. I'm a big walker-around and look[er]. So as I went to college, I would walk around and see what the more senior students were doing. I got to know a lot of them. Richard Meier was a year ahead of me. Richard was a lousy architect and a great partier. Terrible. Absolutely terrible. If you had asked a thousand people, "Does Richard have a chance of being a world-famous architect?" the answer would have been no. I give him all the credit in the world. To his credit, he is now one of the most respected architects in the world. We all blossomed, certainly I did, after college; we had a lot of fun in college. We did.

I do believe that the college experience is about half in the classroom and education, and half is growing up and learning how to deal with people in the environment. It's a really important time in your life to mature a little bit. It was my first time away from home, living away. I can remember we had sort of like a special cardboard box that I would mail to my mother, and she would do the laundry and send it back and forth. A phone call was expensive, so maybe I'd call them once every two weeks. Maybe not even that much. I'd write them a letter occasionally about what's going on.

My sophomore year, I started to chase my wife, my one and only wife of now fifty-seven years. We couldn't afford to call back and forth. The phone calls were that expensive. So we would write love letters back and forth. She has a huge stack of love letters somewhere. I don't know where. Maybe she threw them away in a fit of something or other, or just because they don't mean anything. That was the way you communicated. Today it's hard to even conceive that you wouldn't pick up the phone or send an email or a Twitter or what. It's just hard for people to understand. A phone call was like three dollars. That was a lot of money. That was really a lot of money, and for a short phone call. She was in Middlebury, up in Vermont. It was a six-hour car drive for me to go see her. I had a beat-up old Ford that I had bought for about \$300 or something. To drive that jalopy up there with no springs and bald tires in the snow, it was a challenge. [Sometimes] she would come down on the bus, and it was a ten-hour bus ride. She'd leave Friday night and get there Saturday morning or something. It was a distance romance.

I had dated girls on campus. I had lots of dates with girls on campus, and there were a lot of interactions between certain sororities and our fraternity and we'd do things together. Then there was a Wells College, which was about twenty-five miles up the road on Lake Cayuga. We'd go up there and back and forth. All I can remember is one night being in a car with one of my fraternity brothers and starting spinning down a hill, going around and around. The defroster didn't work and he was looking out of a hole about this big [indicates a small hole in the window]. I couldn't see anything. I was the

passenger. And, of course, again no seatbelts. We were spinning around thinking, “When are we going to hit a tree?” or “When are we going to hit a wall?” or “When are we going to crash off the road?” We slid to the bottom and there we were. To this day I don’t know why we’re not dead. That was going up to Wells, or actually coming back from there. It was a different world. You did things. The fraternities had lots of parties. Drinking was pretty heavy, but not to be [falling-]down dumb drunk. This house had a wonderful party area down in the basement, and we played Ping-Pong.

02-00:36:49

Meeker:

What were you drinking? Was it beer or were there spirits?

02-00:36:50

Gensler:

Mostly beer, although I got into bourbon. Jack Daniel’s was my drink of choice. And rye whiskey, which nobody even talks about. That was a lot cheaper than the bourbon was, so we’d drink rye. I drank a lot of beer. It was fun.

But the big thing for me was that I met Drue at a party of a guy who went to Middlebury in Garden City. I had gone my freshman year to a New Year’s Eve party, to the same party with a date from Garden City, a girl I knew from high school who I didn’t have much interest in. She and I went because we didn’t have anybody we were attached to. And there was a Middlebury girl there that I tried to find and I never did close anything with her. The next year I went and there was Drue and I said, “This is the one,” and I chased her.

02-00:37:47

Meeker:

So you went by yourself to the second?

02-00:37:49

Gensler:

No, I went with another woman.

02-00:37:49

Meeker:

Oh, you did?

02-00:37:50

Gensler:

Then I chased her, and finally I found her and we spent some time together. But I didn’t get her name exactly. I got Drue, and that was all I knew. I didn’t know her last name. The irony of it is she went back to Middlebury and said to one of her friends, “I met this guy named Goose.” He said, “Well, I know somebody at Cornell. Maybe they’ll know who he is.” So she wrote to this guy. It turned out to be my roommate at Delta Phi. He said, “Oh, that’s my roommate. My God.” The world is so small when you think of that. They came to me and said, “You ought to call Drue.” So I called her and said, “I’m going to come see you.” I drove up to Middlebury, and she was in the infirmary. She climbed out the window of the infirmary and we went out on a date, and that put her back in the infirmary with mono or something, I don’t know what it was. And we started dating, and we’ve never been really

separated. We've been separated by commuting back and forth, but we haven't dated anybody else. Been together.

We are the same age. She graduated from Middlebury, we got married that summer, and then I did my last year. She was in Ithaca and worked as a secretary, and I worked a little, and we put ourselves through. But the mom and dad did not like this. "You don't get married; you have no money. How are you going to afford this?" In those days, and probably still to this day, architects are just the poorest-paying of the professions. People kept saying, "You know, if you really want to get poor, start as a wealthy architect," and that's about it. It was sort of a dilettante job, most people. They had money, they went into architecture. They kind of did that. Their family money kept them going. That was not my opportunity and my way of doing things. Drue and I worked hard together, and I worked back in New York in the summer.

02-00:40:21

Meeker:

Do you mind if I ask you to back up to one question about Drue, and hopefully this isn't prying. But I'm curious. What was it about her that attracted you so much to her?

02-00:40:30

Gensler:

Well, first, she is and was an extremely attractive lady. But she's smarter than hell. She's just really smart. I like smart people, and she and I had just wonderful conversations. We can talk about a lot of stuff. You're not talking to some dummy who is all da-da-da. She's pretty serious. And she went to a very good girls' school, Barnard School for Girls in New York, and then went to Middlebury. Her father was a college professor and her mother was very senior in the YWCA and ran camps for people in the summer. So she had a very similar but different experience than I did. During the war, all the guys were gone and so the factories were all these women, Rosie the Riveters. Would go to this camp that Drue's mother ran up just north of New York. Her mother was one of these people, they'd put on shows and they'd write songs and scripts, so Drue got into acting and drama and was very good at it. She was a camp counselor, but they were adults rather than kids at the camp. They'd use as an adult camp, and these were women who just got two weeks off from being Rosie the Riveter in a factory or something. They needed something with their husbands away, no boyfriends around, if you didn't have a husband. And Drue, again, learned how to interact with adults and got—I don't want to use the word more sophisticated, but she was smart enough to understand how you communicate with people. Her mom was a real wonderful character. Unfortunately she died at fifty-two from arthritis, too much medicine, cortisone. They gave her too much cortisone and she finally bloated up and died.

02-00:42:53

Meeker:

Did her parents accept you pretty readily?

02-00:42:55

Gensler:

Yeah, they did. Mom and Dad loved Drue, and her parents were very comfortable with me. They were middle class, lived in an apartment in Riverdale. He was a college professor at City College in New York, taught mathematics and calculus. We got along fine. We had a real wedding, with all the bride stuff and all the groom stuff. I think there were maybe a hundred people there in a little tiny church in Riverdale. Then we went up the Hudson Parkway, and there was this restaurant on a lake, ducks and swans, and we all sat there and had a very nice party. It was a stretch for both her parents and my parents to pay for it, but they did. Again, it was the same thing. Even in those days they were doing better, but they weren't doing great. My first job, I made two-fifty an hour.

Then Drue and I became sort of the chaperones at all the parties at the fraternity. We didn't have many chaperones. But since we were married, we could pretend we were chaperoning the parties and thought that was pretty good.

02-00:44:37

Meeker:

Well, you were in a five-year program, too, so I imagine a lot of your classmates—

02-00:44:41

Gensler:

They were gone. So I moved out of the fraternity, and we got an apartment out in Cayuga Heights, which is just the suburbs of Ithaca, of the college, right adjacent to campus.

02-00:44:58

Meeker:

Was this married student housing?

02-00:45:01

Gensler:

No, no, no. This was a basement of a faculty member. It was on a creek, and it was a really lovely wooded area with a creek running right by the door. We were in the basement; it was on a hill. So the front, which was the back of the house, had this nice lawn. We came and walked around the house and went in. The window, as the slope of the hill went down, the creek went trickling by. It was really pretty. Jim Edgar actually took the apartment after we left. That's a whole other story about how we bumped into him out here. Because we didn't know him in Ithaca.

It was a really nice time. Drue worked for a guy named Urie Bronfenbrenner, who was a child development expert and a very well-known faculty member for children, helping them grow up, and teaching and education in the home ec department at Cornell. I worked in the home ec department doing kitchen and bath remodeling for poor people in upstate New York, fixing up farmhouses mostly. Cornell had a program where they would go in and measure the kitchen and show them how to rearrange it, with a real refrigerator instead of an ice refrigerator, and a real stove instead of a

potbellied stove and a few things like that. We would fix these farmhouses up. I designed all these things for them, and that was my secondary job, because I had completed my four years of eligibility in soccer, so I had time after school and had to make some money.

02-00:46:58

Meeker:

I wonder if we can back up a little bit to the architectural school education.

02-00:47:05

Gensler:

Sure.

02-00:47:07

Meeker:

What can you tell me about your curriculum? Maybe walk me through year by year?

02-00:47:15

Gensler:

I'm not sure I can walk you through, because I don't remember it that well. I can remember that the first year we had to take history of architecture and calculus and then design, and then I had an English course. And I remember I damn near flunked calculus. It was terrible because I had taken calculus in high school and everything they'd bring up, I'd say, "Oh, I remember that." So I didn't focus on it. I'd study for the exam and say, "Oh, I've got to muddle my way through." Then the finals came, and they went back to review everything in calculus. I didn't remember any of it. I really struggled, and I guess I got a sixty-one or something, which was a D. They didn't flunk me.

02-00:48:07

Meeker:

Gentleman's pass.

02-00:48:08

Gensler:

I never had had a failure of anything. But I struggled with that. I to this day do not understand why anybody needs to know calculus. But it was a requirement of architects that they had to take calculus, so I had to pass it. It was for structural. I never used it, understood when we did the structure stuff. I don't think we started the structures in the first year. Then I had an art course, painting or something like that, and drafting. Most of the time, you spend every afternoon, five afternoons a week, from 1:00 to 4:30 or 7:00, you were in a design course drafting. We had Aldo Gergola as a professor at that time.

02-00:48:55

Meeker:

Can you spell his last name?

02-00:48:56

Gensler:

G-E-R-G-O-L-A. He's a Spanish guy, but Mitchell Giurgola is a firm that he founded out of Philadelphia. Very, very, very talented guy. We were in a building which has now been torn down, and they put the Johnson Art Museum, which I.M. Pei designed, on the site.

02-00:49:28

Meeker:

What was the name of the building?

02-00:49:30

Gensler: I can't think of it. Just blank.

02-00:49:31

Meeker: It's not Sibley?

02-00:49:32

Gensler: Oh, that's Sibley's now, the building now. But this was Barnes Hall. B-A-R-N-E-S. It was a building that had been put up as almost like a barracks building. I don't know when it was put up. The First World War, probably. It was a dump. All the freshmen were there; there were fifty of us. I think all the drafting was in there. All the other classes were in there. They started paring people away. You turned around, and somebody else was gone. Most of the people finally said, "I'm not doing well at this at all." And they said, "No, you're not, and you're not going to make it." So they would transfer to engineering or to liberal arts and get a degree in that. It wasn't that they left Cornell. In most cases they just transferred to another.

02-00:50:25

Meeker: What kind of assignments did you complete in the studio?

02-00:50:30

Gensler: Well, in the beginning you made just sort of little constructions. Very abstract. It's almost like doing sculpture, putting pieces together and doing sculpture, and then you'd start to do little simple projects of a store. Not even that. I can't remember the projects in freshman year. Later you'd do an apartment building, or you'd do a church, or you'd do a school. And then some planning. As I got to fourth year, one of the things that was really terrific—no, was it fourth or fifth? Fourth year, I think. I took planning. There was a big group of us. Cornell has architecture, art, and planning as the same. They're three divisions of the architecture school. I call it the architecture. It's called AAP, architecture, art, and planning. We worked on Brasilia. Cornell planning group was selected by Brazil to identify the best site for the capital. They had flown over and with stereo-optic—in the old days you'd look at things and they'd be 3-D pictures? You'd have two pictures, and you had a little thing you'd look through, and you'd click. Well, they had flown over all of Brazil looking for sites and Cornell said, "It's where this river intersects with this river is where you ought to have the site," which is now the home of Brasilia.

02-00:52:17

Meeker: Would have been faculty members who were doing this?

02-00:52:19

Gensler: No, like faculty research. They had picked the site for the location of the city of Brasilia. We were given an assignment as students, both the planning people and the architecture people, to design Brasilia. I have no idea whether they used anything we did. But we built this giant model of the site and then configured it. I'll do the parliament building, and I'll do the administrative and the courts building. We created a program for it. This'll be housing, and this is

where the hospital will be, and the schools and stuff. We laid out street patterns. It was a very interesting project. I got a lot out of that experience. It was really good. I was working with some older students because of how they kind of bunched us all together. It was a big assignment.

02-00:53:12

Meeker:

This is interesting, because it brings together both building architecture and also planning.

02-00:53:17

Gensler:

Oh, planning. Oh, yeah. Very much so. We had not done that much planning in the architecture programs. For that I guess I fault them a little bit. Innsbruck, Austria, was the site of the Olympics, and I got interested in that as my thesis project and designed the site for the Olympics. Actually, I sent it over to them and they were interested in talking to me about coming and all, and finally that sort of faded away. I created a stadium. There was a stadium for ice skating and hockey, and then there was an outdoor speed skating rink. I wasn't involved with the mountain trails and all that. So you had the opening and closing ceremony outside in the plaza, and then the stadium and then the ice skating rink. I did this whole master plan with all that. But it was a good project. That was the one that won all the prizes and awards; it was pretty good. I really did a good job on that one.

02-00:54:37

Meeker:

You obviously would have had a passion attached to the sports?

02-00:54:41

Gensler:

I was passionate as a skier. One of the things I did, way back when I was in West Hartford, and I told you about my dad, but there was a guy in his office who was from Norway. He went out and found me a pair of skis that actually had metal edges. All the skis then didn't have any metal edges on them. He found for me a pair of skis. And they were gigantic. I was a tall kid, but they were gigantic. They were a foot and a half longer than what I would use today. They were gigantic things. Of course, in those days they didn't have safety bindings. You actually took thongs and you wrapped them around and twisted them over and you were just anchored to the skis. There was no release or anything. It was just amazing we're all alive—and I used to go skiing all the time. I was a pretty good skier, but in the East Coast skiing is—if you were in the East Coast, it's like going down a toboggan shoot. The trails are about as wide as this room and they're ice from there to there, you're skiing on ice. I at least had edges on mine. I had metal edges. I was the hero of the group. Everybody else had these wooden-edge skis. We had bamboo poles with these big wicker baskets on the bottom of them. I can remember going to Stowe, Vermont, and they had a single chair; they put three blankets over you like ponchos. You'd just sit there, and it was ten degrees below zero. I remember one day it was so cold that the brake fluid froze and the brakes were—we couldn't move because the brake fluid had actually frozen solid. Oil freezing, it's got to really get cold.

But skiing fascinated me. I loved skiing. I wanted to go to the Olympics. I've never been to a winter Olympics, and I'm not going to Russia this time. But I thought it was a good problem. I did a lot of research and talked to the people through letters in Innsbruck about what they were doing, and they showed me some stuff. It was fun later in my life to go to Innsbruck and see the site that I had been working on and what they had done. I did a lot of that kind of stuff at college.

02-00:57:19

Meeker:

Did you study other winter Olympic facilities?

02-00:57:22

Gensler:

I don't think there were any other Olympic facilities. I don't remember. Oh, I didn't do the ski jumping either. That's the only other thing they built. There must have been. Well, I did. I looked at Lake Placid, because Lake Placid was before that.

02-00:57:37

Meeker:

It was '32, I think.

02-00:57:37

Gensler:

That was one I did look at. That was one I did look at. But they didn't do very much at Lake Placid. They had kind of a big barn building for this hockey, and I bet you they didn't have 4,000 people. Mine was like fourteen thousand people. I like to this day the idea that I came up with. I'd still like to build it. The things you do as kids. We were the big shots because we were married where none of the other people were married. All I can remember is we had a Thanksgiving once, and we still to this day laugh. Some mother had called like Saks Fifth Avenue, and they sent a turkey for us, for the party. There were four couples. And it was frozen. This guy said, "I know how to defrost it." He got a vacuum cleaner out and he said, "The heat on the vacuum cleaner will defrost it." He put it in the blower, and then he turned around and all the water went into the vacuum cleaner. Then all of a sudden the floor was flooded. The girls said, "Oh, don't worry. We'll get it." So they put it in the oven. They didn't realize that all the necks and the gizzards and everything, they were supposed to take those out. So they didn't know that. We didn't know anything. It's amazing we're all alive today. No seatbelts. We didn't know anything.

Then we had David. Just as I was graduating he was born, nine months after we got married. Or seven, I think. Seven, nine. But it was close. I can't remember exactly. But he was born and all of a sudden we were off to the army. That's a good place to stop.

02-00:59:41

Meeker:

Well, before we get there, actually, we have just a couple of minutes and I want you to finish up your story about your Innsbruck project. What was it about your design that made it an award-winning thesis?

02-00:59:53

Gensler:

Well, I think, one, I really solved the problem, which is what I believe today. It really made sense. Everything that we did. The plaza was in a position that worked. The building itself was an interesting dome. It was a scallop-shaped roof that was buildable with ribs like a series of petals. The seating was scalloped, and it was really interesting because what I determined was that the best seats were in the corners and the certain position of the seats, so I scalloped them. And I had this roof that went over and up there, and then went down, and then went up at the ends. The ends were also good seats. The ends of the long sides were not as good seats, the way the ribs went down. So it was a very unique bowl-shaped form rather than being uniform and everything being the same. Some of the Bucky [Buckminster] Fuller thinking. I was still interested in him.

A guy named Felix Candela, who was a Brazilian and did shells, concrete shells. My experience working Brasilia gave me that. This was a concrete shell frame building. I did a great job presenting it. The irony of the whole thing, about a week and a half before the presentation, I had built this model and I was ready to do the roof, and I had this idea that if I made this clay mold, I'd get a piece of Plexiglas and I'd heat it in the oven and it would sync and fit the mold, and then I would have the roof form. So I brought this mold home and Drue and I put it in the oven and turned the oven on real hot. All of a sudden we had this plastic—it just ran all over the oven. It was an absolute total disaster. I'm thinking, "How am I going to ever finish this damn thing?" I finally had to do it with plaster, just make little screens and put plaster on it and build this whole thing. But what a disaster. I was so sure I knew what I was doing.

I can remember one of my fellow classmates, he did an amusement park in Florida. It was a water park, and he poured in this resin at the last minute. He had built all these buildings in the water and stuff. Obviously, he poured in about the night before it was due, and the resin just heated up and everything, buildings were twisted, then it froze. So his presentation had buildings every which way.

I think I presented it well. I had good presentation skills in those days, and I think I still have good presentation skills. So architecture school was a great program, but mine was mixed with fraternity, life with my wife, and sports.

02-01:03:06

Meeker:

Well, let's stop there for today.

Interview #2: January 22, 2014
Audio File 3

03-00:00:03

Meeker: Today is the 22nd of January, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler and this is tape number three.

So what I'd like to start out with is to ask you a little bit more about Buckminster Fuller. I bring this up because off camera I mentioned that I had read an interview that my office did with William Wurster in 1964 and he actually talks about Buckminster Fuller a little bit, as well. He knew him, and also the influence that Fuller had on graduate students in architecture, architecture students. He also had experience with him at MIT and he made the rounds in a variety of different universities. And what Wurster said was that Fuller was kind of a Pied Piper character, right?

03-00:01:08

Gensler: Totally.

03-00:01:09

Meeker: One of his colleagues, he was at Harvard or MIT, said, "When Wurster asked if they still bring him out every semester," they said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We bring him out still once in a while, but always at the end of the semester." Because after Bucky Fuller left there was nothing to do but pick up the pieces.

03-00:01:30

Gensler: That's probably fair.

03-00:01:32

Meeker: What does that mean?

03-00:01:33

Gensler: Well, Bucky was an incredible guy. He drove around in this big Cadillac and was a Pied Piper. He just kind of went campus to campus. Bucky would sit down and talk for four hours, and none of us understood one word the man said. He just talked. And he was fascinating. In the end you said, "What the hell did he say?" He would get up there and just start lecturing. He'd maybe start at one o'clock, and at five o'clock he was still talking. He had a charisma that you didn't want to leave because maybe you're going to catch some of it. But for hours. He was at Cornell for five weeks and went on and on and on.

Now, we did build a Bucky dome. What ours was was four by eight sheets of plywood, and he had a pattern that you drilled holes in and then you bolted them together, and you took a crane and hoisted it up and it became a dome, like an igloo in shape. It was pretty big. I think it was maybe thirty feet across at the base in diameter. So we did that project. But mostly it was lectures and lectures and lectures. Then in the evening he'd talk, and you could go sit in— Cornell has a little house where they put these visiting people up. He would sit there for hours talking, and he just goes on. You know what I mean? You'd

try to get him onto the Dymaxion car, some of the other things that he did. And he'd go off for that for a while and then he'd come back. It was just mesmerizing. Later remind me and I'll tell you a story about a lawyer that I worked with that actually hired Bucky and me to spend a day with him.

03-00:03:20

Meeker: Do you think it's a good time? To tell it now?

03-00:03:21

Gensler: Well, I could tell it now.

03-00:03:22

Meeker: Yeah, tell it.

03-00:03:22

Gensler: It's a long story, but it's really worth telling. I got a call from this guy down in Saratoga who said, "I work for this law firm, Harry Margolis, and we got some problems. We need you to come down and help us out." So I went down, and all of a sudden I found I'm at a house on a residential street. We go in, and they've got a law firm office set up in there. I go out in the back and Harry's sitting in a bathrobe at a table with an umbrella. We sit down and he said, "Look, the city is all upset because I'm practicing law in a residential area. We've got five or six houses we bought. I guess I got to have an office."

Now, Harry Margolis, just to put it all in perspective, is a lawyer that used to represent a lot of people in offshore deals. Harry would say to you, "I'm being chased by six IRS attorneys but I'm legal, and they know what's in the law and so do I. Their law is written this way because of Congress. They know that these little glitches are in the law and so they take advantage of it, too. So I'm taking advantage for my customers." I think he ended up in jail.

Anyway, the guy who called me, he worked for him. He was a cousin of Bucky Fuller's, and so they got this idea that Bucky should come out and spend a day or two with me on how to design the new law firm. So we went, and Bucky spent the day doing, "Well, we could [build a] bridge over the river, the stream here, and we could do it in the woods here." I don't think we ever came up with anything that made any sense or would have been approved. That was probably twenty years after I had had him in class, maybe fifteen years. It was just a wonderful reunion. But he was still Pied-Piper around.

In deference to Berkeley, Harry Margolis's brother was at Berkeley, an avowed communist. They were chasing him, as well. It was quite a family. I won't say the names of the people. You could see the files on his desk. But there were an awful lot of very famous movie stars and financial guys who were using his offshore—techniques that he had worked out. He was a character. But he got me a chance to reunite with Bucky, for which I am forever grateful.

03-00:06:10

Meeker:

Did you get a sense of why Fuller was brought into that?

03-00:06:12

Gensler:

Just because of the relationship. This guy had a family relationship with Bucky. He thought maybe he could help us. We ultimately did a law firm in a warehouse; it was kind of a neat, different office. It was almost an open plan law firm, which is now starting to happen a little bit, but not very much. This was probably in 1975 or something like that.

03-00:06:46

Meeker:

The geodesic dome was his hallmark.

03-00:06:49

Gensler:

A lot of things were his hallmark. The Dymaxion car and the geodesic dome. I got a chance to go to the fair in Canada. Toronto. I guess it was in Toronto. Or was it Montreal? [The 1967 International and Universal Exposition, or Expo 67]

03-00:07:11

Meeker:

Montreal.

03-00:07:11

Gensler:

I guess Montreal in 1967. The U.S. Pavilion was a gigantic Bucky dome, and it was really spectacular. He was a genius. There's no question that he was a genius. But scatterbrained, and his mind was always working. "What is the weight of the building?" He always used to talk about the building. "How much does it weigh? We ought to make it lighter, not heavier, and this is what I'm interested in." So the foundations can have less loads on them. But I can tell you, for the fifty or hundred hours I heard him talk, I have no idea what he said. It was really bizarre.

03-00:07:54

Meeker:

Did you ever get a sense of what architectural problem the geodesic dome was supposed to solve?

03-00:07:59

Gensler:

It was the weight. "I can enclose the biggest space for the lightest weight." That was his thinking. And it's proved true. Nobody's really done it any better than he did, come up with another form or another solution in terms of long spans, closing volumes. It was very clever. He was a mathematician and a scientist and an architect. Not really an architect, more of an inventor than an architect. But the things that he invented affected architecture.

03-00:08:38

Meeker:

As far as picking up the pieces, was he disruptive? Did he in some ways run counter to architectural orthodoxy?

03-00:08:49

Gensler:

I don't think so. He expanded it. We were all used to doing things, in those days, really rectangular. All the shapes and curves which we now do—not so much our firm but a lot of firms are doing, you can do because of computers. It's interesting to think he was able to figure all these things out without computers. He was really ahead of his time. An interesting man. I'm lucky I met a lot of them, but he's one of the interesting ones that I'm proud to know. I wouldn't say I'm a friend, but you spend five weeks with somebody, it's a lot of time.

03-00:09:30

Meeker:

Another broader question around architectural education at Cornell: I have a very good friend who graduated from that program in the mid-eighties, and we had a conversation. I was trying to get a sense of what was going on in the 1950s there, and he tells me that this was a time when there was a key transition between the Beaux-Arts school that really dominated there in the first part of the twentieth century and then the high modernism school that first got started by Gropius at Harvard.

03-00:10:03

Gensler:

I think that what came right after me, when I graduated, was the Corbu [Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, better known as Le Corbusier] movement. I thought it almost killed the school. Because if you didn't draw in the Corbu idiom, they just didn't even bother to think you were there. We had some really good professors. Tom Canfield and Dean Mackasey were two that were there that I remember. And Gergola, I think I mentioned before, was my freshman instructor. They were really, in my opinion, down-to-earth, practical people who were actually building buildings that were realistic, usable buildings. We were past the Beaux-Arts, but before you could do a variety of things. When I did my thesis, nobody was trying to push me into a certain style or a certain direction. Afterwards, everybody had to do Corbu.

There's certainly some wonderful famous people. I'm really proud of the fact that Cornell is always listed as the number one architecture school by the architecture profession. They do a survey and ask the people that actually hire which school puts the best kids out. For an undergraduate program, Cornell does. As an aside, but I believe this pretty strongly, even though my granddaughter just a month ago graduated from Cornell in the graduate program. If you understand that you want to be an architect from the beginning, then you might as well start with the five-year program. But if you don't, then you got to take a seven-year program. Cornell is building that seven-year program, and I think they're sixth or seventh rated in graduate school, but number one in undergraduate.

When all is done, I don't see [the difference] when they come to work for us here, because they've gone to graduate school, they are not way ahead of the people that went to the five-year program. I just don't see that. So I encourage them, if you really know you want to do it, as my granddaughter didn't—she

thought she wanted to be in the theater. She was doing sets and that kind of design, and then realized that that, first, was a tough deal, and secondly, that maybe she really did like architecture and wanted to get into our field.

I think Cornell has morphed over the years and with a number of deans, many of them I'm very close to. I've been very active in Cornell. I think I told the story of Henry Hill and how I got connected with Cornell when trying to be selected for enrollment, so it's always been for me a give-back of what I got from them. I had a wonderful time. Drue and I spent our first year of marriage on the campus. It's a beautiful place. It's tough in the winter, but it's a beautiful place. And I like the people. So I was very active in the Cornell Club of San Francisco, and I was on the Buildings and Properties Committee for twenty years, flying back every two months or so to meetings there. I've been a fairly big donor, and we established a chair, and we now have established a program for the New York program. I'm very disappointed with the Milstein building. I think Rem Koolhaas did a horrible job. I'm not negative about people, but it's a terrible building. Just everything about it is wrong. And the poor dean that's there, he's got to live with it and has to say it's great, but it's a terrible building.

03-00:13:51

Meeker:

This is the one that's leaking?

03-00:13:52

Gensler:

Oh, it's got everything. It cost three times what a building should have cost. It doesn't fit in the location it is, so it cantilevers over the street. It was delayed two years, arguing who owned the street, the City of Ithaca or the university. Why people put up with architects that act that way is beyond me. Because I find it sets a bad precedent for our profession and I don't like people to do that. He could have made it rectangular, but somehow in his mind he got an idea it had to be a square, and the only way the square worked was between the current Sibley Hall and make it cross a street. The whole thing was stupid. These trusses could hold up the Empire State Building cantilevering this building out over the street. It's an embarrassment, in my opinion.

03-00:14:44

Meeker:

Did you ever read the *Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand?

03-00:14:46

Gensler:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

03-00:14:46

Meeker:

What did you think of that?

03-00:14:48

Gensler:

Well, it sort of portrays this "starchitect": "what I do is right!" And I in principle don't fault anybody for the way they practice. I thought I was going to have four or six people in our firm, and we now have 4,000. There has never been any architecture firm in the world with 4,000 people. So we're

practicing new ground. I can certainly tell you in the beginning, I never thought that—I thought there were large firms of a couple hundred people or 300. Skidmore was one of them at the time, and some of these others. But I've thought that there are certainly wonderful small practices, and medium and large, and rural and city-oriented or global-oriented. Although, until recently there really haven't been any global firms. We were one of the ones that really have seriously addressed a global firm; we'll talk about that later.

If a guy wants to be a starchitect—and the guy right in front of me, Richard Meier, was a starchitect, he has become one. I can tell you, at college he was a great fraternity guy. He was drinking everybody under the table with the rest of us. Richard got his break because his parents let him build a house and it got some publicity, and then there was a group of five in New York and a bunch of guys, they each had their own practice and they've all done pretty well. Richard's incredibly talented. But I can tell you, if you looked back at his work in college, it was probably as bad as mine was. So we've all come a long way. Architecture's a funny profession. Wright didn't really get started until he was practically seventy in terms of getting any recognition. He did a lot of stuff. It does take time. Some people do very well young, but not many. Some just blossom as they go later. But there's certainly people that I have enormous respect for. I still have enormous respect for Wright.

I feel lucky. I was, I think, maybe a junior in high school, or maybe I was at Cornell. I'm not sure. Before the Guggenheim was built, on that site they actually built a Wright prairie house. Little building. Built a full furnished house right on that site. They tore this building down, they had this house there. And I went into a Wright house and I got to feel it. Oh, it's amazing. It was amazing. It's an awkward house for a tall guy like I am, because he designs it for—if you're over six feet, you're almost out of scale with the house. You feel like a giant walking through it. I do.

03-00:17:54
Meeker:

It's almost like a dollhouse or something, right?

03-00:17:56
Gensler:

Yeah. Like the Robie House [Frank Lloyd Wright, 1909], which is phenomenal. That's a little bigger in scale. But most of them, as you go into, you kind of feel—I guess I don't bang my head. I think the doors are 6'6" or something, and I'm six four and a half, so I just clear. But the way the shelves are and the things, it's a scale that—it's almost like Disneyland, which is, I think, built at seven-eighths scale. The whole place is done that way.

There are just all kinds of architects. There's Renzo Piano and Norman Foster and there's lots of wonderful architects. Frank Gehry. And these guys are talented but great marketers, too, and great salesmen and communicators. I was talking to somebody the other day that the really great architects are great communicators. They are able to convince the client, the communities and

other people, to articulate why they're doing what they're doing and that their design solution is an important solution. I think it's part of being a great architect and a successful architect, the ability to communicate your ideas and have confidence in them. Not that you need to be arrogant, because I think arrogance is a horrible trait. The *Fountainhead* was arrogant. But you got to be confident, self-confident, and demonstrate that. That's an interesting characteristic.

One of the things that a lot of us have been fighting is this architect-y talk, which is stuff that nobody can understand, but the faculty lets the students use it. Even in the writings of the school, stuff of what the students are doing. I'm a fairly smart guy and I have no idea what they're talking about. I think it's a disservice to the students when they are allowed to talk that way and write that way. I said something the other day, I can't remember the word. The guy said, "Is that a word?" In architecture school, half the words that come out of these kids' mouths, [you think] "Is that a word in the dictionary or are you making it up?" That's a waste of time and effort, I think, going in the wrong direction.

But I think Cornell does a wonderful job with students. One of the things they've done—the problem is, they have a remote campus where there's not an interaction [with the outside world]. To alleviate that, they've for years had a Rome program where most of the kids go to Rome and study for a semester. And now they have a Cornell New York program where they go down there. Over the years, they did Washington for a while, then they did New York. But they never seriously had done it the way they've done it now. Now there's a real program, and it's a very successful program. A guy named Bob Balder, who used to work for us in New York, is the director of it. Kind of an interesting irony. I'm funding Bob's leadership position.

Bob's a planner. He's not an architect, but he's a planner, and a very good one. He's also had a lot of interaction with the city, so he can take these kids everywhere. So they get a city, urban, real planning departments, *real* real estate departments, real brokers and developers and people, which kids don't get up in Ithaca, New York. In Rome, you really get the history and the feeling when they go around Italy. We all take the history. It's important to take the history of architecture. We have as a profession a rich history, as medicine does and other things. There's something about being in a foreign country and seeing what has been done a thousand years ago that's pretty impressive and pretty important. So the kids get that varied experience as well as the experience of being on the campus for five years or four years and then maybe a year off the campus. That was good for me. As I mentioned, I was very active in my fraternity and I liked that a lot and I learned a lot, met a lot of great people. But it was funny. In the end, ten of us graduated out of the fifty original. I keep touch with two of those and that's about it.

I'm going to ask you to pause there for a second.

03-00:22:40

Gensler: Sure. [tape interruption]

03-00:22:41

Meeker: So ten of the fifty who started actually finished the program. Why do you suppose you were in that group of ten? Or maybe another way of asking it: was there any point in your five years there that you thought that you would be part of the forty as opposed to the ten?

03-00:22:56

Gensler: Not at all. I had been laser-focused on graduating in architecture. I wanted to be an architect since I was six years old and there has never been anything else. When I got to about fifty, I had this idea that I ought to try something else, start another business and let the next generation take over. But for me it's just awfully hard to leave this profession. I find it incredibly rewarding. The people that I meet, the impact the people I'm working with have on me and on the communities and the clients they work with. Just walked by a conference room and one of our clients is in there meeting on a project. I couldn't go; our team presented, and I got an email. They were unbelievable. They were presenting to the whole company and all the employees, a buildup of what this exciting building is going to be. And I got a notice that they just hit a home run. They were fantastic. Congratulations! I live for that. I love growing people and seeing them be successful and the clients enjoy our work.

It isn't about me anymore. It never really was. It's really been about a firm. To me, that's what architecture in today's world takes. I have enormous admiration for some people who seem to do it all themselves. They don't actually: they have a big supporting team. But they indicate that they've got the figures on every project and they know exactly what's going on. I can't. First, we're a lot larger than they are. But even when we weren't, I wasn't trying to tell everybody what to do. I had very good people. Kind of get out of their way. Provide the support and maybe some guidance and a few references: "Maybe you ought to look at this, or maybe you ought to look at that." But we worked differently than most; I'm very comfortable with the way we work.

Playing sports—I wish more kids in our firm played sports in college, or at least in high school. Especially a team sport, not an individual sport. I did that, and I learned a lot about [working together] and I figured out how to get it done. I figured out how to get the fraternity done. I was in the theater doing set designs. And that, later in life, got me an opportunity to be a part of the Bohemian Club. I feel very lucky about Cornell. I learned a lot. I was a kid from public school. I did okay, not great, but I was B-plus, A-minus. I grew up a lot, learned a lot. I hadn't traveled a lot, wasn't worldly. Today I can pretty much feel comfortable wherever I go in the world, and I think Cornell had a lot [to do with that]—and I'm proud of it.

One of the nice things about going anywhere in the world, you go in a hotel and they say, “Oh, I’m sorry, we haven’t got a room.” I say, “Is the manager here?” And he comes out. I say, “Did you go to Cornell?” And he said, “Oh, yeah, yeah.” I said, “Look, your guys have screwed up and I really need a room.” “Well, there’s a room here somewhere. I’ll get you a room.” Cornell has opened a lot of doors and opportunities, and we’re very loyal to Cornell. Cornelians stick together pretty well. It’s amazing how many doors have been opened for me when I just said, “Did you go to Cornell?” So I’m honored and feel lucky I got in, and now I’m in the time of my life when I want to give back. My wife and I have given an enormous amount, as my wife has done to Middlebury. She’s done the same thing. She was a trustee for ten years and gave an enormous amount. She started the women’s program there and it’s doing a lot of stuff. She and I both recognize the value a university education can give you.

03-00:27:29
Meeker:

I have one more question about curricular matters at Cornell. I know that we’re covering it in rather great depth. And that is the historical relationship between architecture and planning. It certainly goes back hundreds of years. The program at Cornell was I think pretty closely related, now it’s part of the same program, right?

03-00:27:55
Gensler:

Well, no. Cornell architecture school is really one college which has architecture, art, and planning. When I was there, there was some physical planning. For whatever reasons, it sort of morphed to more social planning. They would go into Africa, in a country, and help them set up their social plans and systems and do some urban planning, but it was not so much physical planning. It was analytical planning. “You’re going to need this much of this stuff and this much of this to organize your government structure.” A lot of us in the architecture group were pushing them to go back to physical planning and not so much the social planning. And landscape architecture is in the agricultural school. So we don’t have landscape and that bothered us, and still bothers me. Cornell has an endowed college, which architecture is part of, and then it has a land grant state school. There’s the College of Architecture, Arts and Science, and Engineering and Hotel in endowed colleges. And then the Home Economics, Agriculture, and Industrial and Labor Relations are in the state university. But it’s all Cornell.

So people on the campus, some were going to a state school and some were going to an independent university. And then all the back of the house is all one school, but they divvy it up. Like the University of California is supported by Sacramento, the state programs are supported by Albany. But not the architecture school. With the planning, we had some interaction but not very much. The arts is fine arts. Most of us took a drawing or a sculpture or painting class in the arts. So we were all in the same buildings, although they’re now getting a little more separate. There’s a building called Tjaden

Hall, which is mostly artists. And the architecture in the Sibley, and the new building, Milstein. The planners are Sibley mostly.

The beauty and joy of Ithaca and Cornell is that Ezra Cornell founded a school where you could get to learn whatever you wanted. It has a very, very broad curriculum base that you can dip into. The problem with architecture, and it's gotten worse since I graduated, is that they've got so many mandatory courses. For architecture they're mandated by state registration laws. To get accredited you got to have all these courses and all these classes. I wish that, frankly, and I suppose that's the advantage if you do undergraduate in the liberal arts or something else, then graduate in architecture, you have a chance to take them. But there are so many classes that I would have liked to take that I wasn't able to take at Cornell. They were wonderful. There were some big survey classes that would have been really good as an educational background to take. But you do what you can do.

I would always try to get one elective outside of the college every semester. I took engineering law, and I took Russian history, and I took an English course and public speaking was part of that. I can't even remember others, but I know I took them. I remember struggling with some of them. One of the things I wish I had taken, but I probably got through college because I didn't, is language. I have bad language skills in English. I'm getting better, but I don't speak a foreign language and I really wish I did. Like I don't play a musical instrument and I really wish I had learned that. You can only do so much in your life, but those are two things that I wish I had focused on. I don't really think I'll ever sit down and do them. But you can't do everything.

03-00:32:48

Meeker:

To wrap up Cornell: there is an event called Dragon Day—

03-00:33:04

Gensler:

Oh, that. It wasn't as big a deal as it is today.

03-00:33:09

Meeker:

As it is now or—

03-00:33:10

Gensler:

I don't remember us building the kinds of floats and dragons that they—

03-00:33:16

Meeker:

Can you first define what it is for the uninitiated?

03-00:33:18

Gensler:

I don't know whether it's sort of the spring breaking out in Ithaca. God, the winter goes on forever and then it's spring. So the architects have started building larger and larger floats. It's almost like a San Francisco Chinese New Year with a dragon, that they build, with a bunch of students. Well, these things are big constructions with dragon heads and Bunsen burner flames. They ultimately burn the damn thing in the middle of a big quad. Big, big

quadrangle in the middle of the campus, and they build this thing and then they march it around. We had boat races on Beebe Lake, the lake that's on the campus; we would try to sink each other's boats, and had catapults and all that stuff. At the end of that lake we would march down the streets and have these big parades and carry banners. I got into some real trouble in one of those, probably more drunk than I could be, or should be.

03-00:34:27

Meeker:

Do you want to share that story?

03-00:34:28

Gensler:

No. I don't even remember it really well. I just remember that by the time I got to the end of the parade I was carrying a cross, which is really the spar and mast on the boat that we had built, and the sail. But it looked like a cross, and I was naked to the waist with shorts on, with a beard and hair all over. I looked like Jesus Christ, I think, and that was a little offensive to some people, and I was yelling and yelling. But our fraternity was having a good time.

03-00:35:00

Meeker:

So the Jesus Christ thing wasn't intentional on your part?

03-00:35:04

Gensler:

No. Finally I realized I was carrying this very large big four-by-four with a crossbar, so it looked like a big cross. I didn't look at it that way. I thought I was just carrying a big pole. But it apparently didn't look that way to the audience. Some of them apparently were offended and couldn't believe the university—

03-00:35:23

Meeker:

You got called into the dean's office?

03-00:35:26

Gensler:

I think I did. I said, "I really didn't know that that was what was happening." It certainly was not intentional. So they didn't do anything.

03-00:35:40

Meeker:

You were admonished and let go.

03-00:35:41

Gensler:

I was admonished but not punished, and that was fine. But I had a good time and a lot of good events. Most of them were around the fraternity or the soccer team. Those guys are still very close friends of mine to this day. As I mentioned, I only follow a couple of people, the woman in Brazil whose father was a really famous Brazilian architect. She and I have kept in close touch. And then a friend of mine who actually worked with me; I'll talk about that when we talk about the jobs. Don Wudtke is the guy that got me the first job, so we keep in touch, although I haven't seen Don for a couple of years. He lives out in Napa I think now, retired, pretty much. I keep a lot of touch with a lot of my fraternity brothers; those guys I do see.

03-00:36:41

Meeker:

Were there many women in architecture school at the time?

03-00:36:42

Gensler:

Oh, God, what was her name? Marsha Dale. She actually worked for Bechtel here in town. And there were two women, I think, in our class that graduated, too, and eight guys. There were not a lot of women. There were probably, oh, I don't know, ten or twenty percent at the most. Now it's more women than men. We've certainly, because of my wife's pushing, hired a lot of women early on. I'm colorblind and gender-neutral, I guess. I was hiring gays when people didn't know there were such—and I was so naïve I didn't know they were gays. I just thought they were talented people. And then people said, "Do you know how many gays work here?" I said, "No, I have no idea." Practically, "What is it?" When we started, things were a little different than they are in the community today. But I just hire people for talent, and try to associate with people I like. One of the three executive directors is a black lady running Washington, D.C., and the East Coast stuff. She's a black lady. That's not the way I think of her. I think of her as a professional and a wonderful talent. I don't know, of the forty-two offices now, I think seventeen or eighteen have women running the offices. So we have a lot of women in the business, very successful, and they've been very helpful.

Cornell is totally a co-ed school, but I think architecture in those days—I think what scared them away was the engineering part of it. The math and engineering was something that women are finally getting to realize they do very well, too. But they were worried about it. Construction sites were pretty rough areas to walk around—the language and just the whole physical nature of being down on a construction site is a little different. You don't walk around in high heels on a construction site. You wear big boots and get muddy and dirty, and your clothes get all messed up. I think there weren't a lot of women in it, but we've certainly learned. I don't think there were any women teachers that I can remember. Now there are quite a few teachers that are women, and faculty members. So things have changed dramatically and I think for the better.

Cornell is a magic place for those of us that went there. I got a call from one yesterday looking for somebody. She's on the board of trustees, she's an architect, a very talented one in New York. And said, "Do you know anybody who does interiors? We're losing our interior designer and we desperately need another." I'm not a real good source for losing people. I'm in the business of finding them, but I'm going to try to help her a little bit.

03-00:40:00

Meeker:

So you graduate in 1958?

03-00:40:02

Gensler:

I graduate in '58, and immediately after the graduation ceremonies there was a ceremony and I got my bar pinned on me as a second lieutenant in the Army

and literally we packed up. My mom and dad were there. My dad and I packed up all of our earthly belongings in a little trailer, like a U-Haul. I'm not sure they had U-Haul, but it was like that. And we dragged it to Washington, D.C., where I was in the Corps of Engineers. I was a six-month wonder because in 1958 they really didn't need us. There was nothing going on. It was between the Korean and the Vietnam War; I was very lucky by that. So we moved down. We had just had David, my first son. We were in a three-story walk-up, on the top floor of a three-story walk-up. I lived at home but I was playing soldier from like 6:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night. They drilled us really hard. There was an implication, there was a thing going on in Beirut, Lebanon, an uprising, and they said, "You may be on the beach in Beirut in six weeks, so you better pay attention." They worked us pretty hard.

03-00:41:43

Meeker:

When you say they worked you, was it physical?

03-00:41:45

Gensler:

Oh, both physical and a lot of classes. But a lot of physical. Crawling on your belly with a rifle, an M1 rifle under barbed wire and all that crap. But we had fun. They taught us how to run a bulldozer and a big shovel and graders. I remember I had a lot of fun doing that.

03-00:42:04

Meeker:

Where were you stationed?

03-00:42:05

Gensler:

Fort Belvoir, Virginia, just outside of Washington. About fifteen or twenty miles out of Washington, south of Washington on the Potomac. We had an apartment that was right about a hundred yards from the Potomac, just south of Alexandria, and that was about ten miles away from Belvoir. I got through the basic training. I don't know, there were maybe 120 of us or something like that. Most people got assigned to places around the country; I got to stay at Belvoir. They had the research and development lab for the Corps of Engineers there and I was assigned to that. I was assigned as an architect. It couldn't have been better because we had a place and we were settled in and it worked. I wasn't off running around with a platoon marching around Fort Dix or Camp Pendleton or some damn place, Fort Ord. I think I wore a uniform, but I can't even remember. I was working with a lot of civilians. We were designing an under-ice camp in Greenland. I was doing the layout of this thing, because it was—

03-00:43:31

Meeker:

Did you say an "under-ice camp"?

03-00:43:32

Gensler:

Yeah. There's a thing called a peter snow plow; if you've seen the snow plow that has a big blade on the front of it, revolves, that's a peter. It burrows through the snow. The concept was that you'd dig a big trench and you'd drop in or build a pre-fab insulated building. Then you'd put a big corrugated steel

ribbed, sort of a form, across the opening. And then you'd blow snow back on it, it'd freeze, and there'd be a tunnel.

03-00:44:04

Meeker:

A Quonset hut or something.

03-00:44:06

Gensler:

With Quonset huts basically underneath it. I laid out where all the tunnels were and where the offices were, and the research labs and the dorms. It was the first place that they used a nuclear power plant. A little tiny one that powered the generator for it and the energy. They wanted to keep researchers there all winter long to do measurements of movement and things. I think they were getting ready for maybe the Russians, I guess, putting in a base up there. Ours was literally under the ice. From the surface there was nothing. There was a door and you went down it, a ramp and a door. I never got to see it. I did the drawings and I laid it out and handed it in and left.

The leaving was the most interesting. I had no money. You make a little more money as a second lieutenant than you do as a private, that's for sure. But we had a child, and Drue wasn't able to work because she was taking care of David. We got this idea we wanted to go to California, which I told you, with Henry Hill, who came to Cornell. So I got on a MATS [Military Air Transport Service] flight. I remember it was a DC3 they were flying. MATS is military air transport command, or system or whatever it was. These were planes that flew around. If you were an officer, and they didn't mind, you could sit in the back. I always sat in the back, literally on a parachute, because there were no seats back there. I sat on a parachute and I flew from the base in D.C. to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and then I went to Seattle. I kept getting on different ones; went down to Hamilton Field, which was actually a field in Marin County. Took a bus in to Fort Mason and stayed at the officers' club.

The thing that's intriguing for me, just thinking back on it, I was so naïve and so young and so inexperienced that I didn't want to get on a bus or anything, so I got a map and I walked from Fort Mason to Henry Hill's office on Clay Street, across the street from where the Transamerica Pyramid is. That's a pretty good walk. And I didn't even recognize it. I walked up over the hill and all the way down, up the Russian Hill and down to Henry Hill's office and said, "Here I am." He said, "Well, I haven't got any jobs, but I'll call, and these are my friends." We got the phone book out and got the lists of all the people. I went and saw John Carl Warnecke and Skidmore and Worley Wong and a whole bunch of other firms. I saw maybe eight or nine firms in about three days, and none of them had any business in '58. This was just before Christmas. So I got on a plane, MATS plane, and flew back from San Francisco because I couldn't afford a [commercial] ticket. Can't even remember where I went, the various stops, but I got back to Washington somehow.

Then I was discharged from the Army. I had to go into the Reserves, and I'll come to that in a minute.

03-00:47:44

Meeker: Had you ever been out to the West Coast before this?

03-00:47:46

Gensler: That's the first time I'd ever been to the West Coast. I fell in love with it; I thought it was just a terrific place and I wanted to get back. But I was really, really lucky to get—I don't think I'd even been to Chicago then. Maybe I'd been to Chicago once, but I don't think so.

03-00:48:01

Meeker: What had possessed you to actually hop on those MATS flights to get out here to begin with?

03-00:48:04

Gensler: I felt that in New York they were not doing contemporary architecture, the kind of architecture that I wanted to do. California was where they were really inventive, and I guess maybe I thought I want to get out of the—I'm a great skier. I skied a lot in college; I've always skied. And I like New England. I like it a lot. Still do. But I had this draw that when Henry Hill said, "You should really work in California," it just stuck in my mind. There was an architect who got killed in an automobile crash, Gordon Drake. I had a little tiny book they published on Gordon Drake. He did these sort of redwood homes that I just thought were the cat's meow. And Henry Hill did a similar kind of very nice but redwoody, Mill Valley type, Carmel type of houses.

03-00:49:11

Meeker: So when you're talking about your interest in California contemporary architecture, we're not talking about Corbusier?

03-00:49:18

Gensler: Oh, no, no. No. Really, nice scale, smaller things. That's what I thought I'd end up doing.

03-00:49:28

Meeker: Nor traditional, hidebound, Georgian style?

03-00:49:32

Gensler: No, no. I would have loved to have had a job at that time at Skidmore or Warnecke, who were doing bigger projects, but I had not anticipated that that was the direction I was going to go.

03-00:49:43

Meeker: So mostly domestic architecture.

03-00:49:45

Gensler: They're mostly domestic architecture. The schools encourage you to be your own architect and start a firm and do things. They don't encourage kids to go

to work for a Gensler or Skidmore or HOK. Now they have student fairs where you set up a booth and you tell them what a great firm you have and try to get the best, and you work with the faculty, “Who’s the best students you’ve got?” There’s a lot of lobbying going on to get the good students. There was none of that then. There was no counseling that was going to help you get a job.

Anyway, I went back to New York and lived with my mom and dad in Garden City for a little bit, and then went to Drue’s father, because her mom had died while we were in D.C., in the Army. She had died a couple months earlier, so we went up and lived with him because he had a little more room. When I ultimately got a job in New York City, it was a lot easier commute just to come down the subway than to go on the train to New York. Well, not a big deal from Garden City, but my mom and dad, I didn’t want to impose, and Drue wanted to try to help her father out a little bit. California stuck in my mind. It was a place that I really liked. I wanted to come here.

03-00:51:31

Meeker: Had you heard of Eichler?

03-00:51:32

Gensler: No, I hadn’t heard of it at all. That was a name that never got to the East Coast, to my knowledge.

03-00:51:38

Meeker: In retrospect, is that the kind of domestic architecture that you found interesting?

03-00:51:42

Gensler: Yes. As a matter of fact, I ran into Orlando Diaz, I’ll talk about later, who was one of the breakthrough people in our firm. I ran into him Saturday at Fort Mason at an art show and he was saying, “I just bought an Eichler and I’m redoing it.” And I have a woman who I’m very close to, Catherine Munson, who’s sort of the real estate person who sells all the Eichlers, and she’s done her home over. It’s wonderful. I cannot understand why more people don’t want that kind of home. They want these “Taco Bells,” as I call them, tile roof kind of things, Spanish something or other, Tuscan something or other. They’re so closed in. No windows, little things. It’s a very insular thing. You have that on the East Coast because it’s cold and they’re insulated. You couldn’t build an Eichler [on the East Coast] in those days. You maybe could today because you’ve got thermopane glass. But single pane glass, which is what they were, even they get cold, I can tell you. Eichlers are terrific, to me. It was the first really concept of open planning. Anshen & Allen did them, I think, mostly. Eichler was the developer of them. I’m not actually positive who did the original Eichlers.

03-00:53:14

Meeker: You mean architectural drawings?

03-00:53:15

Gensler:

The drawings, actual drawings of them. They never really caught on, and still haven't caught on. When you see a contemporary house, it's pretty much open like that. But anything built by a developer on spec, unless they're very expensive spec houses, doesn't do anything open like that and that's a disappointment. Because once you live in a house that's very open, you don't want to live in a place that's kind of closed up.

So I went back to New York, visited fifty-two firms. I didn't interview at all of them. I went and dropped my résumé off and sat in their office and tried to get somebody to interview me. But I literally went door to door. My dad knew Shreve, Lamb & Harmon because he called on them, he was a salesman at the ceiling division. They finally gave me a job at a hundred dollars a week, \$2.50 an hour. And we started. I spent the entire first year there checking shop drawings on one building, which was certainly not what I had anticipated, what I wanted to do.

03-00:54:46

Meeker:

What does that mean? Can you describe that to us?

03-00:54:49

Gensler:

Well, checking shop drawings. Because it was a research lab, it meant that there was all this laboratory equipment. There were things like gas pipes and air pipes and 280 power and 110 power and God knows, water, and all this stuff that went to these various lab benches. The benches were all stone, a thing called colorith stone, and they had to have holes drilled in them, and the ductwork had to get to the fume hoods, and it had to be separate. It required me to take a lot of careful analysis of whether there was room in the ceiling for that stuff and what the bend of the radius of the pipes could be and all the things to make them fit. All this stuff was going to be manufactured and slipped in, like kitchen cabinets today, which people didn't do in those days. It was all going to have to fit in these niches and notches and everything else. So I looked at every damn shop drawing, which are the drawings done by the subcontractor for everything on that project, with the ceiling or the lighting or the hardware schedules. It was tedious work. The thing I remember most was a guy named—God, I can't think of his name. "You got to think in the fourth dimension, Art. You got to think in just not three dimensions but how the timing goes, who goes first of all these pieces."

Finally I got a chance to do a little design work. I did a reception lobby for Union Carbide in the Rockefeller Center. That was a big deal for me. I had never done an interior at Cornell. They didn't have any interiors at all. I did a lobby with a reception desk and a built-in bench, and some interesting lighting in the ceiling. That was my first design job. The senior partner was a Cornellian; in the end he was very bitter about Cornell and didn't like it. He retired to Florida and I did keep in touch with him. I can't remember what he was so annoyed about. He just didn't think they were running the school

properly. But I think the reason I finally got the job is I was a Cornell guy and I really needed a job. He said, “We can squeeze you in.”

Audio File 4

04-00:00:11

Meeker: This is Meeker interviewing Gensler, tape four on the 22nd of January.

04-00:00:22

Gensler: Just to finish up what we were talking about. Shreve, Lamb & Harmon was a solid firm, maybe a hundred people. I didn't get a chance to see as much as I like. Henry Dobecki was the name of the guy. He was really a great project manager and he taught me a lot. He drove me and really made me. They were a very organized firm. I'm forever thankful that I worked there. But they were not doing the kind of design work that I wanted to do.

So I did something that I've never liked, but I did it, which was to go to an employment agency. A woman named Muriel Feder. Her husband was a lighting designer; his claim to fame was he did the lighting at the Idlewild Airport. Now it's JFK, but it was Idlewild in those days. Anyway, I went over and got my résumé and they took it. They were going to find opportunities for me. They sent me out on a couple of things, and I'd go at lunchtime or after work. I remember one was for SAS as an in-house architect. But architecture firms weren't using people with any kind of experience. Anyway, one day I get a call and they said, “Please come over. We're interviewing for the West Indies.” And I'm thinking, “Where the hell? That's down near Florida somewhere.” There was the Cuban Missile Crisis around that time. I said, “I don't really want to come because I've got to stay in New York and get my license.” They said, “Oh, no, no. I need bodies. Would you just show up, please.” So I went anyway.

I went over to her office. It turned out her office was where they were doing the interviews, sort of a small living room. All the candidates were sitting on one side of the room on some dining room chairs, and there was a coffee table and a couch. The interviewer was sitting on the couch and the person, he'd bring them up, and they'd sit and put their portfolio on the table and flip through it and talk. So all of us who were being considered for interview were listening to the people being interviewed, which is to this day I think the most bizarre thing I've ever experienced.

In the process of the interviews, I'm sitting there, and I think there were two or three or four people. There were some people from Cooper Union and there were people from Pratt. They were all single, and here I had a wife and two children by now. Robert had just been born. He was, I don't know, maybe three or four months old. And they were saying, “Well, we would pay you 2,100 pounds per year or something.” I'm going, “What's a pound?” Two forty, four eighty? I didn't quite know what a pound was. I'm thinking, “Why

am I here? This is ridiculous.” But anyway, I went through my portfolio. I had a nice portfolio by then, which was really my college work because I didn’t do much design work. I could show them drawings of the stuff I had drawn at Shreve, Lamb & Harmon. But anyway, I sat there and I thought, “This is ridiculous.” I sat down with a man and I went through my stuff and I said, “Thank you very much.”

I went out, got on the subway, went home, and it was about a fifteen-minute ride on the subway to this place Drue and I had rented in Jackson Heights, which is out near LaGuardia Airport. Pretty rough area right now, but it was okay then. It was a LeFrak building, I can remember; we were in the Hawaii LeFrak building. It was really pretty sad. We had a basement apartment, so the windowsill was about five feet in the air. My poor son, David, who was maybe two at the time, couldn’t see out the window.

Anyway, I came home, told Drue, “Gee, I just finished this ridiculous interview.” And the phone rang. The person said, “You’ve been selected to go to Jamaica.” I didn’t even really know where Jamaica was. They had been talking West Indies, and I guess maybe in the interview I did hear it was Jamaica. But anyway, “You’ve been selected.” I said, “Geez, I did really have a lot of questions, I’ll ask the person, can we get together in the morning?” “Oh, no, I just put him on the plane to London.” It was a British firm. The guy literally got on the plane and flew back to London. They were hiring their first American. They had only had British employees, and I was an American a year and a half out of school, knew almost nothing. They said, “Well, this American firm has hired us and they want somebody who knows what a Sweets Catalog for U.S. products was.” That was the paper internet of the day with all the architectural materials, whether it was washing machines or plywood or bolts or nuts or screws. Everything was in there that you need for a building.

So they hired me as the guy who was the American to come down and help this American firm build a factory. I said to myself, “Well, God, I got to talk to somebody.” I didn’t even know what 2,100 pounds [was worth]. So I said, “Will you give me until tomorrow noon?” He said, “Okay. But we’ve got to get somebody, and if you don’t take it quickly we’ll go to the number two person that they’ve selected.” So I called in sick, which I’ve never done, and I’m still embarrassed about, the fact that I called in sick. Believe it or not, in this firm, I’ve never missed a day of work for illness. I’ve missed it for my knee replacements and my shoulder and all that, but I never missed a day in forty-eight years from sickness. Anyway, I called in sick and I said, “I’ll try to come in later.” They said, “No, don’t bother. Come in tomorrow or something.”

So I went to the Jamaican consulate, and I went to the New York Public Library, trying to find out a little bit about Jamaica, what things cost. I called them and I said, “Look, send me down there for six weeks, and if it works

bring my wife and two kids with me. If it doesn't work, send me home. Get me home." They bought that, for which I was forever grateful.

I went down there. I'll never forget. It was a [Lockheed] Constellation, the four-propeller engine plane, flying from New York to Jamaica. I remember them opening the door and it was like opening the door of a blast furnace. I had never felt such heat in my life. It was just awful.

04-00:07:54
Meeker:

Do you remember what time of year it was?

04-00:07:56
Gensler:

I have no idea, but it was hot most of the time down there. I don't really remember.

They put me up in a guesthouse that had what they called separate tables. I would sit at my little table and I'd have breakfast and dinner and lunch with the people in the office. I had my little car, I don't even remember, it was some kind of a British car they gave me to use. I drove around and got back, got around. I met some wonderful people. Norman & Danburn was the firm that hired me. They were two pilots in the war, and after the war they flew into these various countries. They would set up an office and do the airport, the hospital, and maybe a government building. They did the university campus. In Jamaica they had been doing the University of Jamaica, and they were doing the airport, and they were working on a hospital. So they were a pretty successful firm.

04-00:09:16
Meeker:

But doing very colonial work, meaning basic. It's no-frills architecture.

04-00:09:18
Gensler:

Very much, yeah, yeah. Some nice stuff. Nothing fantastic. So I worked there and I did a lot of different things. I did this factory which was going to be—and it still to this day seems absurd that from India they were going to ship jute in big bails to Jamaica, and then they were going to put it on a little train that went out to this site, kind of like these trains in the sugarcane fields, and weave carpet backing, jute carpet backing. Bring it back to the port, put it on a boat, take it up to Mississippi, someplace where this jute carpet backing will be made into carpet. The transportation costs to me seemed ridiculous. Make the damn thing and ship it. But anyway, from India.

So we made this factory. I can remember my naïveté. Drue and I went one Saturday out to see the site. They had started putting the columns up. I said, "Oh, this looks pretty good," and I leaned against one of the columns and the concrete just fell off. It kind of just fell off. I went back there the next [day] and said, "I don't think this is right." Because concrete sets up pretty quickly. Six hours, it's pretty damn hard, and by a day it's completely solid. You could just grab it with your hand and peel this column of concrete off. I said to my

boss, “Geez, I don’t think this is going well.” So they went out and found out that they had erected the first automatic cement mixing machine on the site, except that they had the lever backwards so it was putting in like one-tenth of a percent of cement and the rest of it was all sand. They needed some cement in the damn thing. So they literally got Jamaicans to climb up at the top of these columns and grab hold of the reinforcement bar that was sticking out and shake it back and forth, and all the concrete would fall off, and then they had to reform them and pour them. They had maybe fifty columns that they had poured this way. It was a disaster. Anyway, the building got built and it was fine.

I got involved in a couple of hospitality programs. A very nice little hotel and restaurant complex. I got involved in a couple of retail buildings in downtown Kingston, and I did a bunch of other things. I really had a good time. It was a wonderful experience because we ended up with a house on the university campus, which was very near where we were. Their office was in a place called Halfway Tree, which is a great name, but it’s about five miles out of downtown Kingston. We would live in these professors’ homes who got six months home leave. Because there was no air conditioned storage or anything, people would leave even their clothes. They’d leave everything. The beds, the sheets, the tablecloths, the maids, the dogs. We took over a house completely set and we would live in it for six months, and then we’d have to move to another one. We kept moving around to different ones. A couple of times we couldn’t find a faculty house so we went into some other places. But we were living in pretty nice, almost like Eichler homes as a matter of fact. It was right on the campus, and it had a faculty club.

The unusual thing, in the British system, when you graduate from college, you’re an architect. In the U.S. system, you have to be an apprentice for at least three years and take your licensing exam. But the British don’t have that. So in their system I was an architect. So I was able to join the faculty club, and we bought a little Volkswagen bug. We ended up in a couple of places where they had two big German Shepherds and my two kids and my wife and me. And a Volkswagen bug is some experience, I can tell you. But we had a wonderful time. I was running things. That was the break that got me ahead of my peers, because I wasn’t considered an apprentice and I wasn’t doing just shop drawings. I was really running major projects. Not knowing what I’m doing, but I was doing them. We always had to have two maids and a garden boy because the maids got every other Sunday off, and my wife didn’t want a day without a maid. Unfortunately, that’s carried over into today. I’ll talk about Drue later, but I’m the luckiest guy in the world to be married to her. We had a really good time.

Then I got involved in rugby. That was fun. They said, “Do you play football? Did you play football?” Well, I thought they meant—because in the Brit system football is soccer, so I said, “Yes, I played football.” So they caught

me. I ended up playing on the Jamaican national team as a second row player and they taught me the game.

04-00:15:04

Meeker:

Oh, for rugby or soccer?

04-00:15:05

Gensler:

For rugby. They taught me rugby. I didn't know a damn thing about rugby, and I never had played football because I was tall and skinny. There was no meat on me in those days. There's too much on me now. So twice a week, Drue would pack up the kids and we'd go and have a rugby match or a practice and drink ginger beer and got to know people that are some of our closest friends even to this day. We lived in the Jamaican and the British community, not the U.S. colony. People said, "Well, aren't you going to live with Americans?" I said, "No, I'm here to find out about local life." I was working for a British firm. So we had lots of black Jamaicans and Brits, and we had people from South Africa and Australia and all over the world in our area. Then there were Americans. I don't think I ever met any Americans. Had a lot of fun and really grew up a lot.

04-00:16:13

Meeker:

What years were you there?

04-00:16:14

Gensler:

I was there from like '60 to '61. Then all of a sudden, one day Jamaica became an independent country and not a British colony. They turned to us and said, "You're white, this is a black country. You're out." So we picked up and came back to the States, I think in December of '61. I remember my dad picking us up at the airport. We literally had nothing but shorts and flip-flops and t-shirts. We said, "Bring blankets," because it was the middle of winter and it was cold and we didn't have anything. You didn't wear a sweater or a jacket or anything down there.

But I learned a lot. One of the key things that I learned is that there's more than one way to solve a problem. That sounds like a simple thought. But the British do architecture, the drawings and the process and the relationship with the contractor and a lot of things, different than we do it. When I went down there I kept thinking, "God, they don't know the right way to do it. That's not the way we did it in New York. Obviously the U.S. knows exactly how to do it. This is stupid. Why would you do it different than the way we did it?" It took me a while to really reflect on it, but when I left I realized their system made a lot of sense. It's always helped me, that if I get stuck and I'm going in one direction, I've been able to back up and take a totally different direction and maybe get to the end, the solution I'm trying to get by going a totally different route. That there isn't just one way of solving a problem. Some people just keep butting their heads, "I'll figure this out, I'll figure it out." I can pull myself way back and go around, and it really helped me a lot to do

things and be a leader at a very young age, which was terrific. [Our third son] Ken was born down there.

04-00:18:50

Meeker: So in New York at Shreve, you said that you were doing kind of the grunt work, right? In essence, doing the bathrooms and staircases, right?

04-00:19:01

Gensler: Yes, right.

04-00:19:02

Meeker: But you go to Jamaica with Norman & Danburn and all of a sudden you're the sort of principal architect.

04-00:19:11

Gensler: Well, like what you would call a project manager. I was really responsible for everything. Design, getting it built, getting the drawings done right. I had really just experience of checking shop drawings. I did a lot of sketches.

I was going to tell you one story which I forgot. It's indelibly stuck in my brain. I remember the first drawing I ever did for Shreve was a detail of a Modernfold door that swung into a niche. It wasn't detailed on the original working drawings; I had to detail this thing. It was a little 8.5" x 11" sheet. Of course, they didn't have printed sheets in those days. They had a rubber stamp, and I remember I did this drawing and they said, "Okay, you put this rubber stamp title block on the drawing." I had worked all day on this drawing; today if I spent more than half an hour to do the whole sheet it would have been—but it took me a whole day. Just before five o'clock they said, "Here's this rubber stamp, put that on." So I go [stamping sound] and put it on the drawing. And I had put it on upside down. Here I had spent all day on this drawing and it was upside down. Luckily they said, "Don't panic, don't panic." We got a razor blade and cut it out and turned it around and taped it back on. What a humiliating way to start your first day—the first thing that you do as a drawing for them is a disaster, and they were nice enough to not say, "You jerk." They were all calm. I was shaking like a lamb and thinking, "God, this is not the way to start my career as an architect."

04-00:21:09

Meeker: If they had built it, it would have been built upside down, I guess.

04-00:21:11

Gensler: Well, the title block would have. They wouldn't have been able to read what it was. It was just ridiculous. You remember those little faux pas probably more than the good stuff that you do.

04-00:21:27

Meeker: So when you're in Kingston, how many other employees of this architecture firm were working there?

04-00:21:31

Gensler:

I think there were probably forty of us. It was a nice size. They had some interesting projects and we all got to be friends. There were people that rotated through. They would be on a two-year assignment, and they would end up their assignment and go back to London, or they decided they wanted to go back to Australia or South Africa. That was fun; we met people from all over the world, that we'd never been exposed to before. In those days, you didn't—certainly the States. Today there are lots of international people that are in campuses and you're bumping into them. At Cornell now probably 25% of the people are international. But in my day there was nobody but Americans there. So to meet people from other cultures, and then living in a country which is Caribbean and has a lot of beaches. I learned to scuba dive, did a ton of scuba diving. Practically every weekend we went with the kids. Drue would sit on the beach with the kids and they'd play in the sand and I'd go scuba diving with a group. It was a really amazing life to be fresh out of school practically, a year and a half out or two years because of the Army, and be able to have your own home with maids. You'd go out and pick an avocado off the tree, I think I'll have an avocado for breakfast or lunch or what have you. It was a different kind of life. And very relaxed. We were pretty hard business but, boy, when we played we played really hard. I met a lot of people and we got to go on various trips over the weekends. You could drive to Montego Bay or Blue Hole or these other places. Ocho Rios. It's a spectacular island. It was before the Rastafarians came along.

My next-door neighbor, his kids played with my kids, turned out to be the prime minister of the country in future years. I'm thinking, "I know that guy." He was the next-door neighbor. We used to borrow ladders or whatever you'd borrow between your neighbors. My kids ran back and forth between our house and their house. It was a very good time.

Drue and I were certainly not ready to come back to the States, although we were because I felt that the way I really had to get my career going was to get a license. So we came back not because we wanted to, but we did want to. We did feel that we needed to come back. I guess David was four and Rob was two and Ken was just born. Maybe the boys were five and three and one by the time. Somewhere in that age group. We could see David was going to have to get into a school and all that stuff. So we came back and we lived a little with my parents. We looked, and the only place we could get was a place out in Smithtown, Long Island. I was going to try to get a job in New York City, but that was a real long commute, like an hour on the train. So I got a job with this guy named Fred Allert.

04-00:25:11

Meeker:

Before we get there, I still have some questions about Jamaica.

04-00:25:13

Gensler:

Sure.

04-00:25:13

Meeker:

If you don't mind. Were you aware of the political context? You described what happened in December of '62.

04-00:25:21

Gensler:

Well, not really, because I just really wasn't focused on politics. The fact that it became an independent country, as I remember, just kind of came on us. We didn't know that Britain was going to spin it off. I've been trying to think of the name of the guy who lived next door, who became the prime minister of the country, and premier [Michael Manley], I think that's what he's called. The Rastafarian movement and all the sort of bad things that are happening in Jamaica were not happening then. Drue felt very safe. It used to be the joke that she'd never let me go buy anything because everything was just a new thing to us. You bargained for it. Everything is bargained for, so I'd come back with a pineapple or something and I'd paid two shillings for it, and she'd get it for a tenth of a shilling. I thought I'd been a great bargainer. I didn't know what things cost. It was really different, but it was a nice time. People were nice and the country was doing all right.

The British have a problem. They ran countries really well, but they didn't leave them in a good situation when they left. The people that they left didn't have really administrative skills to run a country. I think that's one of the issues that India faces. People spoke English pretty well, although they had a Jamaican patois that made it hard to quite understand a lot of what they said. We really got comfortable. As I said earlier, it was stifling hot, yet by the time you left, that was what it was. You lived it and you got comfortable. You spent a lot of time in shorts and t-shirts, even at work. It was a wonderful experience.

Drue was an actress—she's always been involved in the theater, a little theater. They did a Rashomon show that was outdoors. One of the most fabulous play productions I've ever seen. This Japanese play. We just did a lot of stuff, and with our kids and with our friends. Because there were maids. You could leave the kids and you could go out. Although we had no money. I was making \$5,000 a year down there, so I wasn't making any more money than I started when I was at Shreve, Lamb & Harmon. But I could live really well, because things didn't cost very much. Maids were a dollar a day and garden boys were probably seventy-five cents a day or something. It was amazing.

04-00:28:29

Meeker:

You also described or mentioned the different ways in which they practiced architecture as a British colony. Can you give a couple of examples of this?

04-00:28:40

Gensler:

Yes. For example, we do a set of working drawings and they're integrated, they have all the structural and the electrical and the plumbing and the lighting and the architectural, all in one package. In the British system, they package it

differently. The contractor in the U.S., he sits down with that set of drawings and he takes off quantities. “Oh, there’s so many cubic yards of cement I’m going to need for the columns and the floor and this, and there’s so many board feet of timber that I need, and there’s so many square meters,” because they were in metric, “of ceilings and roofing and all the pieces.” They have this thing called bill of quantity you survey, and they have a company type we don’t have in this country. There’s some that sort of do it, they’re called cost estimators here, but they’re really quite different. The quantity surveyor puts all the specifications together and all the quantities. Literally, when a guy in that system bids on a job, he doesn’t know whether the building is ten stories tall or a mile long. He’s just bidding quantities and specifications and very rudimentary drawings comparatively. So they just do things a little differently like that.

And, again, we had draftsmen who were Jamaicans who could draw stuff but weren’t architecture trained, where in the States, most of the people in an architecture firm are architects or interns trying to become an architect. But in Jamaica there was a level of draftsmen that was just different; those people just drew. It was different, but nothing wrong with that. Today, let’s see, we have an India group that just draws. They’re getting better and they’re going to do some buildings. We started an organization, a group in Costa Rica with like twenty-five people who are going to be backup. So we had some inexpensive production capability, and they’ve now grown to 125 people and are doing buildings and convention centers and stadiums and God knows what. They’ve worked their way out of that basic drawing. We need that because they’re people that started, mostly in India but other places, where they provide cheap drafting service for you. We didn’t want to go out of house so we did what we called insourcing, where they were our own people but they were at a different billing rate than the people we would have in the States. Way we do it today.

I learned an awful lot. In the British system they really run the job site much more than we do. They’re there all the time and they’re really involved in the construction process. Unfortunately, the way ours is, pretty much it ends with the drawings. We have some field observation, but it ends and the contractor kind of takes over and so they become the powerhouse. Where in the British system, the architect is much more respected by the whole process than in our country. I think there’s program managers that have come in that say the architects don’t know schedules and they don’t know budgets and they kind of poo-poo everything we do. I dislike them by and large, although there are some that are really good. I don’t like anybody between me and the customer, our client. They want to get there and sort of tell you how to do it and not let the client interface with you. In the British system, the architect is much more of a respected person, as Roark in *Fountainhead* would be.

04-00:32:44

Meeker:

Do you think that this, for instance, kind of different role of a draftsman as not an architect, not treated as an architect, subsequently allowed you to understand that there is this kind of different job category that you could take advantage of in a different system?

04-00:33:02

Gensler:

Well, I think to some degree that was it. Our industry has evolved dramatically, primarily because of technology, the computer. CAD has really changed a lot of it. And the complexity of codes and regulations. In Jamaica you just built buildings. You didn't go through environmental reports. I'm sure there was a building department, but I never seemed to worry about them or see them. They'd say, "Oh, you guys know what you're doing. Go ahead and do it." It was a different place and a different time. In a sense you're frustrated by this industry. You're taught that the design is the important thing. But the design process and the time you spend on the design, if you took the total hours that are invested in a project, it's maybe fifteen, twenty percent at the most. The other eighty percent is just getting the drawings done and dealing with public officials and dealing with contractors and dealing with all this other stuff. Now, all of that I call design, but the actual creative innovative thinking is not that much of your time. You got to like that part of it, too, and you got to understand that part of it.

Our educational system is only functioning on that ten to fifteen percent. That's what you know a lot about, but you don't know much about the rest of it at all. It kind of comes as a shock to people, and many of them never want to do it. They go, "I'll do my own little thing and I'll figure out how to get the bills out." Now it's even more so, because even secretaries and accounting people with computers, "Well, I got a Quicken book system and I can type my own letters." I can't live without Belinda [Presser] here. She's been with me twenty-seven years now, and she knows more about me than I know about myself and my family. And everybody who deals with me knows that, too. If she tells them, "Art would use blue," she's 99% right. She knows what I think, so people ask her all sorts of stuff and she doesn't have to even come to me. I'm traveling. Not so much anymore, but I was traveling a lot, so they didn't want to wait until I got back. "Could you tell me what Art probably would do?" She was pretty good at guessing.

04-00:35:52

Meeker:

Well, let's then move back to New York. I guess you return in—you said the winter in '61 or '62.

04-00:36:00

Gensler:

And I went to work for this guy Fred Allert. To this day, I don't remember how I got the job. I think I probably saw it in the newspapers, he was looking for somebody, and I went. It was out in Long Island. It wasn't in the city. It was because we got a house out there. A couple had retired to Florida and

rented this house to us in Smithtown. I'll come back to that house because in many ways it was a disaster, in many ways it was very nice.

The office was a small eight-, ten-person firm, maybe not even that many. He did schools. Basically did schools, although I was hired to do the Levittown Public Library, which was a pretty big library at the time. Levittown was this huge planned community out there. It was a nice project.

04-00:36:57
Meeker:

Levittown is one of the founding suburbs.

04-00:37:01
Gensler:

Yeah, gigantic suburb. Ten thousand houses all looking identical when they're built. Like Cape Cod boxes. They were designed to be expanded and modified, but they were the \$5,000 starter house. I think maybe five or six thousand dollars, something like that. Starter house. Two bedrooms and a living room and a bath and a kitchen and maybe a dining area and that was it.

04-00:37:29
Meeker:

Did you live in one of those?

04-00:37:30
Gensler:

No, no. Ours was a little bigger. Back east they had basements. This house had a half—a lot of them were half basements, where the house was sunk maybe five feet into the ground, and you went up to the first floor three or four feet. The playroom and the laundry room and the furnace and all was down—the pine-paneled playroom was the awful thing. Unfortunately, ours leaked like a sieve, and the waterproofing was no good on the house so that was always flooding. The washer-dryer, on the big day when I actually got her a washer and dryer, was one of the biggest days in our life. We went out and bought a washer. She had been hanging the things on the clothesline, and when you're doing diapers, and the clothes in the winter—they just were on the line and they were frozen from the weather. It was a really big day when I bought our first washer and dryer. That was the biggest investment we had ever made. I think it was a hundred dollars each or something. That was a lot of money to put out.

Anyway, we lived there. I worked on the library primarily. It was unusual. I had a title that isn't used anymore, called a "clerk of the works." It was a person that managed the jobsite for the contractor and the architect both. I kept track of the number of people who were on the site and made sure that everything got moved around properly. I was really the project manager for the architect. I had nothing to do with the design. I had come onto the design when they were just starting to build the building, so I was responsible for getting it built. Checking all the shop drawings.

I worked for this guy. I don't know why he was an architect. He would go to the country club or something and get jobs. He never designed anything that I

can remember. He had one kind of quasi-partner who designed most of the projects, and the rest of us ran projects. There were some nice schools; they were doing all right. He and his secretary would go out and have a—seemed to be every lunch, having a little affair going on. He'd leave at noon and come back at 3:30 after some event. We just sort of put up with him.

The thing that happened was that the mechanical engineer on the library came to me one day and said, "Art, I met a guy who's going to open an office in New York who's looking for somebody to run the office. I bet you could do that job. He's a San Francisco, California architect and he's coming to New York." I really wanted out of this place, the Allert thing. I just thought, "California, ah-hah!"

So I went and interviewed with this guy. He had done an AIA project on what's called a fallout shelter school, which was a bomb shelter that kids and parents and everybody would run into when the Russians were about to drop the bomb. You were supposed to be in this place for like two weeks until the radiation level went down, and then you could come out of the bomb shelter.

04-00:41:15
Meeker:

It was like an underground town or something like that?

04-00:41:18
Gensler:

Yes. It was Nelson Rockefeller's idea. So we started work on this thing. We had a rural school, an urban school, and a suburban school, and we designed them. I was doing them with him—he came from California and we designed these schools. We had the designs pretty well. We were inventing what it meant. "Oh, we're going to have to have a place to store the cots that people have to sleep on." Freeze-dried food had just been invented and created, so we'd store freeze-dried food. We'd get a well and water in the place, and then the glass was going to be this big cast glass that the radiation wouldn't go through. So windows were kind of about that big [e.g. like a porthole]. That was as big as Corning could make them.

04-00:42:13
Meeker:

So there were windows actually looking outside?

04-00:42:16
Gensler:

Yes, it was sort of built into a hillside. Most of it was in the hill, and there was maybe one wall that had some kind of glass or skylights or something. Anyway, we worked for about six months, and I was commuting then from Smithtown into New York. It was interesting. I had actually worked for another architectural firm in college for one summer at 43rd and Lexington Avenue. He took office space in the exact same building I had worked in, a firm called LaPierre, Litchfield. I haven't thought about them—since we just started talking. But I worked for them for one summer.

Peerless Camera was on the ground floor. It was the most exciting thing, because right across the street was Grand Central Station, and there was so much activity there. I liked going in there. We had a tiny office. I hired three people, something like that. There were five of us. So I'm running this office and then all of a sudden one day we get a phone call. "The legislature has killed the program." He looks at me, "What are we going to do?" He said, "I guess we could go back to California and reestablish my office out there." His father was the head of beverages for Safeway. He had retired and had a home in the Del Monte Forest down in Carmel, on the Seventeen Mile Drive. I saw it later. Nice home that Al had done. A guy named Al Segal.

04-00:44:05

Meeker:

Al Segal was the gentleman running the firm?

04-00:44:06

Gensler:

Firm that I worked for in New York. He was from San Francisco, and then we went back to San Francisco. I flew out with him; we went and I looked around. Looked in the paper. The only person I knew in San Francisco was a guy named Don Wuddtke. Don was an architect who I'd gone to college with. He was from Chicago and had been in the Navy out in Hawaii the whole time. He had come back to San Francisco; he was one of the ten people that I graduated with at Cornell. Don was nice enough to let me stay with him for a couple of days. He had just built a house on an unbuildable lot in Ross—in New York everything's flat, and little rolling hills. But this was a cliff and he had found a way to put a house on it. He was nice enough to let me stay there. So I started jockeying around. We were setting up an office, and Al rented space in the Columbus Tower, which is the triangular building on Columbus and Montgomery, where it comes together—

04-00:45:22

Meeker:

That building is owned by Coppola today, right?

04-00:45:24

Gensler:

Yes. It was in the paper. Coppola owns it, yes. But at the time it was owned by the Kingston Trio, which was really interesting, because they had their offices and their accounting firm in the building. I still use the remnants of that accounting firm for my own personal accounting. He's retired, but he still does my accounting. Belinda works with him all the time.

So we came out and we rented this cupola, the top floor of that building, and we started an office. Nice guy, very talented architect. [He and his] wife lived in Tiburon. I saw a place in Tiburon for I think a hundred a month. It was a two-bedroom, living room, bath. That was it. But it had a view of the Golden Gate Bridge and the city. It was spectacular. It was sort of a duplex. There was a little studio below us that a woman lived at. Aunt Alice, we used to call her. Kids would run down and see her. If you know Tiburon, it's right near that little white church that's above the town. Right above the city. I'd walk down and take the ferry or Drue would drive me down. I'd take the ferry every day,

which was wonderful. The fact that I found Tiburon is in many ways one of the best things that happened. It's a wonderful place to live and it's a very easy commute.

04-00:47:03

Meeker: How did you find it?

04-00:47:04

Gensler: I found it in the newspaper. It was the only thing I saw that was a price I could afford. That was before Tiburon was popular. And this place came up. Don Wudtke said, "You don't want to live in Tiburon. You want to live in Ross." I said, "Geez, it's a hell of a view," after I saw it, "and it's the right price and I like the water." He thought I was dumb to go to Tiburon. It was a noplac. But the ferry was back there and the trains. So we got there and I called Drue and said, "Pack up and come, honey." My mom and dad helped her pack up what we had, and the van came and she flew out, and we came out and started.

04-00:47:541

Meeker: So she was still out on Long Island?

04-00:47:52

Gensler: She was still on Long Island waiting for me to call her. And then because we needed a place, she stayed until the truck got here and I unpacked it and moved in, and then she flew out. I think after she moved out of our house in Long Island, she went where her parents were in New Jersey. Her father had remarried and was in—God, I can't think of the name of the town in New Jersey. Ridgewood, New Jersey. So anyway, she came out. Loved the place. It was a really, really California, almost like an Eichler, but wide open. Everything was just open and there was the view. A huge deck that you could go sit outside. There were no screen doors and we couldn't understand, because in New York the flies kill you in the summer when you're outside. I remember it was like February and it was like this weather. Spectacular. Seventy-two degrees every day. She'd been in the snow and putting snowsuits on kids and it was a big deal.

So we started. I worked with this guy for about a year. It didn't feel right.

04-00:49:30

Meeker: And this is Al Segal?

04-00:49:30

Gensler: Al Segal. I loved the work. We did some nice things.

04-00:49:36

Meeker: Like, for instance, what kind of work were you doing?

04-00:49:38

Gensler: Very interesting. The first project I worked on was a school in Cupertino for handicapped children, mental, SMR, special need, mostly mongoloid children. It was the first time in the state or anyplace that I knew of that they had

actually put those children on the same campus as regular kids. We were at one end of the site and they were at the other end of the site, and there were play fields in between. Our kids were fenced in, because they wandered away and wouldn't know where they were. But they could at least see each other and interact. It was an interesting experience, because all these kids were being educated in the basements of churches and people's homes and they didn't have a decent facility. The parents wanted them to all learn to read and write; the thing that they really needed was how to brush their teeth and wash, just personal care things, and some education. Some are more advanced than others. But these were kids that had real serious handicaps. I have a handicapped grandchild, so I know about some of it, but I didn't then. We built this really nice school. I've never seen it since we finished it and I saw it in operation. Right on my desk is where it is in Cupertino. I get down the peninsula [periodically], but for whatever reason I just have never been there. I'm going to go one of these days, just go down to see it again. Well, it's almost fifty years old.

04-00:51:25

Meeker:

Do you know if it's still there?

04-00:51:26

Gensler:

I don't know. One of the things that just drove me crazy was that all the schools in California, the ones I saw, I thought they were made out of cardboard. They just are so cheap. They had just cardboard on the outside, and a thin coat of plaster on them and they were just awful. I said, "These kids deserve a red brick schoolhouse." So I built a little red brick building with pitched roofs and the whole damn thing. Because they were special needs, the state legislature funded it. It was not the cheapest thing by a long shot. There were a series of four classrooms. If you take a square and put across a line, divide it into four sections; one was an outdoor section, and then there was an L. There were three teachers that would take care of twelve kids in the four sections. It was a really interesting experience. There was an assembly room with a kitchen and a bathroom, so you could teach them those kinds of things. It was a very interesting project and I'm very proud of it, was then.

And then we built a few other things, but most of them were developer things. The problem was he was embarrassed to send bills. I had not known this. He was borrowing all the money to pay my salary, and I'd hired a staff of six or seven, eight people, Don Wudtke being one of them. He finally said, "I got to get out of here," and he left and went to Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons. Al came to me one day and said, "Look, Art, I've run out of borrowing capacity. I haven't told my wife this, but what I'd like is you keep running the firm and I'll go drive a taxicab." I said, "Are you kidding me? It says Al Segal on the door. I'm not going to run Al Segal while you're out driving a taxicab." He said, "Well, I got to do it to keep some money on the table." So I said, "Goodbye," and I left.

He closed the door, and I went over to Wurster because they had just gotten a project which was the BART system. I'll tell you about that. His brother had a very successful practice in Puerto Rico, and I think Al and he worked together for a while. He moved out of the area, and I've really lost touch with him, I've never heard from him. I've never seen him since I left. But nice guy. Got a little sandbagged by the New York state legislature. We were doing some interesting stuff, but I'm very glad we never built those bomb shelter schools because that would have been terrible.

04-00:54:24

Meeker:

We're not going to get to Wurster today, so I actually just want to wrap up by asking a follow-up question about these bomb shelters. What was the science based on the structure?

04-00:54:52

Gensler:

Well, there wasn't any. They were just bomb shelters. If you were around in the Second World War, basically the Brits would go down into the subway tunnel. New York was loaded with subway tunnels, and it was basically a subway tunnel with some windows. So if you're going to be in there for two weeks or three weeks or whatever, they didn't really know.

04-00:55:08

Meeker:

What, was the DoD, for instance, giving you specs saying, "Okay, nuclear fallout would be different than a conventional—"

04-00:55:16

Gensler:

First, there was no DoD, and secondly, the state didn't—education—we'd make up a program and say, "This is a school with six classrooms and a gym and a teachers; office," and that was about it. So then we'd say, "Well, if there are going to be a thousand people in here, we got to make a few more toilets and a few more things, and then maybe we'll have a kitchen in the gym and assembly area." So we talk about my experience with BART, it was the same. We were inventing as we went along. There was nobody in any central government, or at the state level. They just thought this was a good idea. Al had done this project and for some reason, Nelson Rockefeller and the AIA here had run a little internal competition which was published in a magazine. What we were going to do when the Russians drop the bomb. Well, we've got to get some places to go and hide, to get away from the radiation. It was about as detailed a program as that; we kind of had to invent it as we go.

Obviously, there were different environments. In a rural area you could do one thing, and in a suburban area you could do another, and in a city we had a site in Brooklyn adjacent to an existing high school. We were jamming it into there in multi-levels. We got stopped before it really got detailed, but I spent a lot of time finding out about freeze-dried foods and talking to the people at the Red Cross about how you'd support these people and what do you do in an emergency. And it's really like a Red Cross going in and building a tent city

when the area's been wiped out, except here we have to do the tent city in these concrete bunkers.

04-00:57:38

Meeker:

Here you are, also a father of three young boys, fresh off the fear around the Cuban Missile Crisis. How did you feel about doing this work? Did it sort of seem like kind of shifting deck chairs on the *Titanic*?

04-00:57:57

Gensler:

Well, a little bit. I think it did. It's funny. The reason it was so silly was that the Cold War wasn't very cold at that time. It was pretty dead.

One of the things that I should go back and talk about a little bit is that when I was at Shreve, Lamb & Harmon in New York, I got a really interesting opportunity. After I got out of ROTC, and went to the six months training, I had to go in the Reserves for six and a half years, a total of seven-year commitment. So I came back to New York and I got—and I don't know how it happened—a chance to join the Seventh Regiment Armory. Well, the Seventh Regiment Armory is on Park Avenue, and it's where all the CEOs of major companies did their military obligation. If you talk about the armory in New York, it's the Seventh Regiment Armory. The uniforms of West Point are copied from the Seventh Regiment uniforms. As an officer, we had locker rooms that were with butlers that would shine your shoes and polish the brass. You could buy a dinner for a dollar and a half or something, beautiful dinners.

I had to go there Tuesdays and Thursday nights. I'd train and get ready for my class on Thursday. I would train a platoon, and I'd have them marching around the armory. In the summers I'd have to go on a two-week outing where we'd blow off explosives as the Corps of Engineers, and I was never very good at any of that stuff. Matter of fact, "Sergeant, take them." I was very good at passing the responsibility to the sergeants. But it was an incredible experience being around these CEOs of major companies who were there with me sitting in the locker rooms, getting into uniform. That was a big part of the time that was important. Again, more opportunities to meet with people who have been very successful, have been very helpful in my life. I don't want to leave that piece of this experience out.

But I think all of us felt that there weren't going to be any more wars. The Second World War was so horrible, and the Korean War was so horrible, that nobody wanted to get anywhere near it. So when Vietnam came along later, it was a real—none of us had any interest in it. I wasn't certainly anti-Vietnam War. It just seemed so far away, and so the thing about Rockefeller—I don't know what got him into this bomb shelter stuff, and that we're going to live that way. It probably lasted for six months, as I say. But at the time I never really thought, "Is this ever going to be used?" The answer was, how do you use it until you need it like that. How do you make it? There were areas which we did have things like windows and things, and said, "Those areas will be

sealed off; they will not be part of the bomb shelter.” So there was some stuff, in a sense, sticking out that wasn’t part of it and other places that were. It was an interesting experiment.

For me, I really liked the opportunity to work on things that had not been done before. That’s why when I went to Wurster, and we’ll talk about that next, I was asked to put together the standards for the BART system. I was working on a team and the guy who ran the team died, and I ended up running it. It was an incredible experience.

04-01:02:12

Meeker:

Well, let’s stop there for today and we’ll pick up on that next time we meet.

04-01:02:16

Gensler:

Fine.

Interview #3: February 28, 2014
Audio File 5

05-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is the 28th of February, 2014, the last day of February. I'm here, Martin Meeker, with Art Gensler, and this is tape number five. Last time we wrapped up it was a few weeks back, and we talked about your move to San Francisco, your time working with the architect—

05-00:00:31

Gensler: Al Segal.

05-00:00:32

Meeker: —Al Segal. And mentioned some of his financial issues, and you needed to find a new home in order to practice your craft. You had mentioned that your colleague Don Wudtke had been working with Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons, the eminent architecture firm of northern California, and that you were able to leverage that relationship to get in the door at Wurster. Tell me a little bit about how it was that you did get in the door at Wurster.

05-00:01:09

Gensler: I had a pretty good résumé, and I had a background. They were a fairly large firm by the standards [of the day]. I'm guessing there were a hundred of us. Maybe not that many, but about a hundred of us. They were out in the Fisherman's Wharf area down on the end of Montgomery, 1620 Montgomery Street, I think, in an old warehouse. They had a bunch of projects they were doing. They did a lot of work for Gerson Bakar at the time, and they were working on Ghirardelli Square and other projects. They did Safeway stores and a bunch of other things. So they had a nice practice going.

There were really the three principals. It was Donn Emmons, who was probably the senior principal at the time, although he never got that involved in projects. But he was the senior guy. Theodore Bernardi was a real character, a curmudgeon. All over the drafting room all the time, and a really bright and interesting guy, a very important person in the firm. And then, of course, Bill Wurster. Bill was in a wheelchair, and I think he had Parkinson's. But he was still as sharp as a tack, and he came in. It was a kind of an old-line, a bunch of rows of sawhorses and doors and raw wood floors. We stopped work at ten o'clock in the morning and the valet kind of guy brought out the donuts and coffee. We'd have donuts and coffee, and then we'd go back to work at 10:15. We'd all gather around the big tables and chat. So it was a nice place; they had an outside deck where we could sit. Lawrence Halprin had his offices up above us, so there was intermixing between all of us. The Synanon, called at the time, which was the alcohol and drug center, was right below us, between us and the Embarcadero. They had this big building and they were trying to rehab people. It was an interesting area to be in at the time.

I got this assignment of developing the BART system standards and worked as an assistant on the team. They just had sent some people internationally to do research. The way they got hired was that the board of directors said there has to be an architect on the project, and the engineers had just assumed they were going to copy New York City subway system. Everybody said, “Oh, no, that’s not what we want.” So they hired one person, Donn Emmons, and Donn then hired Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons to be the people to try to figure out what they were going to build because—

05-00:03:57
Meeker:

Well, just to back up. What we’re talking about is the Bay Area Rapid Transit?

05-00:03:59
Gensler:

BART system, yes. The BART system. So I got on that team. We went on for a while, and they had sent two people, whose names I won’t mention, but went internationally to look at other systems. They were going to come back and tell us what we should be designing and how we should be designing it. We were starting to assemble the material, and I was going out and asking, “Well, how long is a train?” and “How wide is a platform?” and “How big is the tunnel?” and “How are you going to collect fares?” and simple things. Because nobody had any information. They had hired thirteen architects to do twenty-seven stations, I think. Some of them were aboveground stations and some of them were belowground stations, so they were quite different. I’ll come back and talk about that in a minute. They also did the stanchions and the elevated sections, and how that column was designed, and the beams that go between the stanchions and all. I was involved in all that design process.

I cannot remember the name of the gentleman who was the project manager for it. Unfortunately, fairly early in the project he died. I was left standing there to try to put things together. So I started putting this manual of architectural standards together one step at a time. It was fascinating. At the same time we were doing this, they had selected Jerry McCue—I think it was just Jerry McCue then; it [later] turned into McCue, Boone, Tomsic—to be one of the architects. I can’t remember whether that was the full name of the firm. They started on the Oakland station, and we did some work on BART going down Market Street, and should they have a concourse under Market so that you could go to the concourse and cross the street? Or if you came up from the station, you didn’t have to go up to the surface and cross the street, you could come out on the right side of the street. So that had a lot to do with how deep BART had to be in Market. There were a lot of things that were happening at the same time before we even had a manual how to do this darn thing. What is a station and how big is it and all that.

For the above-ground station we developed what we call a “kiss and ride” system, which is where a wife drops the husband off at the station, gives him a kiss and picks him up at night. And you’re integrating buses and people. Like

kids that are dropped off at school today, that whole lineup system: how that happens, and how you get on and off, and how the parking lot works. At the time there were free parking lots and, I think, they still are. But how is that going to work from a traffic flow point of view?

05-00:07:02

Meeker:

Well, one of the things you're pointing out is that you've got an entirely new system here which is, in some ways, a very conventional urban high density subway system combined with a suburban rail system. It's going to require very different kinds of stations, very different kinds of design standards for those different kinds of places.

05-00:07:25

Gensler:

You're right. Absolutely. It was that kind of excitement, from my point of view, that the project had. It was something that had never been done. So there wasn't a thing to copy. In our industry there's what's called architectural graphics standards. That's a book that shows you how big is a step and how wide is a window and a door, and how the frames work, and all these little pieces. We were trying to do that, because with thirteen teams putting these projects [the different BART stations] together, from a maintenance point, an operations point of view, you wanted consistency. You can't have this over in one station and not on another, to maintain a system, because janitorial and all that's got to be uniform, and signage has got to be uniform, and ticketing has got to be uniform—a lot of things. Escalators and stairs.

05-00:08:15

Meeker:

You don't want five different gauges of escalators, right.

05-00:08:19

Gensler:

Where do you have to have elevators? The ADA or handicap stuff was not prominent, and yet we all recognized that we had to have accessibility. A thing like sustainability wasn't quite as high as it is now, but we were looking and thinking about those kinds of things. So this team went out to look at other systems around the world. There weren't very many. I think there was one in Copenhagen, and there were some in Paris. They didn't get into Russia to see the Russian system. But they got into some places.

05-00:08:53

Meeker:

Well, the guide describes that they went to Chicago, New York, and Cleveland in the United States, and then they went to London, Paris, Berlin, Hamburg, Stockholm, and Toronto.

05-00:09:01

Gensler:

Yes. And they came back and they had this book, which embarrassingly said nothing. Basically, it said people don't like long corridors. Make long corridors shorter. That's a lot of help! Or people like to look at themselves. Put a lot of mirrors around. Well, gee, that doesn't help you design a damn project.

Anyway, we had to get really serious about this thing. The engineers were screaming, “We don’t really need you anyway, we can tell everybody [what to do].” We said, “No, no, you can’t start designing, you need to get these architectural standards. They were tied to the engineers. They shouldn’t get going until you know what you’re going to do.” So we developed this table of contents, which is really an amazing—the program and codes. Nobody knew what the building codes would be for this system. And exiting requirements and vertical data clearances, what vehicle clearances that you need, and the aerial structures, and the aboveground platform sizes and widths and lengths, and how high is the canopy to fit under the train, and all these things that nobody knew anything about. Concessions, and color, and advertising, and graphics—the whole thing. Fare collection and fire protection. It went on and on and on. They were all important, and there was no place to turn, no place to even collect it. I was leading with a team; I was twenty-seven at the time. Maybe I was twenty-eight. And I was leading this team of people trying to get this thing pulled together.

I worked with a woman whose name I can’t remember, who was in the Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons communication group. We wrote it. I’m a better writer now, but I wasn’t the person who could write all this and organize it quite so well then. But we organized this manual so that people would go to each of the sections. Each of the sections we’d have to review with the chief engineer, and we’d have to review with the other engineers, and then try to get a consensus on what we could put in this book, and then invent stuff.

The real thing I’m most proud of is they said, “You got to have an automatic fare collection system,” so I kind of invented the sequence. Not the electronics, but that there’s got to be a turnstile, and there’s going to be a card with money on it. One of the things which is different in New York and others at the time was this variable pricing for distance. In New York you just had a coin and you got on the subway, you could ride. On the MBTA in Boston you could ride forever once you paid. They did not have the variable pricing. So people would get to the end of the line and then they found they haven’t got enough money. How do they get additional money on it, or how do you buy a ticket and load up a card? That was before anybody ever had a card [with magnetic strips]. We didn’t have credit cards and things like that. We kind of invented it as we went. But it seems to have worked; I’ve never heard much complaint about it. And the spacing, and how much distances did you need, how much of a line the people would wait in.

Then graphics: We had lots of really interesting discussions about advertising. Advertising’s really important from a revenue standpoint, and we wanted to know what kind of—I remember one of the things, we didn’t want advertising defaced, so we were going to actually put Kodak carousel projectors under the edge of the platform and shoot up onto the wall on the other side so they would be blocked when the train came through. But when the train wasn’t in there, then it would shine on that wall on the other side, and there would be a

screen. That was the way you'd get stuff up there on that wall. It could change, rather than a big billboard. It would be more dynamic.

05-00:13:09

Meeker: Projection, yeah.

05-00:13:10

Gensler: So we were thinking about a lot of things. Ernest Born, who was a well-known architect, but also a designer of fonts, of graphics, developed the BART typeface. It was a lot of very wonderful experiences. The big fight was the restrooms, which we lost, and that's a whole other story I think I told before. Those are things that I really remember about the process. Then, once we got it going, I worked on a pedestrian bridge across the tracks and some other things. I spent most of my time at Wurster doing that kind of work.

05-00:13:54

Meeker: Okay. Well, you had mentioned that there was this pair of individuals and they worked for Wurster, right? They went and traveled around looking at different places.

05-00:14:05

Gensler: And they kind of faded away. It was like, "Well, they're not going to add any value."

05-00:14:10

Meeker: Well, it sounds like they were really in the clouds. They were kind of coming out with this set of principles, but they weren't actually—

05-00:14:14

Gensler: One of them was a person named Chris Alexander, who became a professor, I think. He did a book called *Pattern Language*, which is a famous book in architecture. He's a professor at times at Berkeley. I don't know whether he still is or not. It wasn't his finest hour, let's put it that way. I don't know him. They just were a little theoretical, and we were dealing with a bunch of engineers. We had to be damn specific because the engineers look at everything and say, "Well, you say that the sign should be here and here and this should be there and there. That's what it is, isn't it?" "Well, it doesn't have to." You can't say, "No, it doesn't have to quite be that way." Well, it did, it had to be that way. So I'm trying to do a project. Somebody said to me the other day, and I was really flattered, he said, "Jesus, the guy that designed the stairs at BART was really clever." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, if you noticed, there's a gutter right next to the wall. I saw this guy take his bicycle and just wheel it right up that gutter when he was coming off the train and right up onto the street. Boy, it worked great. That was clever. It wasn't designed for a bicycle." I said, "Well, first, I designed it. That was one of my personal little touches."

05-00:15:38

Meeker: The gutter?

05-00:15:39

Gensler:

It was a gutter so that you could clean it, because you can sweep a step and you don't have that corner. You just sweep down the gutter or flush it with a hose and it cleans it. I always hate in New York the corners and things. I grew up in New York and used to ride the subway a lot. I worked in New York, not so much grew in the city, although I lived around it. It just was always dirty, and it just seemed to me if—I had seen this kind of idea. I said, "Geez, that is perfect for BART." So that's the way they did all the stairs, which I'm forever grateful. And we were working on escalators; they wanted them open, and all those things. At the time having outdoor escalators was not the best idea in the world, but it works much better than having them all enclosed indoors.

05-00:16:25

Meeker:

That's interesting, because you're right, throughout these architectural standards there are constant references to sanitary conditions, cleanliness, making sure that the architecture does not contribute to the accumulation of dirt and dust.

05-00:16:43

Gensler:

The one thing that I was disappointed in, which they've never actually implemented, but in most of the new systems around the world they have, was what we call the train screen. It's like an elevator door where the train door opens and then the door in the station opens. This was a glass wall that you'll see when you go to airports like Denver and Las Vegas and places where they have a train that goes out to the concourse. The train comes in and stops, and then the train door opens, and then the door on the wall opens. The reason you want that is two things. One, because the pushing of air that comes through from the train coming down that tube is forcing all this dirt and grime and air into the people. And secondly, it just cuts the noise down dramatically from when you're standing on the platform.

So it was a really good idea, but they were not comfortable at the time that they could stop the train carefully and close enough in tolerance so that it would line up with the doors on the platform, the doors on the car. So it's in the book, but it was never able to be implemented. When you go around the world today, they're still using this stuff. It's interesting. I was asked to come to Singapore when they were going to build their system and they had one of these books [referring to the 1965 BART design standards book he developed]. They said, "Well, we want to use it." I was a fairly young architect then and I didn't know how to quote a fee to do a design standard for Singapore. I was a little high, and I think Skidmore actually got some work on it. I don't know. I didn't get the assignment. But I've talked to a number of systems about the opportunity, and they all were using this as sort of the guideline. So I feel a little bit like the father of the modern architectural portion of the rapid transit world.

05-00:18:49

Meeker:

So that design standard's actually circulated around the world?

05-00:18:53

Gensler:

It did. It's one nice sort of thing you can hang your hat on.

05-00:19:01

Meeker:

I think it's an interesting legacy that probably not a lot of people know about.

05-00:19:04

Gensler:

No, I know.

05-00:19:06

Meeker:

When these other two architects were kind of doing the up-in-the-clouds version of it, then I assume maybe it was somebody like Emmons who came to you and said, "Listen, we really need to produce something here that is going to be helpful."

05-00:19:22

Gensler:

He was getting an enormous amount of flak from the engineers who were saying, "This doesn't do us any good. We need numbers and feet and inches and widths. Real stuff." He came to me, and I got a few people. In the end we had like four or five of us doing research and working with people. There were a bunch of consultants. So the mechanical people, the electrical stuff was done, and acoustical stuff we brought in. I was always working with other consultants on a lot of the technical stuff; there were specialists in that we brought in and retained. Again, this was a whole new thing because architects, we're used to designing buildings or interiors or something and not doing this. And Donn was much of a hands-off guy, not a hands-on guy. He would go to meetings, but he wouldn't go to the meetings very often, so I was going and meeting with these sixty-year-old curmudgeon engineers, transportation engineers and stuff. Here I was, a kid, just doing it. I don't know why, but I'm very comfortable doing that kind of thing. It's not I'm cocky, I don't think, it's just that I'm very comfortable. If I think something through, I'm okay with doing that and representing that it's really valuable stuff. It turned out to be very valuable because in the end, all these stations worked together. They're different designs and different sitings and other things, but I was part of the team that would go and present, architects present. I could sit there and say, "Well, wait a sec. You didn't follow it here, and you didn't do that here, and this doesn't work quite right." They used me as a sounding board for that, and that was very fascinating.

05-00:21:19

Meeker:

It sounds like what you pursued here was a pretty unique partnership between a group of architects and a group of engineers.

05-00:21:26

Gensler:

Yeah. I think in the end, everybody kind of got comfortable with themselves in the sense that originally they just said, "Well, we really don't need an architect. We are going to just put concrete floors in, and we're going to have ceramic tile walls and an exposed concrete ceiling and exposed fluorescent tube lights. What more do you need? You don't need any more. That's simple

enough.” To the credit of a few of the directors, they said, “Wait a sec. We’re not going to build that. This is 1964 or three, and we’re going to start building this thing in ’65, four and five. We want something that’s up to date.” As I’ve said before, this whole system was conceived by three engineering firms who were looking for work. They created this composite program that they put in front of the voters. The voters said, “That sounds pretty good.” To think that it was less than a billion dollars. Today we talk about single projects of two and three billion. The canal in Panama is five, six billion dollars. And they built the whole damn system, twenty-seven stations and sixty-two miles, or whatever it was, track and underground stations and aboveground stations and the whole thing.

05-00:22:59
Meeker:

Trains made, too?

05-00:23:00
Gensler:

And parts of trains. It was amazing. And some cars. It’s interesting right now that they’re going through this issue with the last go-around with the strikes and everything that we had here in the Bay Area. They’ve got to get new cars. Those damn cars are forty-five, fifty years old. They don’t look it. They’ve done a pretty good job, but they’re wearing out. You’ve got to get some new cars and new equipment. I think from everything that I’ve seen about BART they’ve really kept it up and they’re trying really hard to run a good system. For that I’m honored to be a part of the original program that got us there.

05-00:23:36
Meeker:

Were you part of the group who would consult with these outside specialists? Obviously it would make sense of the acoustical engineers and electrical engineers. I’m also interested in the fact that some of the architects consulted with anthropologists and sociologists and psychologists in the creation of these standard operating practices. How did people move about a particular space, as I imagine the main question was going to be asked of those people?

05-00:24:07
Gensler:

Yeah, yeah, well, I think it was. I probably was one of the people. Having grown up and ridden the subway in New York a lot, you understand with crowds and how you do it and how you kind of push your way on and push your way off. Go through turnstiles and get down underground, or up on elevated stations and then ultimately go down. I used to commute from Jackson Heights when we were living there. That was an elevated station, and then it’d go down under the East River and I’d end up at Penn Station. I was pretty comfortable with understanding how a user would use this system. I think a lot of people out here never even seen an underground system or an elevated system. Hard rail is a whole different animal than some of these streetcar kind of systems. And then, of course, we were dealing with Market Street, where we were going to put the streetcars above the BART system, so you had a three-level. You had a concourse, you had a streetcar level, and then a BART system. There were a lot of interesting decisions to be made. I don’t

know. I'm pretty comfortable making those recommendations. Now, did I make them all? Hell, no. The engineers had a lot to do with it.

We right now have a little assignment in the firm, I'm digressing but I'm not. Which is the streetcar is going to go up into Chinatown and out to the train station, Caltrans. And they've got this big tunneling machine. Well, BART was excavated. They just put the things down and excavated, a gigantic excavation all the way on Market. They didn't tunnel it at all. But up there they have this gigantic machine, they got to get it out of the ground and there's been a whole fight about where to do it and how to get it out of the ground. They got the hole big enough to get it out of the ground in Chinatown, and our guys in this firm now have been working with them. Chinatown's happy and the MUNI [San Francisco Municipal Railway] is happy, everybody seems to be happy with this thing. But they didn't want to bring it up in the middle of Columbus Avenue and foul up traffic for six months or a year trying to get the damn piece out. This is a big piece of equipment that's down there, and they had to hoist it out. So they've worked it out. I love complicated things like that, where if you really put your mind to it you can come up with some really exciting ideas.

[Back to BART] Everybody got on board finally, where we said, "We can't be just flighty kind of designers." This is real stuff, and it's going to have to really work. So everybody got on board the team and said, "This project is real and tough. It's hard wheel, heavy cars. This is big-time stuff." The Oakland stations are really complicated because they got people coming up from the south and going up to Richmond, and then you got people going from San Francisco out to Walnut Creek in those days, crossing in multiple levels. So there was a lot. But they got the routes, and we didn't have to move many stations. The original plans were pretty good, where it was going to be aboveground, where you were going to build. Berkeley had a big fight about whether it was going to be underground or aboveground. But we didn't have the EIRs [environmental impact reports] and the lawsuits that we have today, which is so difficult moving things forward.

I'm digressing, but I'm not in a sense. There was a very interesting article in the *San Francisco Business Times* the other day about the Embarcadero and the waterfront in San Francisco. The planning for that waterfront was done thirty, forty, fifty years ago, and it all happened because of those towers that were built down at the end of Van Ness and the two high-rise apartment buildings, and we're going to lower the height limit to forty feet. BCDC [Bay Conservation and Development Commission] came along, and we're going to control how you're going to use the port and stuff. Well, fifty years later there isn't any shipping out of San Francisco. There used to be a train that ran around here. The wheelhouses to turn the engines around up there at the corner of Sansome and Embarcadero. The whole thing is that you have to have active port activity. Well, there isn't any. It's all in Oakland, because the train doesn't come to this side of the bay. They unload in Oakland, it gets on a

train and goes to the east or north or south. But there isn't a train because the tunnels are not big enough to get the freight cars through. It was ridiculous to unload stuff in San Francisco, because the only way you'd get it out of San Francisco is to truck it.

The whole world has changed, and yet people are fighting about things. It's this Warriors Stadium, and there was the apartment project that was across the street from the Ferry Building and next to Golden Gateway. Wasn't blocking anybody's views because Golden Gateway already blocked everybody's views. It was just all, "We don't want anything to change." In San Francisco we've now got very high high-rises, buildings, and people are beginning to say, "Geez, this isn't too bad, this is okay." They're talking about the big one going up as Transbay Terminal. We got these gigantic ones up here, apartments and buildings. The world changes, and yet there's a whole thing in the Bay Area that says, "I want to freeze it." To me, life goes on. Well, what are we going to do now? You don't want to change every six months or years, but for fifty years, maybe there's a new thing that may happen.

I think that BART would never have been built today. Literally, there was talk in my day that the elevated Embarcadero Freeway was going to go from Fisherman's Wharf to Alcatraz to Angel Island and down the ridge of Tiburon. And I lived in Tiburon. I've always lived in Tiburon. Can you imagine even anybody proposing anything like that in today's world? Which is probably a good thing. But nobody proposed things like that.

05-00:31:06

Meeker:

There was one plan for a tunnel to go underneath the bay and actually run through the actual water of the bay?

05-00:31:11

Gensler:

Yeah. We were working as a firm on a scheme for the Transbay Terminal, which is stupid the way it is. But the AC Transit lady insisted it be parallel to Mission Street, not perpendicular to Mission Street. And it takes about another, I don't know how much longer, but it's a billion dollars more to get the train, if it ever comes—and I don't think it will—but if it ever comes downtown, to get and make the turns. There isn't enough length because the platform is too short for the trains that they bring. It doesn't make any sense. If it came in this way it would make some sense.

05-00:31:54

Meeker:

What train are you talking about? Are you talking about the—

05-00:31:55

Gensler:

The high-speed rail from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

05-00:31:57

Meeker:

The platform's not going to be big enough for the train?

05-00:32:00

Gensler:

No, no. They don't tell you that. And I've been bitching and moaning about this. It doesn't fit. And yet they're building the box. That's the whole construction right now. They got \$300 million to build a box. If I was a betting man, I'd give them a twenty to twenty-five percent chance that the box will ever be used. But it was \$300 million of shovel-ready work, so they went and spent \$300 million of your money and my money and built the wrong thing. It's not exactly what I think is a great idea, but it is a job.

We're learning in this town, slowly but surely. Things are happening but it's very difficult. One of the things that I like about our firm is that we work outside of San Francisco. There are always differences and challenges in every other place. But there are certainly, at least moving forward, and we're getting a lot done in this town. I love San Francisco, and I don't want it to be destroyed in any way. But it can't be frozen in time in the 1960s and remain that way forever. We made a huge breakthrough when we got the Embarcadero Freeway torn down. Did I tell you that story?

05-00:33:16

Meeker:

No.

05-00:33:16

Gensler:

Well, I was on the Chamber of Commerce Board. And when the freeway was busted—

05-00:33:24

Meeker:

This is after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake?

05-00:33:25

Gensler:

Yeah. Jim Harvey was the chairman of the board of Transamerica, and he was chairman of the board of the chamber. Well, there's an off-ramp on Clay and Pacific, one on each side of the Transamerica Tower. When I was on the board I was a kid, I don't know, fifty-four years old. He said, "Well, the chamber, we're going to come out and get this thing rebuilt." I said, "Wait a minute. Let's tear the damn thing down." "Oh, no, no. We're not going to do that." Everybody was thinking, "Who's this young punk yelling to tear it down?" And finally, finally, finally I got some people to start seeing that we had a real wonderful, wonderful opportunity to create the boulevard that Embarcadero has turned out to be. Although I wish they'd set the traffic lights better because I drive it every day in and out of work. I think they set them that way so people don't use it. I know they're trying to discourage me. But then I have to go down Columbus and weave my way down Montgomery and over here. So I don't like it that much. But the point is that that wouldn't have happened but a bunch of us finally said, "This is crazy. Why rebuild that?" And it's turned out to be fine.

It's interesting. Now there's talk with SPUR of taking down the 280 and stopping it down further and bringing it on the surface and a bunch of other

things, because it's dividing portions of this town. There was going to be an elevated thing that was going to go through Golden Gate Park and then to the Golden Gate Bridge. So a lot of good things have happened by resisting things, and I'm all in favor of that. But the waterfront is not going to be water-oriented all the way because there isn't any shipping or manufacturing or anything in San Francisco anyway. If we can have it open for people to wander and all that, that's terrific. But let's put some stuff there. And everybody's, "Oh, well, I don't want any traffic and I don't want this and I don't want that." And with the environmental review process and the BCDC, it's pretty damn difficult. I don't know what's going to happen on the Warriors, thing but I wouldn't be a betting man that it's going to happen.

05-00:35:49
Meeker:

That looks unlikely.

One of the interesting things about BART, and particularly in the design standards, was in fact the attention to access for people with disabilities. I know that you consulted with Allen Jenkins from Center for the Blind. There's a recognition in that that BART is going to have many different types of users. Obviously you're going to have your core commuters, but then you're also going to have tourists, you're going to have your off-hour users, you're going to have people with different nationalities, different access to the English language, and then also different physical abilities. I wonder if you could take me back to that time and, if possible, give me a sense of how it was that these notions of different users, particularly around physical ability—because I think it's really unique for that early on for that to be talked about.

05-00:36:44
Gensler:

It was clearly way before the ADA [the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990].

05-00:36:48
Meeker:

ADA wasn't until, what, '92 or something like that, so—

05-00:36:51
Gensler:

Yes. So it was way before that. It's actually ironic. I think the fact that Bill Wurster was in a wheelchair was important. And then we started looking at the kind of people. San Francisco, because it's a really cosmopolitan town with a lot of tourists, with lots of language difficulties, and Chinatown is kind of another part of it. Before, with Al Segal and Wurster Bernardi Emmons office out in the Fisherman's Wharf area, I spent a lot of time at Chinatown. The language is a problem. Not so much today, but then, when you were in Chinatown, you were in China. Man, there were not a lot of Chinese people speaking English. I used to eat lunch there every day when I was with Segal's office. There was a sense that maybe this was one of the things. A number of people on the team said, "This is something we could really make different and really distinguish ourselves." San Francisco is one of the communities that's always been in the forefront. All the curb cuts and the ramps at the

corners and the textures, pavements, and stuff, and the ADA access has always been a thing that San Francisco has had on its front burner, where in other communities they'd say, "Come on, we got to get this thing done. Don't worry about it." San Francisco for a long time has had an understanding that there's a variety of people in this community and we've got to take care of all of them.

There were some early activists who were saying, "Wait a second. You got to make sure you take care of us, and you got to do this." To the credit of the BART system people, they said, "We better talk to the people that are blind. We better talk to the hard of hearing. We better talk to the language handicapped." I would like to think that I was the guy that thought it up, but I don't think I was. I can remember being on the team and saying, "Yeah, I get it. And let's make sure we cover those issues, and let's find people that can help us." They were good about allowing us to bring in consultants who had some knowledge of the issues. There were people locally that did have that knowledge. And I think it's proven that it was the right thing to do, just for the patrons that they've got, but the right thing just for society to do. I'm very proud of what San Francisco does. They sometimes make it damn difficult.

One of the problems with this city, because of the hills, you can't get access. We've done buildings with ten stops in the building because the building is on a slope, and to get people in and out at different levels is just—for a building that should have four stops, and you've got ten of them to get all the levels to work as it works through the building. BART is a little bit that way. We tried to simplify it as much as we could. The system is probably twenty feet deeper in Market Street than it would have to be, and it could have saved a ton of money by not having concourses, where you either came up in sort of a center platform, you had side platforms, and you could have come up on either side. So you'd have to cross on the street level to get to the other side of the street. But we pushed it down twenty feet so that you come up to the concourse, you can go one way or the other, you can go underground to various ends rather than coming up just from where you get out. That was a big decision, because it meant twenty feet of additional depth in the muck. They build what they call slurry walls, which were these big concrete temporary walls. And then they tie them into buildings. I remember we tied it into the Emporium. Not many places actually tied into buildings, where you could go from BART right into something. That occurred at the level where you were boarding and ticketing, so you came out and then you could go left or right or up or down.

05-00:41:24

Meeker:

Concourse being a free area.

05-00:41:25

Gensler:

Concourse being a free area. I have not ridden BART enough to know whether that's used a lot or not and whether they put anything down there at

all. In New York, half the city's got stores and shops, but I don't think San Francisco ever got onto that.

05-00:41:40

Meeker: Peet's [Coffee and Tea] has been putting a lot of coffee shops into those areas.

05-00:41:44

Gensler: I haven't been in a long time.

05-00:41:46

Meeker: Yeah. Particularly in relation to accessibility, do you remember any particular innovations that your team came up with that would have made the BART system more accessible than the other systems that existed?

05-00:42:02

Gensler: Well, we did put elevators in at every place so that people could use elevators. And then we put escalators in every place, rather than making people walk up and down stairs. We said, "We've got to get people comfortable moving vertically." There was texture put at the edges of the platform on the pavement, so that a person with a handicap could feel it with their stick and see when they were getting nearer the edge. And I think there were speaker systems so that we could have ways of communicating to people what's going on. There was a lot of thinking about what happens if a train gets stuck in the middle of the bay, and how do you get out of that darn thing and walk along walkways in the tunnels. A lot of other stuff that they had looked at in other systems, but I think BART, to their credit, thought about those kinds of things more than almost anybody you could imagine. Now, today it would be second nature, but it clearly was not in those days.

05-00:43:19

Meeker: Can you talk a little bit about the uniqueness of it, the entire system put together, in the sense that there's both urban as well as suburban stations, thus requiring very different uses. It seems obvious now, right, that the Powell Street station would have to look a lot different than the Walnut Creek Station. How were these differences recognized early on, and how were they then codified?

05-00:43:58

Gensler: I think there were two ways they were recognized. One, we literally had a whole set of people that were suburban, aboveground stuff, and then there was a different set of people that were working on urban stations, underground stations. Skidmore had some, and the McCue organization had one in Oakland, and some other people. I can't remember—Hertzka and Knowles had one in the ground.

05-00:44:26

Meeker: These are the project architects for the different stations?

05-00:44:28

Gensler:

For stations. They were attacking it quite differently. They were assignments, and they weren't thinking. In the suburban stations, it's how do you get the people coming in and going out, and then in the urban ones, it was all getting them from their office in and out. A lot of people reverse commute now. They live in the city and work in Oakland or in the East Bay, because they want to live in the city, or up and down the peninsula.

But the architects were good architects and well-thought-of firms. We did some early studies with the Oakland one, with McCue. They were the first that we really thought through it with. Because it had all the problems of coming up in Oakland City Center, and all the things that happened over there. How do you get up, and how do you get transfers from trains that are going east and west, and other trains going north and south? It crosses there. That's the only place in the system it crosses. And how do you phase that, and keep them in the same fare collection zone so they don't have to go out and then come back in? It's actually tricky to do that, and yet you have to do it. Do you bring them all the way up and down? Did you have side platforms or center platforms? That makes a big difference in how it works out. So most of the suburban stations are center platforms and most of the downtown ones are side platform stations.

05-00:46:20

Meeker:

So how is this mapped out, when you were working with the engineers?

05-00:46:27

Gensler:

It was initially mapped out by the engineers in their original composite report. They had some rough sketches of each station—because one of the things that they had to do was identify sites in these communities where they could put the station. How you could get out of the darn thing and get into it, and so roads, and what you could purchase and what it was going to cost, and how big would the parking lots generally be, and how much land could they acquire? We had to still run stuff on Market Street even though the box is the width of Market Street and goes right up to the property. In San Francisco, the office buildings can build under the sidewalks and other buildings. So the basements of buildings on Market Street are actually at the sidewalk road edge, and then the BART boxes go down at the sidewalk edge and take that whole space where the road is. I don't think we had a lot of stuff in here, but we did it. Like the beautification of Market Street was a huge effort, the fact that it was going to have brick sidewalks from the Ferry Building to the City Hall, and they were going to have these plane trees and all the other things. And the street furniture. That was a whole other area that we worked on. I think [Lawrence] Halprin did a lot of that, if I'm not mistaken.

05-00:48:00

Meeker:

The fare collection also was one of the interesting and probably more difficult pieces in this. It was unique in that it was self-service, it was meant to be universally comprehensible. It was distance rated, as you said. It was flexible,

expandable. You needed to provide barriers. There were reversible gates to depend on—

05-00:48:24

Gensler: Yeah, traffic flow.

05-00:48:26

Meeker: —traffic flow. Were these known? Were all those factors known? Were they presented to you to say, “This is what it’s going to be like?”

05-00:48:35

Gensler: No, they were not known. We’d have these committees and groups that would work on various sections of this, and we’d start ‘what if’. There was a lot of ‘what ifting’. The engineers would say, “Well, this is the way we’ve assumed it, and this is the way we priced it.” But when you got into the details that were not known at all, how you’re going to accomplish it with knowing even less, it was sort of, “This is a dream. Somebody’s got to figure out how to do this.” The BART system was the first variable pricing system that had ever been done as an electronic system. Again, if you go to London, which is variable pricing, you get your ticket and you go from point A to point B. If you haven’t got enough money on that ticket you could just go up to a machine and say, “I’m here in this station. I’m going to station A.” You had to punch in what you wanted, and then you got a ticket. Well, we didn’t even think about that. One of the things actually that was really interesting was that the map of the system, and I think Ernest Borne actually developed the map of this system—so you could stand and look at a BART map and say, “Well, I’m going from there to there and I got to do this,” and the pricing was on that map in the early days.

Those were things that came out of the analysis. I can’t remember whether it was a year of analysis and working to put this book together. When I started and when I finished. It was probably a year, year and a half of time. I finished, and then there was still another six months of implementing, working with teams and seeing whether things worked and made sense. By and large, the information we gave them worked. There was never any, “I can’t work with this, guys, I’ve got to have something else.”

05-00:50:39

Meeker: Was there a lot of whiteboarding and sketching out of different flows of—

05-00:50:42

Gensler: I think so, although there weren’t whiteboards. We didn’t have post-its and a lot of that stuff available to us then. You sat around at a table with a yellow roll of tracing paper and sketched. It wasn’t the way it is today. Of course you had no visualization capabilities, renderings and stuff which we do today with CAD and all the systems that we have. You had triangles and T squares or parallel rules. Parallel rule was as sophisticated as it got, and they were pretty new at the time. They were just in but not really. We had T squares. You had a

compass to make a circle. It was pretty primitive in those days, yet we built the system, and that's something all of us that were involved in it ultimately are pretty proud of, that it actually turned the button and it worked.

05-00:51:50

Meeker:

Well, speaking of technology, one of the interesting things that I came across that is I think revolutionary is the several references to the use of magnetic strips on fare tickets. This is from 1965. I went and looked back, and the first mention of magnetic strips in an experimental context was only 1960. Magnetic strips weren't really even used in the commercial sense until 1969. So this was four years before they're actually commercially available and it's already made it into the design standards about this is how the tickets should be done, probably because you need a ticket in and out.

05-00:52:37

Gensler:

I wish I could remember who came up with that. They said, "We're going to figure this out. We don't know how we're going to do it, but that's the way we're going to do it." To the credit of the leadership of the program, there were people that had enough vision and guts, and I mean guts in a serious manner, had enough courage to say, "We're going to build a system, and the world's going to come along with this and figure out how to do a lot of these things that we hadn't been able to do." It was like the train screen I talked about earlier. Everybody believed that they would come back later and put it in, and they could, and I'm actually disappointed. I think that's been money why they haven't done it. It would be a hell of an improvement if they did. Especially the below-grade stations, where the blast comes down and the noise and all.

05-00:53:33

Meeker:

Not to mention safety.

05-00:53:35

Gensler:

Basically, safety. As you get crowds of people pushing, all you need is to push one person into the damn thing and it's a disaster on your hands. I think that there was a belief that those things were going to happen, that they would figure out a way to make it happen. They were putting out proposals to fare collection people to come up with solutions. So that was the way it would be done. They'd put an RFP out to companies like they put it out for car design. I remember spending hours and hours on the car design and that bull nose that we have, that sort of front bull nose. I thought that was pretty slick. Initially, and I was clearly wrong, I always thought BART was a terrible name. I thought it was like Bat Masterson or some cowboy. I thought that was a lousy name.

05-00:54:32

Meeker:

Did you have an alternative?

05-00:54:33

Gensler:

I don't know if I had an alternative, but I sure remember being opposed to that one. We'd argue a lot about should it be called BART, or SFBART rather than BART. There was a lot of discussion. I think Bechtel and Tudor and Parsons, they were pretty good people they had brought in to be general managers and leaders of this program. We would have these discussions that would go on all afternoon in their offices about the train and the seats and the configuration of the seats, and do you have hang rails or don't you have people standing—is everybody going to get a seat? I think initially they believed everybody was going to get a seat. There was nobody standing. We'd have trains frequent enough that nobody would have to stand. Well, of course, that didn't last long, which is the good news and the bad news. And should the seats be fabric-covered or should we use fiberglass? I think they were metal because there wasn't any fiberglass in those days. Seats. Does everybody stand? There were just a round of things.

05-00:55:53

Meeker:

Do you recall how it was that they came up with the particular configuration of seats and the kinds of seats?

05-00:55:56

Gensler:

We built a mockup. They built a mockup of a whole car, and we would all go in and bitch and moan about this, and do we want carpet on the floor, or linoleum, or metal floors? And lighting. In New York they just got a fan up there. You'd get your arm chopped off if you put it up in the old cars. Were these cars going to be air conditioned? Are you going to be able to open the windows? You go air conditioning. All sorts of things that were really foreign. Probably in those days we thought we were like space age, developing stuff like Star Wars, which was before Star Wars. But that we were developing things. The car was really—now I see there's some that don't have that bull nose piece on it, they just ride with a flat front. But that was a pretty neat little deal because they don't want to turn them around, so you need them at both ends. They don't have like a roundhouse where you can turn the engine around.

05-00:57:08

Meeker:

The bull nose piece, was that a pure design element or was that aerodynamics?

05-00:57:13

Gensler:

Well, I think it was a little of aerodynamics, but it was a design element to make the car look spiffy and to really have something rather than just the front end, one end of a car that just sort of blunts its way. I think they wanted to make it kind of sleek and streamlined.

05-00:57:30

Meeker:

Did you play a role in designing that?

05-00:57:32

Gensler:

Part of the critique team. We were an advisor in that regard to those, and everything from the elevated structure to the form of the hexagonal column, rather than a rectangular column, and the shape of the bottom in the flanges on the big truss beams that go between the elevated structure and support. That was the way it was done.

05-00:58:03

Meeker:

The interiors were really luxe. There was carpet. The seats were fabric. As you said, there was air conditioning. This is extremely different than, I'm thinking, New York subways at the time. They were dirty. It wasn't until the 1970s that they got covered in graffiti and everything. But it was a very different—

05-00:58:25

Gensler:

Well, it was. It was a real breakthrough. They were trying to make a really quality experience for people coming in, because the suburbs were really the big thing to San Francisco. They wanted to be able to bring people in. San Francisco, in a sense, was saying, "We don't want a lot more housing in the city. People want to live in the suburbs." And people did. There was no question. There was a huge push to get out of the city, for schooling and for other things, and how are we going to get all these people [back to the city]? You can't cross the Bay Bridge. And the creativity of putting the tunnel under the bay, which they channeled a thing and then floated these gigantic elements, two double tubes, and dropped them into the bay and plugged them together and then put dirt back on top. That's the way the tunnel was put in.

There was a group of people that had a vision. And today, you wouldn't have the nonsense that the two Browns, Willie and Jerry, argued over the bridge replacement. I don't know. It's all right, I guess. But a lot of money spent on a thing that doesn't do anything. I don't mean to be negative, but they could have had that causeway just go all the way to Treasure Island and that would have been fine. There's no boat traffic going on the east side of Treasure Island. But that's what they wanted, and they spent billions of dollars to get it. We didn't seem to have that interference from the city or the mayor and the board of supervisors getting in, design review committees and planning commission people arguing about everything. I can't remember really anything of impact, interference, or involvement, frankly, with the city. Even Market Street was pretty much done by the system rather than a lot of people in the city getting involved and arguing and screaming and yelling. They said this is what we want to do. They put these granite curbs in and all sorts of stuff that was pretty spectacular.

Audio File 6

06-00:00:10

Meeker:

This is Meeker interviewing Gensler. This is tape six. We were talking a little bit about BART, how you guys were not looking back to a subway in New

York or systems in Europe but rather to futuristic models. The monorail at Disneyland or the transportation systems at world fairs: Did any of those forward-looking transportation systems play a role?

06-00:00:40

Gensler:

I think it was very, very influential on us ultimately. I'm sure we kept thinking those were certainly a level. To Disneyland's credit, they were doing stuff that nobody else was doing. There was even a discussion at one time of whether it should be a monorail versus a hard rail thing. I can't remember exactly how that came about. We worked later with some concepts in L.A., monorails and other things to move people around the L.A. Basin, because that's a nightmare. They've gone to a hard rail system, but it hasn't been very successful compared to BART. I don't know what the capacity and carrying are. BART, to its credit, has been growing and growing and growing. It'll be interesting to see whether Caltrain ever converts to being a BART system and really ties that whole loop around the bay. I don't see it going to the north bay. I don't see the need for that yet, or even ever.

06-00:01:52

Meeker:

Going to Marin was part of the original BART plan.

06-00:01:54

Gensler:

Oh, it definitely was, and Marin voted against it, as did the Peninsula. I was even involved in studies of whether you could hang it under the Golden Gate Bridge, which in fact you could.

06-00:02:10

Meeker:

Really?

06-00:02:10

Gensler:

Yeah. There were people that said, "Oh, we couldn't possibly put it [there]." They could have actually hung underneath the Golden Gate Bridge.

06-00:02:18

Meeker:

That would be a thrill ride.

06-00:02:19

Gensler:

Yeah. Wild ride. There are a lot of options. I think they're going to end up having to put another tunnel across the bay pretty soon. My guess. The capacity, I think, they're going to finally choke themselves to death trying to get one line down through Market Street. Whether it runs down Mission or where it runs, I don't know.

06-00:02:45

Meeker:

You had mentioned some of the things that were not factors then that would be a factor today. The environmental impact reports, organizations like BCDC. The meddling of local politicians. I'm wondering about a couple of other things: concern about the homeless and ways in which they have a tendency to use public space that maybe makes other, regular commuters not want to use public space. Crime. Terrorism and sabotage. You referred briefly

to washrooms and toilets and food and drink. Were these issues that—were any of those issues concerns?

06-00:03:30

Gensler:

No, I don't think any of them were issues then. I don't think any of us even thought about those. To be honest, the streets were pretty safe. You didn't see the homeless that we see today. The terrorism, it was a word not even known, I suspect. The use of public space is an interesting one. I think that BART was just assuming, like they do with the restrooms, they were just not going to tolerate it, and so we're not going to worry about it and it's too much of a problem. It is a problem in New York and other places. Yet I don't know, to be honest with you, how they've handled it. I've never heard an issue, and I know we have a big BART police force, how they keep from having homeless people live down there at night. Why they don't go down and stay in the concourse is beyond me. Maybe they do, for all I know.

The world has become much more complicated. There's a graph, and I can diagram it. I can describe it and diagram it. It's how I think about my business and my life and everything else. It is called the rate of change. I had heard about it just in 1966. I went to a conference on moving. Herman Miller had a conference on a new product called office landscape, the stuff that now became the cubicles of the world. It was the first system, called AO2, and a guy named Bob Propst was the developer of the system for Herman Miller. He made a talk about the rate of change. The rate of change is kind of a sweeping hockey stick shape, the concept being that what my great-grandfather did and my grandfather did were pretty much the same thing, and maybe my father had a little more advanced, and I'm now in the beginning of things. We're going along. And all of a sudden technology and a lot of other things have changed, and now we're going almost straight up. The knowledge [that had previously been created] in a hundred years is practically being created every day, every six months in today's world. And the changes that knowledge, information, data has caused is that the rate of change is on a rocket ship going up. What that means is a lot of things.

For example, we designed buildings, and it's hard for me to say this, but probably the best thing would be if the building would, at the end of thirty or forty years, just disappear. Poof, disappear, and you could do something else. But we now live in a world that says, "That's fifty years old. That's historical. We don't want to take anything down that's historic." Well, we got a bunch of crap that was built right after the Second World War that is junk. It was just thrown up to get some stuff and now people say, "Yeah, but it's fifty years old. It's historic." Well, it's a piece of historic junk. Just because it's old doesn't mean it's good. No, there's some good stuff and that ought to stay, but there's plenty of bad that ought to go.

What's happened is that center cities are being forced to go out and out and out, because you can't tear down these buildings that you should frankly tear

down. The mechanical systems don't work, the electrical systems don't work. The curtain walls have no thermal value and the glass is single pane and doesn't reflect heat, and the light is terrible. There's nothing redeeming about them. We have projects where you could replace the building for \$200 and it cost you \$400 to rehab a piece of junk. Well, why would you invest your money that way? Yet we as a society do that. It's all about this sense of rate of change. Now we do adaptive reuse. We take office buildings, we convert them into condos. And that may be okay. There's one right now on Van Ness, the C-AAA [California-American Automobile Association] building there, where there was an office building and they're going to make it condos. They're going to have to reskin the building. All they're keeping up is the steel, and I'm sure the steel has to be braced and changed. It probably would have been just simpler to take the whole damn thing down and put it up. But the codes and the fights, community fights and the environmental things, it's just easier to keep something up and then fix it.

So we live in a world right now that is totally different than the world of the sixties. This rate of change is something that America, not only the Bay Area, but the whole country and the world, has to start living with. Things are dynamic now that they were never before. They're also far more complicated. Before you could get five people in a room, make a decision, and do it.

I was talking a little earlier about the Embarcadero Freeway and there was one point I wanted to make. Art Agnos was the mayor, and I was pushing to get it torn down. I went to a framing shop to have a picture framed and I saw a poster, a picture of the Ferry Building and, believe it or not, there were streetcars. They went down underneath the street and then up on the other side, and there was a gigantic plaza in front of the Ferry Building. And I said, "Art, this is something. Look, if they could do it in the 1900s, why the hell can't we just do that now and have this wonderful plaza there? We don't have the elevated freeway and we don't have any traffic. Market Street can end in this gigantic wonderful plaza, and wouldn't it be terrific?" And Art used to walk around with this thing rolled up. He'd unroll it at all the meetings, say, "Let's do this. Let's do it." Then in the end, "Oh, we can't afford to do it." Well, Christ, if we could do it in 1890 or 1900, you ought to be able to do it now. Wouldn't it be better than this thing we've got now? If you'd just had the traffic run right underneath a plaza, I mean in front of the Ferry Building. But you argue about stuff and you do this.

There's a group of people that are really uncomfortable with change. They know what they know, and they don't want to know about other things. They wanted to freeze it, stay where it is, and remember the past. It's like my business. When I first started, I had to put wingback chairs in lawyers' offices and all this frou-frou wooden paneling with moldings. It looked like you were in some Georgian home or something, and that was a law firm because they were impressive. Today it's none of that stuff. It's all gone. And yet, if you go to the lawyer's house, he'll have it in his house. The wingback chairs and the

panels and all that stuff. So they live one way but they work another. Well, before, they lived and worked the same way.

There's this whole evolution that's happening, that we put everything on wheels so we can move it and change it and shift it, open plan. Maybe we've gone too far and we back off a little. But there's a total change because of this rate of change. As a society, we have to deal with it. As an architect and a designer I have to deal with it all the time, because there's new technology. I was on a cruise ship last week and all of a sudden I got this idea, a very simple idea, about all the buildings that we build for offices, where you have a central core and a ring of offices around the perimeter. Well, that isn't what we ought to be doing anymore. What we ought to be doing is putting the core where the elevators and the restrooms and the stairs are, on each end of the box, and have one big giant open space in the middle where everything can just flow back and forth, shift and move around. It would be much better, more effective and efficient, and it's a form that we've used. We've done some stuff like that, but not much. After I finish here, I'm going to do some sketches and send it to our architectural office, people that do corporate office buildings, and develop our buildings. I think that the market out there is much more interested in that kind of space, and that's why they like these old buildings with big open spaces like we've got here, not the center core standard high-rise building.

The real estate brokers and the developers will have trouble, as they did when we brought in sustainable and said, "Hey, wait a sec. You got to do these LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design] things, gold and bronze and platinum and all that stuff." "I don't understand this. No, no, no." And all of a sudden the tenants start saying, "What kind of a building is this? Is it a sustainable building?" Well, I'm pretty confident, and I'm right, that if we build a building like this it'll be the hottest building going in the marketplace. So that's my next charge. But I think that as a businessman or an architect or a person, one has to start thinking about the rate of change of society and what things are going to happen. It's technology, but it's just everything. Technology is obviously driving the biggest bulk of it, but it's just the fact of globalization.

I was literally last week down adjacent to Antarctica and now I'm standing here talking to you guys. That didn't happen before, but it does now. My partners are all leaving tomorrow to go to Abu Dhabi to have a Gensler board meeting. A U.S. architecture firm is having a board meeting in Abu Dhabi? Why? Well, we've got a lot of business in Abu Dhabi. It's different. Until you've actually walked the ground and seen it, you can't imagine what it's like, and they're trying to run a business without really understanding. A few of us have been there and we understand what it is. We've got offices there, and we need to have our other senior management people understand. I just was working this morning on the board book that we put together, talking about the tax implications of working in ninety countries, which we do, and

the complexities of inner branch between an office that's working in Sydney and in Singapore. Both offices are working on it and, in fact, the taxes going back. Those things didn't exist before. Life was a lot simpler, but the world we're going to live in, and we're living in now, is going to get more complicated, not less.

I'm working right now on a project which Berkeley's going to face and is facing: distance learning and online learning. There's been some really interesting articles about, well, the faculty doesn't want to do that. They want to teach the way they've always taught. We're going to get the really great lecturers to do it and then they're going to be online, and then there's going to be other ways that you interact with the students. And, "Well, I don't want to do that." Well, the world is moving, and whether you want to or don't, the world is going to change. The system, whatever that system is, educated students.

And I'm working with CCA [California College of the Arts], the architecture design school in the city and in Oakland, how they're going to go for the next thirty, forty years. We've just been commissioned to do that. Tremendously interesting. We haven't done it before, but I've got people. I actually hired a college president who's joined our firm to help me get through, because I believe that the way we educate people is going to be totally different in the future than it is today. The California Teachers Association, "I want twenty-three kids in a class, not thirty-two, and I want this, and I want that." That may be all fine for them, but ultimately it's like everything else. The pressures build and build and build, because the world is changing and kids are not learning properly. We've got to get back to teaching kids how to learn and get them to learn, get them excited about learning and be ready for this world. The rest of the world is catching up to us and passing us, and it's embarrassing for a country as capable as we are of dropping behind these other places.

06-00:16:43
Meeker:

It's similar to what we were talking about as far as the waterfront here, where you have the longshoremen's union battling with the city about an industry that was no longer here. It's similar to what's happening with teachers. When you heard this message at this Herman Miller conference in '66, was this something that was scary to you? Was this something that was an education?

06-00:17:11
Gensler:

No, no, it's exciting to me. It's exciting. But it was interesting. Of all the messages that I've ever received at a conference, and I don't go to many anymore because I've sort of heard all the stories, and I want our people to be more up-to-date than I am. It's more important that they get there than I do. But it was a game-changer for me. It was something I never thought about. Here was this new furniture system. At the time I was doing interiors. I needed to understand what it was all about and why it was here and what was happening, so it was a real game-changer for me that, gee, these walls were

going to move around and people were going to be able to raise their desk or lower their desk, or files would be over there. We were gray army desk kind of world. Thirty-by-sixty desk and that was it. You got a desk chair and there was maybe a file cabinet, two-drawer file cabinet next to you or something. I don't know. It's a different world.

All of a sudden, why was that happening? The light bulb that went on in my head was the world is changing, and I got to get on the change side of this thing rather than on the wait-and-see. Now, I'm a second-in kind of guy. I don't like to be the first guy doing something. I like to be the second or third, but not the last. I want to be right there behind. The first guy is usually going to end up going and then tank because they have overreached and they haven't got it all together. So let the first guy take the flak, and then come marching in and see what's left. That's probably the stuff that you have to worry about. I do believe, strongly, that we are living and we will continue to live in a more rapidly changing environment and society than we have even begun to imagine. To think that Twitter or Facebook has a billion people. It's just inconceivable. You could never have conceived that five years ago or ten years ago, although I guess Facebook's ten years old.

06-00:19:41
Meeker:

Ten years old now, yeah.

06-00:19:43
Gensler:

Which I find also staggering. I still don't know what it is.

06-00:19:46
Meeker:

Well, ten years ago they were just college campuses—

06-00:19:50
Gensler:

But the point is look now there are a billion people. In ten years they've gone from zero to a billion—but it's like our firm. Ten years ago we were probably a thousand; now we're four thousand. It's inconceivable that we're four thousand. When I started this business, my hope was to get to six people. That's it. I was hoping to maybe have six people, and I would do nice houses and maybe an office or a store or something. That was my hope and dream, that I would do that, although I never really planned anything. I'm giving commencement addresses now to schools. Unanticipated opportunities is the word that I'm using. The whole philosophy is that you go where the flow is, and if the opportunity falls in your lap you grab it and you run with it. I'll tell you about some of those at some time when we talk, because there's some really great unanticipated opportunity stories. We can do it now or later.

The big thing is that these young people coming out of college, I want them to get a job. I don't care if it's the perfect job or the right job. Get in the workforce and start, and don't plan on your next five years what you're going to do. You're going to go from here to here to here, because that isn't going to happen anyways, so don't waste your time on it. Just get in and start seeing

what happens. I'm sure both of you didn't think that you were going to be doing what you're doing, and probably didn't even exist when you graduated. But the point is that I certainly never knew and anticipated I'd be worrying about tax returns in Thailand versus the tax returns in Australia. That's certainly about as far away from my thinking as could possibly be. But I am now, and you go with the flow and where it is. If you're not afraid, and I'm not afraid particularly, then what a wonderful trip it can be. That's the fun of it to me, and why I come to work every day, because I want to be a part of this changing world we live in.

06-00:22:05

Meeker:

Let's back up a little bit, but actually not off-topic of what we were just talking about. I'd like you to talk a little bit more about Wurster. I know that you had some experience with him and that he was sort of on the decline, if you will, at that point in time. Our office actually did an interview with him in I think the late 1960s, a long interview with him. And there are a couple of quotes out of the interview that I'd like to share with you.

06-00:22:38

Gensler:

Sure, I'd love to hear them.

06-00:22:39

Meeker:

One of them is actually kind of awesome, what we were just talking about, so it's apropos. He says, "Education in architecture is a ten-year cycle. Five years in school and five years in an office. My attitude is that to teach facts is to outdate education even before you start because facts change. I don't want a skilled whiz in my office but I do want an inquiring mind." What do you think of this approach?

06-00:23:04

Gensler:

He was right on then, and it's even more true today. And his five and five is about right. You come out and you really don't know anything; it takes you a period of time to learn it. Things were a lot simpler and we were trying to do things simpler, you could maybe grasp it in five years and have a pretty good feeling. I could literally start an office and actually know what the hell's going on and know the things I had to do. Today it is so complicated and so technical. There's so many pieces to it. It's inconceivable to me that you could come out and just start doing stuff and think you can really make a difference. I'm a great believer in we all have a chance to make a difference, so the ideas that Bill had then—when I went and saw him and said I wanted to start a firm, he said, "Of course you ought to start a firm. You've been five years out, and now it's time you go try it out." Well, that sounds good then, but I'm not sure if I was that age now I'd have the courage or the balls to go out there and try what I tried. Hopefully I would, and hopefully my kids will. Actually, it's funny. One of my grandchildren starts Monday with our L.A. office. She just graduated with a master's from Cornell in architecture, so we'll see what happens, whether she's going to stay with the firm or stay with the business or what. It's an interesting world out there today.

One of the things, and I digress, but I'm not in a sense digressing. The registration boards in the various states have requirements for businesses that are in the profession. Law firms have it, and now they call themselves LLPs and a bunch of other things. But in architecture, in the state of New York, it's still required that all owners be registered architects. Well, it's the stupidest law you could imagine, because we have accountants and lawyers and interior designers and businesspeople who all make up a firm right now. As I said, I got a president of a college, and I got the former head of the GSA working for the firm. They're not principals of the firms or owners yet, but they will be, I hope, in some time. Certainly those other initial group are all working as principals and owners. And the idea to say, well, only architects can be owners of a firm is so outdated, and yet you can't go up to the state of New York and change it for some ungodly reason because a few architects, "Well, it's a profession, we want the integrity of the profession." It's all nonsense.

So we have a phony company which I own called Gensler, PC, professional corporation. Gensler PC doesn't do anything. It farms out all of its work. Probably shouldn't say this, but it farms out all its work to Gensler, Inc., which has all these other people, and that's how we get around the law. But I don't like getting around the law. I'd like the law to be intelligent enough to know what is the world that we live in. The world that we live in is an architect doing anything more than a single-family residence, it's damn complicated and it takes talent, a lot of people's talent. I always said you take somebody to get the job, somebody to write a decent contract and negotiate a decent fee, somebody to plan the project properly and design it properly, somebody to get the drawings done, somebody to get it built, and somebody to collect the fees. You need, we call it in this firm a constellation of stars rather than a star system of Joe Blow, the name on the door is the designer and God and controls all activities. That model, to me, doesn't work anymore. Certainly it doesn't work in our firm.

I just think that you have to have this blending of people, because the world is more complicated. Our IT department is running almost a billion-dollar business, and we have people all over the world. I can dial a number and a guy in Singapore picks up the phone. Why do we do that? Because that's the kind of world we live in. You've got to communicate instantaneously with people. I was, as I say, down in the end of the world, down by Antarctica. And yet I'm sitting on my email sending instant message to the people here. "Gee, that sounds like a great idea." Can you imagine even thinking that would be possible in a place that remote? That you could sit there and do emails to people, and they're getting them ten seconds later? But that's what architecture is today.

And again, I keep saying there's no one way to practice or design. There's the single practitioner. If he wants to do that, God bless him, I think it's terrific. There's the medium-sized local firm, maybe specializes in schools or something, or housing, multiple-family housing, and that's fine. But if you

want to be anything with multiple practice areas or multiple locations, you just are in a whole different environment. It's this whole thing of dislocation. I'm sitting there reading, "Well, so-and-so is going to relocate from here to Singapore. We're going to put our finance people down there, and we want somebody on our finance team here in San Francisco, in the headquarters, to go down and run a finance team, and we'll hire some locals." People in Gensler are moving all over the place. I would hate to look at the bill that we pay for relocating people. The travel bill must be astronomical, just planes and housing people. What it costs to send twenty people to Abu Dhabi, I have no idea, but it's a lot of money.

But it's the way you got to be. They'll never be great until they go and see it on the ground. You can do all the stuff, Skype, and videoconferencing and all that stuff, but until you walk the dirt and kick the tires, it's hard to do stuff. Businesses today are going to have to compete. We've got to go right to their door and compete with them. We can't just compete as a country sitting back here saying, "Well, you come to us." It's an interesting, interesting time, and I am more excited than ever. I'm hoping to live a lot longer, and so far I'm doing okay. This is the challenge that we all face today, that I didn't when I started. Never dreamed it would come at me, but it certainly has, and I've loved every minute of it. I wouldn't do it any other way.

06-00:31:04

Meeker:

Well, speaking of when you started. I still want to get a little bit more thought about where you were and what you were thinking at that point in time that you did decide to break off from Wurster.

06-00:31:17

Gensler:

Well, I think every architect is told at school that he's not a real architect unless he has his own firm. If you were a secondary kind of guy or gal, and there weren't many gals doing it, then you worked for somebody else. But if you were really an architect, you had your name on the door. That's what architects did. That's what I was told at school, and I was pushed. The faculty would promote that. The idea was not to go to work for—and there were firms like Skidmore, which were maybe three hundred people in those days. You went there for a little training, but then you'd go on your own. You wanted to have your own name and your own thing, and that was what it was all about. You practiced that way.

06-00:32:11

Meeker:

Sort of like a doctor putting a shingle up.

06-00:32:12

Gensler:

Yeah, a doctor or a lawyer putting a shingle up. And then they started building a little larger law firms, but they were local. Then they got larger, and then in the last ten years they've put these giant multiple international firms together. But that was not the way things were thought about. So when I went to Bill Wurster and said, "Mr. Wurster, I'm thinking of starting a business," he was,

“Well, of course you’re going to start a business. You’ve done pretty well here. You can then start a business.” And [I was] like, “Okay, now what the hell do I do? How do you start a business?”

06-00:32:53

Meeker:

Did his mentoring of you go beyond simply suggesting that—

06-00:32:57

Gensler:

I’m a pretty good observer of what goes on. I didn’t ever sit down with him or anybody and talk to him about how you start a business. I read a little bit, and I watched how other people ran their businesses, what they did and didn’t do. I’d worked for five or six firms, so I’d seen what I thought was good about the way they treated people, paid people, policies and things. I had an idea of what I wanted, but not really. When I got this unanticipated opportunity to start a firm, because Don Wudtke, my guy who had been at Wurster, bitched and moaned to the developer of the Golden Gateway, when he was working on the project, that, “You were a lousy client. You don’t know how to give me the information that I need and decisions that I need.” And they said, “Okay, smartass. You become the development manager.”

So he left architecture and became a development manager of the Golden Gateway. He was running that project and then the Alcoa Building, which is now One Maritime Plaza. That came along, and they needed somebody to do the tenant work. They had hired Skidmore to do the building and they needed somebody to put the tenants in there. They had hired a real estate broker, a guy named Mike Robbins. He was going to call on the various potential tenants and try to encourage them, but he needed somebody to go with him and say, “I’ll show you how you fit in the building, how much space you need to take and what’ll it cost you in terms of improvements, and how much the rent will be because of the space you take and what floor in the building,” and all that. It was all priced by floor, higher as you went up. If you were in the bay side, you paid more than if you were on the city side.

There were two firms in town. There was Saphier, Lerner, Schindler, a New York firm, had a little branch out here, was doing 44 Montgomery Street, and another firm, I’ll think of their name in a minute [Whisler Patri]. They were doing the Hartford Building, the competing building at the time. He said, “I can’t find anybody that wants to do interiors.” Architects specify Barcelona chairs and a Barcelona table, put it in the lobby and say, “I’m an interior designer.” There were some furniture dealers who would come in and design space for you. But they did not do working drawings or figure the ceiling systems out and all that stuff, so I had to do that stuff, work with a mechanical coordinator.

Anyway, he and I were drinking and I said, “Well, I bet I could start a firm and do that. That doesn’t sound very hard.” That’s when I went to Bill Wurster. I got the Golden Gateway people to agree that if I tried it for three

months and it didn't work, because I was a start-up and it may not work, they didn't want to commit. So I got a three-month deal. I said, "You got to pay me every two weeks," because I had 200 bucks in the bank. I went to Bill Wurster and said, "Mr. Wurster, I got to keep working partly to keep a little income." I had three kids by that time, and we lived in Tiburon. Maybe we bought our first house at \$26,000 over there, or \$28,000. He said, "Well, of course. You ought to start your firm. You'll do great." Didn't know me that well, but he said, "You'll do great." So I would work for him in the mornings on finishing up some stuff on BART and some other things, that little stuff that I was doing, and I'd go off in the afternoons and meet with the tenants. Then I'd work at night and draw everything up. For three months I tried that, and they said, "Okay, you're doing fine."

I rented space in the back of the office of Henry Hill, the guy who came to Cornell as a visiting critic and said I should come to California. A landscape architect [Royston Hanamoto Beck & Abey] had been in there, so there were some drawing boards. It was a little one-story walkup on Clay Street across the street from where the Transamerica Pyramid is right now. The drafting room had a beaded curtain as the door, and we had an ammonia tube for making prints. We swept our own floors and cleaned our own toilets. Just four drafting boards in the back, and my wife came in as the secretary, the office manager, and the accountant one day a week. She had worked for some other architects, so knew a little bit about architecture systems as a sort of secretary and assistant, and we got started. A friend of mine at Wurster said, "Well, I met a guy who's with a design build company doing stuff and he's really a good draftsman." Guy named Jim Follett. So January 1 when we started, in '66—the firm actually got started in the fall of '65—January of '66 we actually opened the door and put our name on the door. Jim came and he was a great draftsman, but he wasn't a college graduate. He had a little college. But he later got his license and became an FAIA and a whole bunch of other things.

He started, and then maybe two or three months later my former boss in Jamaica, Hal Edelstein, called and said, "I'm in Florida, I'm going through a divorce, I want to get out of here. I'm remarried." So he came. We were in our house, because I remember they couldn't get up the hill. They had pulled a U-Haul, a trailer with all their possessions with a Nash Rambler. He opened this folder up to return the trailer and said, "This is not insured if you use a Rambler to pull it." Why it ever said on the U-Haul—which he had driven from Florida all the way out here. Hal was probably ten or twelve years older than I am.

06-00:40:07
Meeker:

Was he British?

06-00:40:09
Gensler:

No. He was Jewish, a guy who had grown up and went to RPI. Grew up on the East Coast. I'm not sure how he got to Jamaica, but he was running an office

there that I worked for for a short period of time, and we became friends. He was a technical guy. He really knew how to put the drawings together, the codes and all that stuff. So he set up all our systems in terms of process, and I did the design work, and Jim drew it up. The three of us went alone, and then we started getting more opportunities, and then a group of people came along, and here we are today.

06-00:40:54

Meeker:

Let me back up a little bit, because I feel like you kind of went over a little too quickly the early phase, when Don Wudtke was working with the Golden Gateway project. Can you provide a little more clarification and detail about what his role was, why he was dissatisfied with the current situation, and then how his role transformed?

06-00:41:24

Gensler:

Well, the Golden Gateway—they called it the Alcoa Building, but the Alcoa people never even moved into the building. They just contributed some financing. There were some local people that helped finance it. That area had been the meat market and the produce market, and in urban renewal they just cleared the land and started building these buildings. So Don was there at Wurster. They had hired another firm to do the apartment building. And he was looking for answers. They had a guy who was a finance guy, Allen—God, I can't think of his last name—who was the general manager running the project. But he had never built anything. He was a finance guy. They didn't have anybody who knew how to build anything.

Perini's were the contractors. The Perinis are an interesting family. The Perinis were premiere heavy construction, roads, and bridges and dams. Old Lou Perini wouldn't let any of the Perini kids be in that business. The kids all wanted to work for the business. So he started this architectural building type of stuff and he kept them in that division, not the heavy construction where they made all their money. So they had a bunch of people running around who didn't know much about anything either. There were a lot of people that didn't know anything about—they all kind of were dilettantes at being a developer. There wasn't a true developer, and you need a true developer. Allen could tell you about the finance, how much you could spend, but he wouldn't know whether it was con—they'd say, "Should we do it in concrete or steel?" He'd go, "I don't know."

06-00:43:15

Meeker:

So basically you have this blank slate down there that used to be the produce market, and urban renewal had gotten rid of a lot of old buildings?

06-00:43:23

Gensler:

And they had hired Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons, who hadn't really done any high-rise like that either.

06-00:43:28

Meeker:

And it was supposed to be mixed use, housing plus offices.

06-00:43:33

Gensler:

Offices. It was a great urban renewal project. I don't know if there was HUD around, but the redevelopment agency was involved. But there wasn't really anybody who was really strong and knew much about construction. So Don [Wudtke], who was a very forceful, very successful guy, said, "You got to get somebody in." They said, "Why don't you do it?" So he moved over and became sort of the day-to-day development manager.

06-00:44:05

Meeker:

What does that mean? What is a development manager?

06-00:44:07

Gensler:

He's the guy that answers. When the architects, like I did in BART, asked the BART directors, "What do you want?" and they said, "We want an automatic fare collection system," he'd figure out what it is. When I went in as an architect wanting to build, "This is what we're planning on doing," you need somebody on the other end that says, "I don't know. Let's don't do that many three-bedrooms. Let's do more two-bedrooms, and let's make them a three-fixture bathroom, not a four-fixture bathroom. And let's have some townhouses. Well, that's an interesting idea. The townhouses, could they be rental? And we're going to put in all this parking, and then we got to have some retail. Can that work? And how do we go and how big and what kind of storage do you think you're going to have?" All the kind of basic questions. They had nobody. Guys standing there: "Well, I'm an accountant and a lawyer. I don't know anything about this." So he needed somebody that's going to understand building, because ultimately you're a builder. You hire the builder, but you got to control him, and you got to understand what he does and how he does it. You can put schedules together and develop all these things. So Don went in, and to his credit, did it, and did an amazing job.

06-00:45:28

Meeker:

Did he do this under the aegis of Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons?

06-00:45:34

Gensler:

No, no, he left. He already left them and went and worked for the Golden Gateway.

06-00:45:33

Meeker:

So Golden Gateway is kind of an entity.

06-00:45:39

Gensler:

Was an entity that built the project.

06-00:45:41

Meeker:

And so he was focused not only on the Alcoa Building, the commercial space.

06-00:45:48

Gensler:

He was focused on the apartments and all the townhouses and all that stuff, too. So as a friend, he needed somebody to get this Alcoa Building, which was going to go up, and get some tenants in it. How are you going to get them? What we were trying to do, and what we were successful in doing, is basically preleasing it. As the building was being built, we were out signing tenants up so that when the building was finished, tenants could start moving in and the rent would start flowing. That was a little unusual in those days. You used to build a building, and then you could walk up and say, "Here's your space," and look at it. We were selling it with pictures, not with a finished product.

06-00:46:35

Meeker:

This is a major building.

06-00:46:36

Gensler:

Four hundred and forty thousand feet. Twenty-four stories.

06-00:46:38

Meeker:

For San Francisco at this point in time, it's one of the bigger projects that was happening.

06-00:46:44

Gensler:

Yeah. No question. When we would talk to people on Montgomery Street, let's say they were in the Russ Building. "You have great views of the bay." And they would respond, "That's the hinterland. Moving from Montgomery Street all the way down to Sansome and Clay? Oh, my God. I don't know. That's a long way away. I don't think I want to move that far." And what we were thinking? Let's walk over there and see what it's like. "How am I going to go to Jack's? I go to Jack's for lunch every day. I don't want to walk all the way over there. I'll never see my friends again. They're all over here on Montgomery Street." Montgomery Street was it, and if you weren't on Montgomery and California, you were not anywhere.

06-00:47:44

Meeker:

This is before the Embarcadero Center, so that whole area was no-man's land.

06-00:47:46

Gensler:

Oh, the Embarcadero Center is way past this. That hadn't even been dreamed of yet. These people were going to the hinterland now. They'd had parking, lot of parking, and had a nice space, and great views and all that. Forty-four Montgomery Street was sitting there on Market, and BART was going to be developed. You could be right on Market Street. Of course, you didn't cross Market Street. You didn't go to the south side of Market Street in those days. That was really bad. But it was north of Market. Ground zero was California to Market and Montgomery. That was ground zero. It was just hysterical, but that's where we moved people.

06-00:48:37

Meeker:

What about the response to the style of architecture? It's a very modern building.

06-00:48:40

Gensler:

The big thing was the cross bracing. You had to show people. "I'm not going to have an office with a diagonal in front of my window. Oh, my God. Oh, no, no, no." Not at the top of the building, because the top floor, the corner office had a diagonal. You went down two floors so that you didn't have a diagonal in the corner office. "I want to be in the most important prestigious space, but I'm not going to be prestigious with a diagonal in my corner office." That was the way it was. So Potlatch [Corporation], which is the first major tenant in the building, was down on the twenty-second floor, not the twenty-fourth floor, because they wouldn't want the diagonal in the chairman's office in the corner.

06-00:49:31

Meeker:

Was it known as the Alcoa Building at the time? Were they already signed up as tenants?

06-00:49:37

Gensler:

No, they were never signed up as tenants. The financing arm of Alcoa had been an investor. But it was a nice name, and it was prestigious. It's like Transamerica. Transamerica only had two or three floors of the pyramid. But Alcoa, no. I think maybe five or ten years later, they took a small, like 5,000 square foot office. I'm not sure they ever took an office. There were a bunch of local investors that put the money into the thing. It was strictly a name.

06-00:50:15

Meeker:

So you said Potlatch was one of the first tenants that signed up. And they took how much? How many floors?

06-00:50:22

Gensler:

Took a floor.

06-00:50:23

Meeker:

They took a floor. Can you recall for me what it was like going to the office? Because it seems to me you would have had many roles, but I'd like you to tell me what you thought your roles were. Were you a salesman in addition to an interior architect?

06-00:50:40

Gensler:

Oh, God. Yeah. I didn't know that I was at the time, but I was. I thought I was an architect and a planner. The thing that, I should step back a little, is that I'm an architect. I never took interior design. I didn't know a carpet from a piece of linoleum really. Don and I worked together, because he knew what he was doing. We advanced the state of the art in a lot of things. Skidmore did a very strange thing. They were the architects. They decided that the building should have clear offices of ten feet wide, so that you could put two five-foot desks in the office side by side against the window, I guess they were thinking. Then the partitions would be two inches thick, which was an unusual thing. But to do all that, then the module of the building was twelve and a fifth inches, so you'd take five modules and it would be five-foot-one. So all the

ceiling tiles were twelve and a fifth inches square, not twelve inches. So anything in the market was useless. Light fixtures had to be three and four/fifths feet long, because they're all four feet long. All sorts of stuff that just made it a nightmare.

We developed a laminated gypsum wallboard, which is two boards laminated on another one, and they were movable partitions. You could slide them together and they stood, and you didn't have any steel studs or anything in them. Those were the wall. They were movable partitions. We decided we wanted movable partitions so we could run the ceilings in, come in later, put in the movable partitions, and move them around. It was a very appealing thing and we worked hard on the acoustics to make it work. The draperies had to be something. It was before there were mecho shades, and [we had to decide] whether we're going to have venetian blinds or drapes. We had drapes. And standardized carpets. And what kind of light fixtures and all that stuff. Skidmore didn't have much interest in doing it. They thought for a while they were, but they'd never really had much of an interest, so they didn't bother me. I would go over there and work with their people to figure out the building and the mechanical systems and that stuff. They did the mechanical and electrical. They had the mechanical people and electrical in-house, so I'd work with them on that stuff.

My role initially was to do drawings. That's what I was supposed to do. Find a program: you know how many offices of what size, and how many secretaries, and how many file cabinets, and bookshelves and all that stuff that they needed, and then do a plan, tell how many light fixtures and how many doors and how many linear feet of partition and how many electrical power outlets they needed. Then they'd price that out and say, "Okay, your rent is so-and-so, and you're going to need to put another ten bucks a square foot into the space to make it habitable."

06-00:54:05
Meeker:

Were you doing them as part of the sales process?

06-00:54:12
Gensler:

Yes. Well, no. The first phase, just the planning. That's what we would call schematic design. The working drawings would come once they signed a lease. From the schematic design you could get all that other information. Not the detail. You didn't have the detail yet, but you could get close enough to figure out what they wanted. The developer would speculate my fee to do that, to show the tenant how he could move to the building. I set up a different system because there wasn't a really professional system. So people call me the guy who really founded interior architecture. Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. But I think I really professionalized it.

The fees were five cents for the space plans and twenty-five cents a square foot for working drawings. That was the market. For whatever reason, I have

no idea why, I said, "I'm going to charge seven cents, and I'm going to charge thirty-five cents for the working drawings, but I'm going to do a better job than anybody's done. I'll do it on a cumulative basis, so that there'll be some projects that I can do for less and some that are going to cost me more because the tenant was more difficult or the things changed." I said, "I'll absorb that if I can have the whole pot of money rather than I lose on some and I won on others. I don't want to get to the point where I'm losing money with a tenant and I'm never going to recover it." Anyway, they bought that. And I said, "The total cumulative will be within those numbers as we'd go along. I got to get paid every two weeks, so I'll send you a bill." I went with this Mike Robbins. He started out, and then he would bring another broker, so he would show the real estate brokers for tenants.

06-00:56:26
Meeker:

Mike Robbins was?

06-00:56:27
Gensler:

An employee of the Alcoa Building, and he was a real estate broker, which was a little unusual. He became their employee. But he got a commission. He was commission, employed.

06-00:56:41
Meeker:

So the two of you were a team?

06-00:56:42
Gensler:

The two of us were a team. We'd go out. I'd say, "Leave me alone, Mike. Go find another tenant. I'll work with them." Now, many of the other brokers, "Oh, no, no, no. We don't want to leave you alone with the tenant. We got to be here." Finally, I got to know them all, and I said, "Leave me alone. I'll just get it done. I'll get the drawings done, and then you come and we'll present it together. Mike and you and I will present it together to the tenant, of what we can do." I think I was good enough, probably a salesman, but could convey to the tenant the advantages of the project and the advantages of the layouts that we could do, and the types of the layouts and things we could do for them.

So we were very successful in making this building preleased. Pretty much, not fully. I don't know, 80% of it or something was leased before the first tenant moved in. We had people like IBM, and we had Cooley Godward, and we had Potlatch, and we had Marconi, and a lot of small tenants. But we had some major tenants. I don't know whether we had anybody that took more than one floor. The floors were about 24,000 feet. So they weren't huge.

Anyway, it was interesting, and I learned a hell of a lot. I just learned an awful lot about the business and the industry, and in the process got some other things happening. I got to know Gerson Bakar, because there was a tenant called Parr Cox Terminals, which was in Richmond. They were a terminal company, where ships would come in, they'd unload the ships. They'd been an old line San Francisco company. They were where the One California

building is, and the building was being torn down and they were going to move into Alcoa. Well, they couldn't get in in time, and their lease was up. They were going to be thrown out on the street. So with a broker I went and we found North Point, which Gerson had. He knew how to do apartments but he had never done an office. Didn't know anything about office. We went, and they were going to take the top floor of the building in North Point. So I went out and did a plan. He said, "Sounds okay to me; go ahead and do it." Bakar said, "I don't know anything about that." So we started, and then he went out one day—I was helping on a Saturday, move drywall around—and he said, "My God, you really are a committed guy." We've been friends ever since.

We got some other tenants that weren't going in the Alcoa Building, and we started compounding that, and it got more and more. It went along for a couple of years, about a year and a half, I think. Then we were starting to wrap it up and Cushman & Wakefield, the Peters brothers who were the owners of Cushman & Wakefield, bought a company called Buckbee Thorn. It's a real estate firm here in San Francisco. They got the job of doing the Bank of America space.

I was doing these projects around San Francisco, and I got some other little things. I did a dress shop in the ground floor of the apartments over on Sansome Street in the Golden Gateway, and I did a few other things. We did one house up in Twain Harte. I don't do houses, but we did one house, a really beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright kind of a beautiful house up in Twain Harte that Hal did. Then we got a few other little things. So we got a practice going, and ultimately moved to the Hearst Building after about a year and a half on the corner of Market and Third Street. Hearst Building, and then the annex over a pawn shop and a bar. It was a nice brick building. Had brick walls. It was ours, not the back of somebody else's office. We kind of felt that we were starting, and from then on we really said we have a business. I think there were like ten of us or twelve of us when we moved, and thought we'd go to twenty-five, and here we are today.

06-01:01:17

Meeker:

That's probably a good spot to stop today.

Interview #4: April 29, 2014
Audio File 7

07-00:00:05

Meeker: Today is the 29th of April, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler and this is tape number seven, interview session number four. I had just mentioned that I had a good conversation with your wife yesterday and she seems like a really great, joyous woman.

07-00:00:26

Gensler: She's a special lady. Very, very special.

07-00:00:27

Meeker: And she had a lot of good little nuggets that will make their way into various points in my questioning. But the first point I wanted to bring up actually is a fact that she brought up that I imagine you didn't mention because of humility. She had talked about when you came back from Jamaica, really one of the main reasons you came back was you had been working for three years, it was time to pass your license exam. And she said that you were one of the very, very few people to pass your licensing exams, all of the exams included in that, in the first time, all at one time. Is this a true statement?

07-00:01:11

Gensler: Yeah, it is. I think there are some of us that really get serious about it. With an Ivy League education, you're kind of committed to the business world and you're committed to being a player. So when I came back, I really studied. Every night I'd lock myself in a room after we got the kids calmed down and into bed, and I really studied. I was committed to do it. When I came back from Jamaica I had three kids. I had a lot of obligations. My parents had helped me financially before a little bit, but not much. Mostly to get through school and pay the tuition. The rest of it I earned on my own, and Drue earned some money, as well. There were some programs that I could take, but not like now where we here in the firm have courses for our people, and syllabuses and all sorts of props. People today don't try to do it all at once. They do it in steps and stages. Damn, I wanted the damn license. I think there were nine sections that you had to go through. I went through two sections on design, which I was pretty good at. You have to learn to pace yourself, because it's a ten-hour exam. You're given a problem and you have ten hours to get it finished. If you don't finish it, you don't get anything.

There were people there taking the practice of the design and other things. They'd come and have their lunch, and they'd have napkins and tablecloths, they'd bring sandwiches and all that. I'm there to work. They'd taken the exam four or five times and hadn't passed it. But I was determined that I'd finish it in one shot and get it done. It was one hell of a week, because it all occurs in one week. I'm not positive, but I think now you can take it any time you want. It's up online, and you just go in and take a test and then you get another test. It's a different kind of game than it was when I was there. But

you'd go into a room—I think ours was at Pratt [Institute]—and we just sat there for ten hours doing the design portion. The other portions are done Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. I think it was over four days.

07-00:03:49

Meeker:

When you say the design portion, what did that entail?

07-00:03:52

Gensler:

Well, I can't remember the program, but it might have been a school with classrooms and an auditorium and a gymnasium and things. You had to both plan it, site plan it, plan the building, go through all the code, exiting and stairs, make sure you had all those kind of things right. And then actually do an elevation and the perspective sketch of it. It's a pretty rigorous thing. Now, you don't try to be Frank Lloyd Wright. You want to do something that's very responsible and realistic. Not something that's all Zaha Hadid, kind of curved walls and things. If you were smart, at least, you didn't try to show all your architectural flair in the design problem. It was really, "Are you competent to put a building together?" I can't remember, but I think there may have been a structural part of it, although we took a separate structural exam. You need the columns, you need windows, modules and things that made sense, [to show] that you knew how a building actually was put together. It was a rigorous test and it was, I suppose, maybe even more anticipated than April 15th when you know whether you get accepted or don't accepted to college. It's sort of the same thing. You wait and wait and wait for months after they grade them, and then one day it all comes out, who gets passed and who doesn't. You could pass four or five and then have to go back and retake it—I think they gave it every six months, if I'm not mistaken, in those days. It's a long time ago, but it was an important time for me.

07-00:05:39

Meeker:

I imagine one day you picked up the mail and there it was. How did you feel?

07-00:05:45

Gensler:

Well, I was confident I had done pretty well, but you're never sure in an exam like that. The thing that happened was in Jamaica, because of the British system, I was considered an architect. Where here I was just considered a draftsman until I got that license. Now, they didn't push me all the way back to the beginning, but I did feel it was an important new step, when they recognized that I could be a fully registered architect. I've never gotten hung up on people that don't have licenses, but I think it's important. We're actually seeing fewer people actually going for it, which I think is discouraging. People that should, in my opinion, try for and get their license don't. We came back from the meeting in Denver where we talked a little bit about promotions. Is it mandatory that a principal have a license? It's pretty much sentiment that they should, or at least they should be working for it and not just say, "I don't need to bother about getting one."

07-00:07:00

Meeker:

Instead people decide not to get a license and just work as a designer or as a draftsman?

07-00:07:06

Gensler:

Well, for all intents. In a firm like this, a lot of people sign documents. The system is, in a sense, broken because you're supposed to be supervised by a registered architect. The registered architect who's supervised the project literally has to what we call "wet seal": you have to actually sign a drawing, every single drawing. So if you've got a thousand drawings on a building, a big building, you're sitting there signing a thousand pieces of paper, which is kind of bizarre, that you've personally watched it. Now, that makes no sense in today's world, because everybody used to have a big piece of paper on their desk, and I could go by and see what they were doing and what they did. I used to do this [signing drawings] as a ritual. In the morning I'd go around before everybody got there and I'd look to see what they added, where they were on a drawing. Then I'd go at noon break and I'd see the progress they made. When they went home I'd take a look after they left and see where they were. I could tell what was going on.

Well, today everything's in that damn little TV screen that you got on your desk. There'll be a piece of a drawing that they're working on, but you don't see the whole context of the thing. The drawings could be done, as it does in Gensler, in Costa Rica or Bangalore, or it could be done in L.A. to help us out, or Denver. It isn't one person sitting there watching them do it the way that law is—you're supposed to be oversight and looking. When you get the drawings done, you go and you review them and you see whether they're good or bad. Then they get assembled in a set. But it's a whole different way of thinking, and yet from a governmental regulation they haven't accepted the fact that that's the way the world is. They still want hard copies. I'd like to just send them a disk and say, "That's the drawings." But they don't get that quite yet.

07-00:09:12

Meeker:

So when you started out, when you actually put your wet signature on it, you were already familiar with most of those drawings?

07-00:09:19

Gensler:

Oh, yeah, very. And I was. Every once in a while I'm asked to sign something that I probably shouldn't sign because I haven't had any supervision at all, but I'm the only guy. At one stage, we've backed off. I have to be licensed in every state, so I had forty-five licenses. There were only two or three states where we weren't growing, because we were doing work for people like The Gap who were putting stores all over the darn place. So I kept getting licenses, and have to pay in some states that require special licenses. When I came from New York, which is my original license, I got a New York license. I came to California and you have to get a license, additional stuff on seismic because

they don't know what the heck seismic is in New York. So that was appropriate.

A lot of states try to block you from coming in to get a license, so you have to physically go there. There's a thing called NCARB, National Council of Architectural Registration Boards. For most of them, you'd just say, "I've got this license," and then you got an NCARB license. Then they can go to the state of Tennessee or Arkansas or something to get you a license. But you don't have to do anything more than your basic license. New York and California, having those two were probably the tougher states. Now it's a little more organized nationally and a little more electronic. In the old days it wasn't, and it was just a pain in the neck. I had to keep getting the licenses—and I believe if you're a professional working in the profession, you ought to get your license and support the American Institute of Architects in lobbying and giving back to the community and all the things that it does. Training young people, exposing the public to what an architect does so they understand it. People say, "That wall isn't built right." "Well, I don't build walls. I design them but contractors build walls. That's not what we do." So when they see a chip of paint in the wall, "Talk to the contractor. Don't tell me about it!"

07-00:11:38

Meeker:

So when you're getting licensed in other states, it's not a matter of taking those exams again?

07-00:11:44

Gensler:

No, no, no. As I say, California required seismic, which is a separate exam. I did that one because I didn't have that as part of the structural exam test in New York. They're all getting much more uniform, and they're beginning to talk. But each one had their own exam in the beginning, and then this organization called NCARB came along and helped standardize it and helped allow people—so I have plaques. I don't have any up on here, but I have big fancy things from every state in the nation.

Now that I'm slowing down, I'm giving up licenses because my other people in the firm are actually watching over and involved with projects, so I don't sign documents anymore. But I have a couple of them that are bizarre. I had to get licensed in London for the UK, and I got licensed in Canada in Calgary because we were doing some work up there. So I held that license for a while.

07-00:12:47

Meeker:

Have you paid much attention to the evolution of architectural education and licensing, so that you could point out some of the big changes in the licensing exam between today and when you took it?

07-00:13:01

Gensler:

Well, there have been a lot, although I'm not really up to date on what they are. But clearly the biggest change that's happened is the whole sustainability

green movement, that's become much more important. And then the other thing is continuing education. When I started, there wasn't a continuing education requirement, and now there is. I'm supposed to do so many classes and hours and tests a year now, which is a little silly because the stuff has no bearing on what I do. Anyway, I'm required to do it. And health and safety are very big issues now.

07-00:13:44

Meeker:

From the ADA and those kinds of things?

07-00:13:45

Gensler:

Yeah, all that stuff. What happens is that you have to take so many hours on that, and one of the things that the firm has done is we run a lot of programs, very good programs for our people to keep them up to date. We get those accredited so that people can work on the programs that we believe are the ones that are valuable for young people. We have one woman, Jane Pesci in Washington D.C., who's our training director. One of her major jobs is to set up a whole system so that people can receive their credits. Then there are intern programs and the first three years apprenticeship programs the young people have to go through. They're not just architects, but they're interior designers. I don't know, maybe a third of the states have licenses for interior designers. I'm not a licensed interior designer, I'm a licensed architect. As an architect you can do interior design, but interior designers can't do architecture. So there's always been that sensitivity and tension that goes between them.

Licensing has unfortunately fallen into "protect yourself." We don't want too many people in the profession, so we make it difficult for people. We don't want people that don't know what they're doing, doing buildings. Anybody can do a residential building—single-family, not a multi-family. Some people have no design sense at all, as you can see by driving around the world. We don't want things to fall down. We don't want things to not hold up; we like things to look good and fit the function and needs of the public. I think it's a great, an important program, but it is by and large led by people who are more interested in being on a big committee than they are about actually doing good work. No, they want to do good work. I shouldn't say that. But there's a lot of esoteric stuff, not much out there on what's really happening. Most of the people that are really, really busy are not like me. I used to be very active; I haven't been active for quite a while on the profession side. There are groups, and I try to be involved with some of them. I've been more active in the USGBC group, the U.S. Green Building Council, which started here in San Francisco. Guy named David Gottfried, lives in Berkeley, he started the thing that has taken off and become the world sort of standard.

07-00:16:47

Meeker:

That's the organization that awards the different platinum and silver LEEDs rating?

07-00:16:50

Gensler:

Yeah. LEED rating, developed the LEED rating system. David developed that whole thing. He'd be an interesting guy that you should meet.

07-00:16:59

Meeker:

Yeah. We'll certainly talk more about LEED and green building in the future. I guess I just have one last question about your licensing exam experience. So you go to the office the next Monday or something, after you find out that you pass. I wonder, do you think that it affected your reputation amongst your colleagues that you passed them all at once?

07-00:17:20

Gensler:

I don't think so. Well, maybe, but I don't think so. You can be a licensed architect—well, there were three ways before. Now there are just two ways. You could work for an architect for ten years and not graduate from a degree program. Have some courses, but you could actually work for ten years and be able to take the exam.

07-00:17:52

Meeker:

Like an apprenticeship.

07-00:17:53

Gensler:

Apprenticeship program. Then there was the five-year program, which is what I took, which was a freshman through five years of architecture. And then there is the graduate program, which is you have a four-year degree, and then you take two or three more years of architecture, which is like the Berkeley program. So I have a bachelor's in architecture, and people from Berkeley get a master's in architecture. I've tried to figure out whether you're a better architect [with a bachelor's or master's degree]. I haven't done it recently, but I've tried to go through our staff and just take a list of what their credentials are and see whether they've done—and I can't speak for the last maybe five years—but it didn't prove to me that a five-year degree [bachelor's] was not less than a master's degree. They may be better-rounded, because one of the issues with the five-year degree is that we have very few electives we can take in college. I would have loved to have had more electives. I took Russian history, public speaking, and creative writing, and something in the engineering school and some other courses. But I would have loved to have had time to spend on—not philosophy probably, but things that would have enriched me and broadened me more than I was able to fit in.

Architecture is very intensive, class-focused. Five afternoons a week you had design studio. We were going to school Saturday mornings. The faculty actually was teaching Saturday morning, which nobody does anymore. I talk to my grandkids, they're going to class four days a week and maybe a few in the morning, few in the afternoon, maybe one or two in the evening. They clearly have a different kind of pace and pattern than I did. So there's a difference, but when people ask me should I take a master's program in

architecture, my recommendation mostly is to get in the damn profession and get your hands dirty and go into it.

Like my oldest granddaughter, Aaron (David's daughter, my older son), she just graduated from Cornell. She was a theater major in Middlebury where Drue went, and then she went to New York and tried to be involved in not acting but more set design and direction and the whole thing, writing and some things, and found that it just wasn't her thing ultimately. She got excited about architecture and she just finished three years at Cornell and did very well. Now she's working in our L.A. office. Started two months ago. Or maybe not even that much. But she's off and running, and it's very exciting. So she's gone and done it that way, where Doug, my youngest son, went to a summer program at Cornell between his junior and senior year, found out he liked it, and then he moved to the five-year program. He went to Asia and worked in Japan for a while and did a bunch of other things, and then finally came back and worked here. He's been working here for a long time. And then my fifth grandchild, Morgan, Ken's daughter, went and took the summer program at CalPoly between her junior and senior year. Kind of thought that she would be interested in architecture. She finally came out and said, "That isn't quite right." So she went and has taken a liberal arts program. She worked at our office in San Diego and found out that the interior side—she really liked working with colors and finishes and layouts, and has now transferred to Interior Architecture Program, University of Oregon. So she'll have a five-year interior architecture degree. So we all get there a little differently.

07-00:22:13

Meeker:

The one that you didn't follow up on was the apprenticeship approach. I guess that that's no longer available?

07-00:22:18

Gensler:

Yeah. I was trying to think of what they call—there's a certain name to that, and that's pretty rigorous a requirement now. I'm not an expert on that, but I think the apprenticeship program—so, again, we have classes for the young people who are here. We run them ourselves and write the curriculums and all that. So they get a lot more support than I had when I was starting out, that's for sure.

07-00:22:46

Meeker:

So do you think that that's a legitimate approach?

07-00:22:50

Gensler:

The apprenticeship now is the first three years before you take your exam. No. I was talking about the ten-year apprenticeship. That program is gone. In other words, you have to have a college degree in architecture to sit for the exam. And whether in fact you need this apprenticeship program, the documentation that you worked on different phases. One of the things they wanted to do is not have you just sit and do a working drawing but get in the field and work

on specifications and doing some design work—it was, and I think rightly so, important to get people exposed to the field, not just a piece of the field. Young kids can get pigeonholed into doing certain things because they get good at it, and when you're trying to make a profit on a project you put them on that. That's all they end up doing, and they don't get exposure to the rest of the things that you need to be a full rounded architect. That's why the exam has so many parts, because there's so many pieces to this. Because this has gotten much, much, much more complicated than it ever was when I started.

07-00:24:07

Meeker:

Well, I can imagine, not only because of specialization but specialization enabled by technology was one of the things.

07-00:24:17

Gensler:

Yeah. Just government regulation and the use of proper materials, and the complexities of building and building design, and the scale and the integration of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing—all the systems that we have to deal with. We have to know. Knowing that we aren't going to be—engineers do the design of the systems, but you certainly have to understand them and what are available so as you're designing a project you can use the right system and then get an engineer to help you fit it into your building.

07-00:24:53

Meeker:

So let's move forward to 1965 when you were working at Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons. From the way you told it, if memory serves, your colleague Don Wudtke approached you and said there was an opportunity to work there after you left Albert Segal?

07-00:25:14

Gensler:

He didn't approach me. We were having a drink one Friday night and he said, "God, I'm struggling because I need somebody to do the interiors for this project." There was a firm called Saphier, Lerner & Schindler, SLS, who had the 44 New Montgomery Street building, and Whisler-Patri, who had the Hartford Building, which was 650 California, I think. Those were the two buildings that were being built at the same time as the Alcoa Building. Alcoa was a little behind them, but the same time. What was being done, and it's done to some degree that way today but a little differently, is that in the case of the Alcoa Building, which was owned by the Golden Gateway, a bunch of investors, they hired a manager to run the whole thing. They built all the apartments and the apartment garage and the retail, and then they came in and put up the Alcoa Building and built it on a base of a big parking garage. They hired a real estate broker named Mike Robbins who ultimately went on and founded Spring Mountain Wines, when he made so much money he could stop being a broker. He would call on other brokers and he would call on tenants directly who didn't have a broker and encourage them to think about moving to the Alcoa Building. It's hard to believe, because it's like six blocks maybe from Montgomery and California, but it was like going to the hinterland. People could not imagine moving that far away.

07-00:27:17

Meeker:

Was it considered a dangerous neighborhood?

07-00:27:20

Gensler:

No, no, it was just a run-down neighborhood. No, it wasn't dangerous at all. South of Market was always considered dangerous. No, there weren't the Tenderloin type of people there. It was just kind of run down, and it was far away. The center of gravity was Montgomery and California. That was ground zero. And that was, again, before the Bank of America building was built, and so it was ground zero. Then the Bank of America was on the corner across the street from where it is now, Montgomery and California but on what would be the southeast corner. So when this firm moved from California Street down to here south of Market, I thought they were nuts, but they were absolutely right. I was wrong. At that time moving to the Golden Gateway in Alcoa was the right thing, again, before Embarcadero Center was built.

So he [Mike Robbins] would get tenants that needed to move or wanted to move and talk to them. They'd get to a point where they would say, "Oh, yeah, we might be interested." Then either the broker or he would bring me in, too, and I would sit down with a tenant and try to figure out how much space they needed and what it would cost them for the basic layout, the number of walls and doors and light fixtures and electrical outlets and all the things. Because there were allowances—if you took so many square feet, you got these various things. I would try to show them why that building was a good building to go in. In some cases they would just say, "Well, gee, I've got to dress up the lobby, and I've got to make a conference room, and I'd like some paneling in my office and the carpets," and I'd give them a price to design that and have that included in the package. Sometimes the building would give an allowance for a certain amount and then they'd have to put the rest. A lot of times they'd give it all to the tenant, and the negotiations went on. I would show them how they might be able to expand in the future. They could have a five-year lease or a ten-year lease, but at the end of five they could take on additional space. I didn't know anything about how to do that. I never even knew that they existed as a service. It was normally done almost by the office furniture stores. They had some in-house interior designers who did some of this.

07-00:30:10

Meeker:

So they did have architects working on these kinds of interior issues?

07-00:30:15

Gensler:

No. In the old days, the office manager had graph paper and they would draw, "This is what I want. Harry's office, it should be this big, and Joe's office is this big." So I went in and tried to analyze a little more what they needed and how it fit in the office and in the building.

07-00:30:42

Meeker:

Was there no permitting or regulations required about interior construction?

07-00:30:45

Gensler:

A lot of interiors didn't need permits, so there wasn't a big deal on that.

07-00:30:54

Meeker:

So if you're building just interior walls to create small offices, or painting or carpeting or wiring—

07-00:31:01

Gensler:

Yeah, there wasn't much on that. Now it's gotten to that. But there wasn't much in those days. So I went out and read some books—there were a few books on how to do this, sort of. My claim to fame is that the going price was five cents per square foot for what you call space plans, which are the plans that I would do to encourage them to move into the building, and then twenty-five cents for doing the drawings, the working drawings, so that they can construct a space. The building paid for those. But I said I'm just going to do it better, not knowing what the hell that meant, and so I charged seven cents [for space plans] and thirty-five cents [for working drawings]. How I got away with it I'm not sure, although you can't find it, there's a rounding error in the cost.

The rents were like six dollars a square foot for annual rent. That'd be a fully serviced rent, meaning heat and light and janitorial service and everything, for six bucks or eight bucks a square foot. In those days it was interesting that if you were on the second floor your rent was maybe six dollars, but if you were on the twenty-fourth floor it was eight dollars. And if you were on the north side of the building, look at the San Francisco Bay, it was eight and a half, and if you're in the south it was seven dollars and seventy-five cents or something. There was a lot of juggling around where to put people in the building and how sensitive they were to rent. There it was even sensitive because they have these structural braces on the outside and, "Oh, I don't want one of those things going through my window. I don't want to be on that floor, and I don't want to be in that office. Give that to somebody else." Now it's sort of a feature and everybody thinks it's pretty good. But in those days it was, "Why would you want one of those things blocking your view?"

I got pretty good at doing that. And two things happened. One, before the brokers were so possessive of their tenants that they would go to all the meetings and they would hang around and drive me actually crazy. They just wanted to make the deal and make their commission, because that's the only way they get compensated. I want to be honest with the people: "This is what's good here and this is"—and so I was sort of an honest broker. I had a vested interest. You go in the building, because then I could do the working drawings and help fill up the building. But I just took a different attitude than the brokers. I said, "You guys go find me other tenants and I'll take good care of your tenants." It was good because I got to meet a lot of real estate brokers. Mike was a very hard-driving, aggressive guy. He went to the Naval Academy. But he was very good in closing deals and making deals.

We got a lot of very exciting tenants and law firms and things that in the end went in the building. It was pretty much preleased before it was finished construction, which was very unusual. It was a huge success from a financial and business point of view. Tenants when they got there really liked it and it was a very popular building. It was called the Alcoa Building, now One Maritime Plaza. I don't think Alcoa even ever went in the building. Their investment arm was involved in it, so it was called the Alcoa Building. I still don't know who ever made that decision. It was never any part of Alcoa so far as I could tell.

07-00:34:50

Meeker:

So just to follow up on the difference between what you were bringing to the table as opposed to what, in essence, your competitors were doing—

07-00:34:58

Gensler:

Well, Whisler-Patri and Saphier Lerner Schindler were offering a similar kind of service.

07-00:35:04

Meeker:

Okay. They were furniture companies?

07-00:35:06

Gensler:

No, they're architectural. Saphier Lerner Schindler was an interior-only company. Whisler-Patri was primarily an interior company, but Whisler and Piero Patri were architects and they did some architectural work. They did law firms and accounting firms for when they were moving in the Russ Building and other buildings. They were asked to do it for some of the new buildings. But it was all kind of "back of the envelope" before, and we got a little more professional.

The other thing I did was that I helped set up all the systems on the inside, from the partition types to the door types to the hardware to the curtains on the windows, light fixtures. I worked on all of those with Skidmore to make sure that they worked for the tenants. I think I helped everybody. I was trying to learn what the right things to do were. I got really interested in it, so I was very aggressive in being a part of the selection process for the wall coverings and the elevator lobbies, anything to do with the tenant. And trying to use some standards for graphics and things. I really was more involved, I think, than most people with the architects, sort of did it all and just handed it to you.

They did some really strange things, I'll use that word. The module of that building is five foot one inch. It's not five feet, which you'd think you'd do. But their idea was that the partition would be two inches thick, so that you'd have a clear five feet wall to wall and you could put two five-foot desks, squeeze them in. Everything was exact. But it meant that the ceiling tile was twelve and a fifth square inches. It just drove everybody crazy. I had a movable gypsum partition system which we used rather than a fixed system. We encouraged them to do that, which was a pretty early idea, and we worked

it out. Those had to be panels that were thirty-six and a half inches, and you'd have two of them that made the five foot one inch. It was just a nightmare. Things aren't built in that way. But the architect who did it, and by the time I got there it was the module of the building and that was the way it was. So we had to work out the things that made it work, and it worked out fine.

07-00:38:09

Meeker:

I'm trying to get a sense here of what you were offering that maybe set you apart from something like SLS.

07-00:38:14

Gensler:

Well, I got really into taking the program and helping people understand what a program really meant. I can remember certain people, they were down on their hands and knees with a ruler trying to measure the size of their office and making sure their office was just the same size or larger. Law firms: Joe is the junior partner, not the senior partner. The regular partner, his office should be at least two square feet smaller than mine and some nonsense. I kept saying, "Guys, no, don't do that to yourselves. People are going to change and grow. You're going to be here a long time. Don't worry about—that isn't the way you think about things." A lot of people, they'd have their wife come in and want to do the decorating. It was a whole different era. I discouraged them, "You really don't want to do that. That's not your wife's basic skills. She's good for the house, but the office is a different thing." Again, this is before any technology at all. The beginnings of an automatic, what's called a mag card system, there was a series of cards that IBM came out with in this big standalone deal. You'd put it in, it had some memory in it, and it worked on the typewriter, electric typewriter. But it was so rudimentary, you can't believe it. Some of the early law firms that we did in that building had that system. But there was no technology of any kind. Computers weren't being used.

I think I worked the problem harder than most architects. I also was pretty good at helping close deals. I don't want to say it's beneath them, but they were interested in just doing [the job]—"Here's the drawing and this is how it works." I was interested in making a deal and supporting the building, and supporting the brokers to make that. So a lot of deals happened because I was able to encourage the tenants to go. The brokers really liked me and got to know me and respect me and leave me alone in the sense of, "Let me do my thing," because I was helping them make deals. They get huge commissions for making those deals. I built a relationship with a lot of the brokers, which other people didn't and they didn't quite get that. The furniture dealers, all they cared about was selling furniture. They didn't care. They'd do a layout, but it didn't mean anything because it was how many chairs and desks they could sell. That was where they made their money. And so they were giving that away.

07-00:41:13

Meeker:

They were giving their design services—

07-00:41:15

Gensler:

Services away. But the buildings realized that they needed somebody to do it professionally, and they could start as these buildings got more and more involved. The real step was the Bank of America building, which was the next big project.

07-00:41:37

Meeker:

Let's get there in one second. I'm still wanting to unpack this a little bit.

07-00:41:40

Gensler:

Sure.

07-00:41:41

Meeker:

Because it sounds really interesting. It sounds like there were, as you mentioned, firms like SLS who would just parachute into the project, right? They're architects and they're going to just design the interior, give the signed drawings off to the contractor to build out, and then they leave. And they're only doing architecture, right. But it sounds like you've got this sort of different ethos working, where you're engaged in service, you're engaged in consulting. Also design elements?

07-00:42:20

Gensler:

Oh, I think so. That evolved. I'd like to think that I did it all in Alcoa, but I think it took a while for it to evolve over many years. There wasn't a thing called interior architecture really.

07-00:42:37

Meeker:

Yeah. What would SLS have called themselves then? Just architects?

07-00:42:41

Gensler:

No, probably interior designers. But not interior architects. There must have been some program, because Margo Grant, who became one of the senior partners and leaders of the firm in future years, was with Skidmore. There was an interior architecture course at Oregon, University of Oregon. There was certainly nothing at Cornell talking about interiors. Nothing in our course training was interiors, and nothing in the licensing exam was about interiors.

I had actually worked on Union Carbide, an office in Rockefeller Center when I was working in New York. I was doing the lobby and the reception desk and stuff like that, and kind of made it up as I went along. Looked at some pictures in magazines. It was a very unsophisticated program available to people on interiors versus the building, which were pretty solid and pretty professional and pretty important. I don't think they tried to do the interiors there. Later they wanted to do the interiors in the Bank of America building. In fact, they did do the bank space. And they had done some places in New York, Union Carbide and some others. Some insurance companies. It was an afterthought for the profession rather than an area where you put your best talent. If I did anything, I kind of professionalized the interior architecture. Now I would bet that half the commissions and half the revenue are generated from interiors for

architecture firms. So from that point of view, I think I did have a big impact at sort of changing the way people looked at approaching the interiors of an office building.

07-00:45:03

Meeker:

But why do you think it was that interiors were an afterthought compared—

07-00:45:12

Gensler:

My employees would constantly say to me, “Art, when are we going to do real architecture?” That was the line that I’d just want to throw up. I said, “It’s design. You’re helping people. You’re showing them how to work. It’s architecture.” “Yeah, but I want to do real architecture.” That was the line that I got for years and years. “You don’t do real architecture. You just do the interiors.” Well, I think architecture is design, and design is inside and out. And, frankly, the reason the outside [exists] is because you have to build an inside. We started the phrase that we design from the inside out, which most people are designing from the outside in. What is it going to look like, and then we’ll figure out how to put the stuff in it. That never made sense to me, and still doesn’t make sense to me. You start from the inside. What are you going to put in this and how are you going to use it? Once you know all those things, then you put a wrapper around it—now to go hand in glove and can, depending upon the building, be more dramatic.

I think it was an attitude more. I just had an attitude that what I was doing was important, that the clients were important. I really enjoyed the fact that I was dealing with such professional people who went into buildings. The IBMs, the Marconis, and the Potlatches. These big corporations. And the Cooley Godwards, law firms. All these firms that I worked with were really quality people, and I was thirty-one, thirty-two years old and was dealing with these super important CEOs. In those days the CEO was very involved in decision-making processes on the space. J. Walter Thompson, I did their space, a big advertising agency.

I had a lot of really good clients and people that I worked with that I became fascinated with how I could help them. People finally started to say, “Hey, he’s doing something that might be fun and might be profitable and might be interesting.” We got it going. Maybe we’ve just taken it to a new level. But for, I don’t know, twenty, twenty-five years, people say, “Oh, you do more than interiors?” Hell, we were the biggest architectural firm around, and people still thought the only thing we did was interiors. Even to this day they say, “Oh, you do interiors.” Over the half the people I talk to think that’s all we still do. We’re still working on getting out the fact that we do airports and hotels.

07-00:48:05

Meeker:

Cities even!

07-00:48:06

Gensler:

Cities and buildings and all sorts of things. Convention centers. We seem to figure out how to relate to brokers who control a lot of these clients, and they get there first. We have to work with them, and we've learned how to do that. But they're also very much a part of our marketing. They call us up and say, "I've got this tenant. Let's work together to get him to move. We want to figure out what their programming needs are, and then we'll look at five buildings."

There's two ways. The Alcoa Building had their own rep, this gentleman Mike Robbins, and he would try to get the client. Most of the projects today maybe have somebody there, but they're basically just servicing and coordinating things with independent people who represent only the tenant. Some represent the building, but some just represent the tenant. They'll take the tenant to five buildings and say, "Here's how it works in these, what'll it cost you in rent, and operating and all sorts of build-out and stuff." They'll work with the tenant to make a deal on the one that they want to do. There's always the thing, "Oh, well, they're in-house." I've somehow been able to convince almost everybody, but occasionally I get somebody who says, "Well, you're a conflict because you're really representing the building, you're not representing me. I want somebody who's representing me who's doing the work rather than you." But I've always hopefully been open and fair and direct enough with people, and the firm has learned to do that, that most people don't look at it as a potential conflict of interest. They just respect what we do and they're comfortable with us.

07-00:50:06

Meeker:

Was there a point along the way where you started becoming maybe a discerning critic of effective versus ineffective architectural interiors?

07-00:50:20

Gensler:

The answer is interesting. It was a very interesting time, because in 1966 Bob Propst and Herman Miller came out with a thing called AO2 offices – AO2 office panel system for creating cubes, workstation cubes we now call them. In those days they were high panels about six feet tall, and you hung shelves on them and hung the tabletop on it, and you had cabinets that hung off of them. They were the walls that went around people. You used to go in these rows of offices or these high cubes, which I never did and never liked. But that was one thing. There was actually an outgrowth of a German group called Bürolandschaft, which I don't know how to spell. But called the Quickborner Team. Quickborner developed what they called open office landscape. It was sort of scattering furniture around in a random way with panels that floated. They're freestanding panels that kind of floated on spread legs. And a lot of plants. Actually the Port Authority in New York did some big mockups and studies to see if they could go that way. They thought that would be an interesting way for the World Trade Center buildings. So I, as part of my education, went to see those projects, so I was sort of in at the ground floor of that stuff.

07-00:52:23

Meeker: What year was this?

07-00:52:23

Gensler: Sixty-five, '66. Probably '66.

07-00:52:26

Meeker: So the very beginning.

07-00:52:27

Gensler: Very beginning of the firm. It just happened sort of the same time as the firm was getting started. These things were just coming out and being talked about, and I thought that they would have an effect on what I was doing so I needed to understand them. And they did. They did, and we've been working with the manufacturers now for forty-nine years trying to get them—and we've all evolved. I've evolved, they've evolved. We're doing better service for them now. Now we have the Gensler workplace survey, which we do every other year, which has now become the global basic research on workplaces. I was just doing it by guess and by golly, trying to figure out what would be of interest. So we were in on the ground floor of, in effect, taking down the walls of offices. For certain kinds of clients. Not for law firms and not for accounting firms in the beginning, but for corporations and others. To be blunt, it wasn't to have more communication, as it is today; it was about a lot cheaper and a lot easier to kind of rearrange and not so much build-out and not so much cost there, a little more flexibility.

It was all proposed on flexibility, which was true. In a sense, when you'd go in in those days and you'd say to PG&E, "What are your needs?" they could lay out for the next fifteen years. "We're going to grow this speed and we're going to hire these people," and everything was laid out. They had these long-range plans—law firms said, "We bring in three new associates a year, make two partners, and so we need this number of offices. If you look out ten years, that's the number that we'll be." And they were pretty right. That was just the way they ran their businesses. Where today it's up and down and teams changing and firings and hirings and economies. We had ups and downs in the economy, but it wasn't quite so radical and so dramatic, and people didn't think that way. They weren't thinking about cycles.

Many of these firms have been in business a long time and they just kind of plowed along and did what they do and hired what they did. I've had people deny this, but I can remember working with Pillsbury Madison & Sutro, somebody said, "We send Chevron a bill twice a year." Can you imagine a law firm not caring? That was their biggest account and they'd send them a bill twice a year? They'd just say, "You owe us ten million dollars, or five million dollars." No company would accept that anymore. Nobody could remember what the hell they did four months earlier. But six months came along, "I guess we better send them a bill." Nobody could afford to carry it today the way—but that was much more of a handshake and a plan. You got a

plan of what your firm or organization was about, and that's what you did and you were going to grow to do those things.

I could go in and talk to them about their plans. I spent a lot of time trying to understand the relationships. As I got in further, then I teamed up with some people in New York who were doing some really interesting work and got more exposure and that was very helpful.

Audio File 8

08-00:00:05

Meeker:

This is the 29th of April, 2014, Meeker interviewing Gensler on tape eight, session four. I just wanted to follow up on one more thing about developing a sensibility around quality interior architecture, apropos of what your employees kept asking you year after year, "When are we going to do real architecture?" Obviously part of that is that real architecture is, in their mind, a building that you can see that almost has a signature, right?

08-00:00:57

Gensler:

Right.

08-00:00:58

Meeker:

And everyone knows what the great buildings are, right. The great, memorable buildings: the Chrysler Building, the Acropolis, etc. But who knows what the inside of the Chrysler building looks like? But Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, was very interested in interior architecture.

08-00:01:30

Gensler:

Oh, all the way to the furniture and everything else.

08-00:01:33

Meeker:

Yeah. And then subsequently some of the starchitects have also been very interested in interiors, although maybe not as much as they could have been.

08-00:01:43

Gensler:

No.

08-00:01:45

Meeker:

But what's happening then is kind of a historical transition where there is a developing appreciation or connoisseurship almost of good versus bad, effective versus ineffective architectural interiors. Did you, over your period of time, start to kind of develop a sense of what is good architectural interior versus not so good?

08-00:02:18

Gensler:

Oh, yeah. I think I have a very good sense of what's appropriate. Good and bad is a word I don't think I use very much, but I do appropriate and inappropriate.

08-00:02:34

Meeker:

Or effective and—

08-00:02:34

Gensler:

Ineffective. When we first started out, I remember people had wingback chairs, and they had English partner desks in law offices and couches with puff pillows and all sorts of things. That was the era. We had heavy wood paneling on all sorts of things. I didn't really do much traditional paneling, but it looked traditional more than it did—with simple moldings, not fancy moldings. But there was a whole era there where I was struggling because that wasn't something I knew or cared much about, and I didn't think it was the appropriate thing for the clients that I was working with. Often in the law firms, for example, I would do everything but the partner offices, and then each of them hired their own personal decorator and paid for their own furniture and their own couches. I would say, "At least the carpet ought to be uniform." "Oh, no, I want wood floors," and "I want parquet," and I want this. Until maybe fifteen years ago they were still doing that kind of stuff.

That didn't seem to me to be the right answer. One of the things that I learned from Bob Probst, when I went to Herman Miller: he did a chart which basically is a hockey stick that goes like this: [drawing a line chart] The hockey stick was basically your great-grandfather did stuff, your grandfather did stuff not much differently. Your father did stuff a little more differently. You're doing stuff here but, boy, there's starting to be a rapid change. The things that you're doing are quite different than your father, and your kids are going to be doing stuff totally different going forward. I believe that really strongly. I can remember Bob Probst, when I was back in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in a conference center, they were presenting it, too. He said, "This furniture system is designed for the rapid change." I've believed that ever since; I believe it to this day. That the rate of change in society and what we do and how we do it and how we live and how we visualize things are very much tied around rapid change. I've always felt that way.

Now, I also felt that I wasn't a stylist and I wasn't passionate about a particular style. I could do the other stuff, maybe not my personal favorite, but I could do it, although we'd try to move the clients to a more straightforward contemporary solution, some very beautiful. Exquisitely beautiful in many cases. That was an outgrowth of an evolution with me, of seeing where people were and then where they could go. So I was doing things like these fairly ornate law firms and corporate headquarters, and then IBM and people like them wanted very straightforward, beautiful but very efficient and effective work spaces. It was a chance to see both of them. That was one of the things that I was fortunate with—because we were successful, I was able to hire quite a few people and it kind of got the ball rolling in the early days. Not a lot, but there were eight or ten or something like that. So we were working on different things and I was hiring some people. I can't remember whether I was doing all the furniture; I think I was doing most of the furniture myself. I don't

remember hiring a decorator-type person. I must have had somebody. It sounds terrible, but I can't think if that's how we did it. I just picked stuff and tried to encourage them to go in certain ways. This is the very earliest year or two.

I think that we had a big effect on the marketplace in terms of what was being offered, but it was a time of rapid change. It seemed rapid at the time, but now seems very slow because it was sort of the curve of the hockey stick where it started to flatten out. Now it seems to be going straight up with changes to the way of life. Nobody knows what they're going to do next week, let alone what they're going to do five years from now. So the ability to adapt and modify where you work and how you work and what technology you're going to have is today the driver of our work. Things like branding and graphics and sustainability were things that we just didn't have any thinking about, but now it's so integral a part of what we do. We've had to change as an organization, and I've had to hire people of all kinds of shapes, types, and sizes. Which I enjoy more. I think it's fascinating.

To me, the opportunity that I had then was to really create a real business that didn't exist. I didn't know that, and I never had a business plan. "Ah, I see a window of opportunity. There's a great opportunity. I'm going to write a business plan." I just sort of woke up one day and was doing these things. I just kept going and yet, as I said before, the staff kept saying, "When are we going to do real architecture?" I kept saying, "We'll get there, we'll get there, we'll get there." We did a few buildings; we did a very beautiful building, two buildings in a place called Wood Island at Larkspur Landing. They're really beautiful wooden buildings. I got to do them for a developer who got my name from the B of A, my first banker, and I've been with them ever since. This guy came in from Australia and said, "Australia's a disaster. I've taken all my money out. I want to build a building." He found this piece of property and the banker put me with this guy and we built a very nice complex, which, actually, Victoria Station went in and was their headquarters.

08-00:09:30

Meeker:

The restaurant, right?

08-00:09:31

Gensler:

Restaurant, yeah. And three of the guys that founded it are Cornelians. I was helpful to them when they first started. Then they got successful and they wanted a corporate headquarters. They were down near Fisherman's Wharf at Bay Street, down at Bay and Embarcadero, that area. And they wanted to move. They lived in Marin, so they all moved up there to Marin. That was one of the early buildings. It's the same time we were doing the Alcoa Building. We picked up a few other opportunities which we probably ought to talk about now because they're important in the development of the firm.

There was a tenant named Parr Richmond Terminals. They had docks over in Richmond where boats would come in and unload, and they ran this terminal operation. A very successful operation. They were where One California is now. They were tearing that building down in a year or so to put up a new building. We were trying to put them in the Alcoa Building, but they had to get out of their own building before the Alcoa Building was finished. So a broker took them down to what's called the North Point Shopping Center. There was a developer who had bought the old Simmons Mattress factory property, which was quite a few city blocks of space and an office building. He turned the lower level into a shopping center and the upper into an office building. He was a housing developer. Put the North Point apartments up. He didn't know anything about offices at all. This broker said, "I think our tenant would like that space on the top floor there." He said, "I don't know anything about it." The broker brought me along and said, "You know how to get him in and do it?" And I said, "Yeah." "How do I make a deal?" I said, "You got to give him so much of this in footage, and so much light fixtures, and so many of these things." And we did. It worked out wonderfully for them and it worked out wonderfully for him. The gentleman's name is Gerson Bakar, who's a tremendously successful developer.

[paragraph deleted: repetition]

08-00:12:49

Meeker:

So let's go back to the partnership with Gerson Bakar again. This is interesting because we at ROHO have a good life history interview with him where he talks about this from the other vantage point. It's interesting hearing you talk about it, because obviously he was a leader in doing apartments and he was even, I think, one of the first people to do condos or what kind of preceded condos [co-ops]—

08-00:13:16

Gensler:

Yeah. Well, he did the Woodlake [San Mateo, CA], which was really the first community apartment project with a rec center and a pool—it wasn't just a bunch of apartments. He ran programs for the people that rented there. Actually he was in the rental business for most of it. He had done some condos, but he was mostly in the rental business. He was the one that created the Woodlake concept, which is a series of apartments and the people being part of a community. Almost like a gated community, but in an apartment format rather than a residential format.

08-00:13:51

Meeker:

And nicely landscaped, he worked with Lawrence Halprin and then others too.

08-00:13:56

Gensler:

Yeah. Larry. And he worked with Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons, and they did the NorthPoint apartments. Although they didn't do the shopping center. I can't remember the architect who did the shopping center portion of that, where there was a Safeway store on the ground floor. There was a roof deck

over the parking, and then you walked in and it was sort of a Best Buy type of store. There was the office space above, and it was just a building that was left over. He had knocked down all the others, warehouses and manufacturing stuff. But this was left over and he decided he'd put retail, and he'd learn about offices because it was there. How do you convert it to a good return like he was getting on his apartments, which he knew backwards and forwards.

08-00:14:54

Meeker:

So based on your experience working with the Alcoa Building and their leasing agents, you were able to help him.

08-00:15:03

Gensler:

Help him, yeah. And we've been both clients and friends for forty years, or forty-five years, because of that. The big breakthrough was that there was one piece of property that was sort of left over on Bay Street. He said to me one day, "Gee, why don't you design a building that could fit on that piece of property. Maybe we'll find some tenants sometime." So I designed this building, and all of a sudden the broker came by and said, "I'm looking for a tenant for a data center for MasterCard." They were just getting formed and they were literally in this basement of a building on Market at Sansome. They needed like 60,000 feet. We had designed a building and we said, "Well, they could take the whole building." Gerson, for some reason, was in Hawaii. I called him. I said, "I just ran into this tenant, MasterCard, and they're competing with BankAmericard." Then it wasn't Visa at that time. He said, "What are the costs to do the building?" I'd had a cost estimate done by—I think it was Rothschild & Raffin, because we knew them well, although I can't remember. But I think it was Rothschild & Raffin, who were friends of Gerson. They said, "\$19.60 a foot to build the building." I can never forget. Gerson said, "Okay, what kind of rent can I get?" And I said, "Six dollars a square foot." He said, "Okay, make the deal." So we made the deal. It was the first call center. In those days when you wanted to get authorization, it wasn't punching codes in the computers. They [the vendors] called up, and there was a little lady at the other end of the phone answering. "Well, let me look for their records."

08-00:17:15

Meeker:

See if they're up to date on their bills.

08-00:17:16

Gensler:

They had their main computer there, and all their call center operators. So we did this building for Gerson again, a building he didn't know anything about. An office building. Make a deal with that. And that led to the building behind it, which was One Beach Street, which we did, and then Blue Shield came along and we did that for them.

08-00:17:39

Meeker:

You were doing interiors only?

08-00:17:39

Gensler:

No, for him I was starting to do architecture. He got me the first architecture jobs after Wood Island that were of significance. I guess in the beginning, just to complete the record, we did a couple of houses, one beautiful one up in Twain Hart and one nice one in Tiburon. Not great but nice. But I decided I didn't want to do residential. That was too much of my time personally involved, and I couldn't do all the other things that I wanted.

08-00:18:14

Meeker:

Clients required too much hand-holding?

08-00:18:16

Gensler:

Well, clients, you'd have to handhold them so much for a residential versus commercial. You just do it. I much preferred that approach than the handholding. You agonize over every nut, bolt, and screw [in residential architecture]. In the commercial world they respect you and they let you do what you need to do. They say, "We don't know anything about it anyways, so why don't you just do it right." In residential, everybody's lived in a house, they know exactly what they want.

08-00:18:46

Meeker:

And I suspect these early commercial buildings you were doing were fairly utilitarian, right?

08-00:18:51

Gensler:

Well, the commercial ones were. Then we did Blue Shield. EDS, Ross Perot, came and we did a giant data center for them in One Beach. Took the whole building. It was 120,000 feet or something. Was the biggest data center on the West Coast.

08-00:19:17

Meeker:

Where was this?

08-00:19:18

Gensler:

It's One Beach. It's right in Embarcadero and right across from Pier 39 now. It's a brick building that was an old railroad maintenance warehouse, I think. A big brick building. Gerson bought it, and we put EDS in there, which was the data center. They had the contract for the data for Blue Shield. So we worked on that. We did the architecture, renovation, historical. It wasn't so much called historic renovation in those days; it was just renovating the building. We took out floors and put in floors—it was high bay space, and we put in a couple of floors and created a huge—and then the air conditioning and stuff for the early computers was astronomical efforts. We figured all those things out. So we got pretty good. I had hired a couple of really talented people, one in particular, a guy named Hal Edelstein.

08-00:20:29

Meeker:

Who was that?

08-00:20:29

Gensler:

A guy named Hal Edelstein who had been my boss in Jamaica. I can't remember exactly why, but I think it was he had gotten a divorce and he married this other woman. He was in Florida at that time and he wanted to just get out of Florida, away from his wife and everything. So he came out and worked for me. He was probably ten, maybe fifteen years old than I am. He was the technical wizard of the firm and he really put these kinds of things together. I could design them, but he could work stuff out with all the engineers and the contractors, was really good at that. He set up all of our design drawing systems and specs and all that. We were taking on some pretty good-sized projects for Gerson. This is at the same time that the Alcoa—a little later, more maybe towards when we were in the B of A. Probably around 1968. These other projects sort of fit in. Gerson was giving us stuff, but most people were not giving us the architecture, they were just talking about the interiors. So we built a whole complex of buildings out in NorthPoint for him. Then we got into TV stations and a bunch of stuff.

08-00:22:15

Meeker:

So there was a station down here?

08-00:22:17

Gensler:

KGO we did. We did KPIX also. There's a funny story, the KPIX station. A guy named Don Wyler, who was Bakar's sort of go-to guy, wanted me to pitch KPIX to move into something of Gerson's. We went in, we made the pitch, and they called Don up and said, "There's good news and there's bad news." "What's the bad news?" "You didn't get the job." "What's the good news?" "Your architect did." It's another building. So anyway, he always reminds me that I didn't land it for him, but we then got KGO for him, so that was okay. There were a lot of things. Then we went on to Levi's Plaza and that whole thing, which we can—

08-00:23:13

Meeker:

Well, that's later in the seventies, right.

08-00:23:13

Gensler:

That's later. That's '70.

08-00:23:15

Meeker:

So with all this constellation of these projects, your office obviously is going to be pretty busy to produce this—

08-00:23:22

Gensler:

We were in the back of the office on Clay Street. I guess we got up to six or seven or eight people there. We had to move. We needed our own identity because we were in the back of Henry Hill's office. So we moved to the Hearst Building on corner of Market and Third Street. Behind there is a little three-story brick building that we had the top two floors. I think we started with both floors. Maybe not, maybe started with just one. But I think we started with both floors. You came in through the Hearst Building and you

went up some steps into the building. It was over a pawn shop and a bar; there was no entrance to the office space that way. You had to come through the front door of the Hearst at the corner of Market and Third, come up and into our space.

08-00:24:19

Meeker:

Then you could have the Hearst Building address, which was more prestigious than probably—

08-00:24:21

Gensler:

Yeah, much better than an office in a bar address. And Third Street. So we went over there in probably '67. Something like that.

08-00:24:37

Meeker:

When in all of this did it feel like the firm was going to be an ongoing success?

08-00:24:45

Gensler:

Well, we were over there for maybe six months. There's an event that happened. We were maybe fifteen people or something, and I got panicked that this was a real business. I didn't have any business training at all, and Drue was trying to cover everything while raising three kids. We had a woman who worked for Cloverdale Dairy who came in and was an accountant, and we had a couple of secretaries. But we didn't know what the hell we were doing. I saw an ad for a UC Extension course in business, small business, start-up business or something. I went to the class for three sessions and then I said, "This is not going to work. This is going to take much too long and I'm not going to learn it." So I went up to the professor and said, "Do you do any consulting work?" He was a professor at Hayward State, but he was doing the UC Extension stuff at night. Glenn Strasberg was his name. Glenn started consulting with me and then with eight or ten of us, trying to teach us what a financial statement was. He gave us homework, how you get schedules and how you do things. So he was really the breakthrough for us in terms of finally making it a business, not just what I would call a traditional architecture office where you go from bankruptcy to bankruptcy or from struggle to struggle depending upon hire and fire. You get a job, you hire somebody.

We had all these different projects, a lot of them small projects in the Alcoa Building. There were the big ones, but there were also a lot of small ones. We were scrambling. And because we were dealing with these brokers they'd say, "Well, it's too much money for Alcoa Building, and they want to stay near Market Street. Can you help me here with a tenant?" and stuff like that. So we were very fortunate. The furniture dealers would say, "Oh, it's too big for me to handle. Can you handle it? And can you steer them to us when they buy their furniture?" There were people that were marketing for me pretty heavily. They wouldn't think that, but in reality they were really out there finding tenants for us. We've never really had a time where we had to kind of go out

and just market. There were other people that were taking advantage of what we could bring to the table that would help us get business, which was wonderful, and still is to this day.

08-00:27:46

Meeker:

Do you recall anything in particular that Glenn Strasberg talked about?

08-00:27:51

Gensler:

Oh, he taught us everything. Actually, it's interesting. He retired as a professor and became a management consultant to the architectural industry. So I taught him and he taught me in a sense. I taught him what the problems and issues were, and he developed solutions. I'd never seen a financial statement. I didn't know what the hell you look for. I don't think we called it a business plan, but he would ask us—for next week's assignment you had to bring back what you are going to try to do and how are you going to handle this and how do you organize a project. Basic stuff, but the kind of stuff that we desperately needed. We'd all worked for other people, but we never saw the other side of the table. We saw the drawing side and the building. It encouraged us to get our act together and get an accountant. It made some sense. Get a bank that made some sense. Gerson introduced me to a Bank of America banker, on the corner of Market and New Montgomery Street. Can't remember his name, but he was a really wonderful banker. He would say, "Art, I think you're growing too fast." I said, "Well, I think we're all right." "Well, you're growing too fast." I wasn't borrowing any money, but I would go talk to him about things. I liked him a lot. We'd go to lunch and he was helping me. They were helping me with our payroll and some other things, I think.

08-00:29:33

Meeker:

The concern about you growing too fast was based on what?

08-00:29:37

Gensler:

Well, we were growing pretty fast. I think that people didn't do that in those days. People were very cautious. They planned out everything. If I had told you last year that we were going to hire a thousand people last year, you'd tell me I'm crazy. So we didn't tell you that. But we in fact hired a thousand people last year. I think he just thought, "Be careful, Arthur. Be cautious." Business people sometimes run too fast. I had never seen a downturn on my own, and then when it came I was glad he had to some degree—he encouraged me to put away a little money. Don't spend it all, don't use it all, and don't borrow a lot. We may have borrowed a little bit to do some tenant improvements, but that's the only time we really borrowed anything. When we went to the Hearst Building we may have borrowed a few bucks to do that. I don't think I had enough cash to do all that. I don't think the Hearst Building put up the money. Drue was terrified, because there was a personal liability note: We were personally on the note, Drue and I, not the firm. They weren't taking Gensler & Associates, Inc. It was Drue and Art Gensler, and she was saying, "Is this me that I'm signing away?"

08-00:31:13

Meeker:

And I'm sure your equity was in your house.

08-00:31:15

Gensler:

Oh, yeah. Very little, but it was in our house. It was an interesting time. But we were responding to what we've always done, which is if a client calls, we'll go there and do it and we'll go through the Bank of America experience. That led to Cushman & Wakefield taking us all over the country. At one time people really thought Cushman & Wakefield owned us. They never had any ownership in us. But we were a firm that delivered what they wanted to their clients. The clients were always, "Oh, thank you for introducing Gensler. They've been terrific. We want to use that team again. Why don't you and Gensler help us here and help us here?" So it was a mutual-love arrangement. I was helping them and they were certainly helping me.

08-00:32:11

Meeker:

Let's talk about that, but I do have one question before we get to that. And that is when you move into the Hearst Building in 1967, '68, I imagine that you're in charge of doing build-out on the interiors of this office space. How did you approach that? What was your goal? Did you bring any new ideas into that?

08-00:32:32

Gensler:

No. We had to do it. I tried to do it nicely. I wanted to have something that I was proud of. I remember we had this big, big heavy oak table that was pretty nice looking, but it was like a big butcher block table. But big, big, long with Eames chairs around it. No, Pollock chairs around it. I had an office, and there were desks with oak tops and furniture we'd gotten. So we tried to do it nicely rather than—like in Wurster there were sawhorses, and doors on the top of the sawhorses.

08-00:33:22

Meeker:

Really?

08-00:33:22

Gensler:

Oh, yeah. It was very, very primitive. Just raw wood floors, no carpet. Exposed florescent tubes. It was at an old warehouse out in NorthPoint. I just didn't want that kind of thing. Henry Hill was oak and raw wood floors and sawhorses and doors. I just said, "We've got to get better than that." I can remember one of my first gifts to the staff, because we worked on just stools. We just sat on stools. I got them chairs that had wheels and a back, and adjustable. You could actually move back and forth. That was my Christmas present to each person, that they got a nice chair to sit in rather than just the four-legged stool with no cushion or anything. We tried to make it, again, reflective of what we were trying to do for our tenants. I don't remember in those days many tenants ever coming to our offices. Now we have lots and lots of people coming to our office. Almost all the presentations are made in our office, not so much in theirs. But in those days I would go to their offices and lug all the samples and the drawings there. But it was a nice enough

office. We worked hard in building a library where samples and materials were there so that people could see them in color. You had stuff to work with. But we had a very great group of people.

Then we expanded and were on upper floors of the Hearst Building. There was a back stair with a rickety hand-operated elevator, like an elevator operator to take you up. The place was called the shaft, which was this terrible place. We kept expanding, and ran out of space. The Hearst people were nice to us. There was a woman named Sally something and Jack Hearst, one of the original Hearsts. No, not Jack. God, I can't think of it. It wasn't Jack Hearst. He was married to Phoebe Hearst. [It was Jack Cook.]

He had his offices. You actually passed his offices to get to ours. You went down his office with the receptionist, and you walked through there to our offices. So I'd see him a lot. Good guy. They were nice to us there at the Hearst Building. There was a doorman down at the lobby that greeted all the people that came in in the elevator lobby. Those were automatic, but the elevator in the back was one of these hand things that you would have to work.

08-00:36:33

Meeker:

So how long were you in the Hearst Building for?

08-00:36:36

Gensler:

Probably two and a half years, something like that.

08-00:36:40

Meeker:

So not too long.

08-00:36:41

Gensler:

Not very long. Then we just outgrew it terribly, and we I think went to Sansome Street next, the corner of Sansome and Sacramento.

08-00:37:08

Meeker:

What I do want to get to now actually is the B of A Building and your work with Cushman & Wakefield. When we weren't recording, in between tapes, you started to talk about the process by which you met the people involved with the firm.

08-00:37:26

Gensler:

The Peters brothers, yeah.

08-00:37:27

Meeker:

Peters brothers, yeah.

08-00:37:28

Gensler:

Well, they came out and said, "Oh, how the hell are we going to lease this building?"

08-00:37:35

Meeker: The Peters brothers again were—

08-00:37:38

Gensler: The owners and principals of Cushman & Wakefield. Leon and Tony Peters. There's a third brother, Joe, but he wasn't very much involved. They came to San Francisco, were given an assignment by the B of A to lease it and manage it. They said, "How the hell are we going to lease this building?" It has these damn twenty-foot bay windows and the primary tenant—there's two million feet of office space, and the Bank of America took a million feet, the first twenty-seven floors. Then we took twenty-eight through fifty-two, fifty-one. Some of fifty-one, and the Bankers Club was on fifty-two. Bank of America's executive boardroom and some offices and some of the club were down on fifty-one, and some office space.

Skidmore did the production for the building, some of the design work, designed the branch on the corner. Belluschi and Wurster were sort of in the background. But they came up with this bay window form and the sliding elevations where these things stepped off, this sort of stepping at the top of the building. If you look at it you'll see.

08-00:39:00

Meeker: So Wurster basically came up with the exterior appearance of it.

08-00:39:02

Gensler: Wurster and Pietro Belluschi, a very famous architect out of Portland, Oregon. They came up with the basic architecture of the building. And then I think Bank of America and Cushman & Wakefield scared the hell out of everybody. They said, "These guys cannot handle that." This is a big building. It was probably the biggest building in the country at that time.

08-00:39:26

Meeker: Certainly the biggest office building in San Francisco.

08-00:39:28

Gensler: Oh, yeah. It still is. It's a huge building. Beautifully built, but three-and-a-half-inch-thick granite on the outside, not an inch-and-a-quarter granite. It's a beautiful building.

Anyway, they built a building with these big bay windows. Basically they thought law firms were their primary tenant, and brokerage firms. Those guys want fifteen-foot offices. Well, how the hell do you put a fifteen-foot office in a twenty-foot bay? They were panicked. They didn't know how. They couldn't figure out how to do it. Skidmore was saying, "Oh, we'll figure out something." But they didn't have any answers. So they came to me and I came up with an answer about how to do it, which was a twenty-foot narrow office and a ten-foot-wide deep office that went to fifteen inside a little ways. So there were two fifteens and a twenty-foot and two fifteens and a twenty-foot, but they overlapped each other.

We built a big mockup down in South City in a warehouse so that they could take tenants and show them how exactly it would be to have offices. Because nobody could visualize the thing. We were able to convince the tenants that they were getting the same square footage they would get if they were just a flat façade, but you were in the B of A building and you had these different offices and stuff. It worked; we were able to convince these tenants to go in that way. Everybody was thrilled, because they had never thought about the problem of a twenty-foot bay. You also need ten-foots.

08-00:41:29

Meeker: Could you just do me a favor and draw the design?

08-00:41:30

Gensler: Sure. Yeah. [drawing]

08-00:41:32

Meeker: Just an example of it.

08-00:41:41

Gensler: [drawing] There you go. Okay. And let me do one over here. Okay. Now, what we came up with was a scheme which had—and then over here—I guess it went this way. Over here we had an office like this, the doors there. Then over here we had an office again, which was like that. Then here sat a secretary.

08-00:42:46

Meeker: Interesting. Let's get the camera on this. So this is the exterior of the building and the interior.

08-00:42:55

Gensler: Yeah, that building, and this is twenty feet there to there, and this is fifteen feet there to there and fifteen feet there to there. So it's only ten feet at the window, but it's fifteen feet on the inside.

08-00:42:05

Meeker: Interesting.

08-00:42:07

Gensler: And so we convinced them that this office was—

08-00:43:10

Meeker: Square footage of the offices—

08-00:43:10

Gensler: —the same, same. We convinced the people that that was the way it could be done. It worked, and it was a huge success.

08-00:43:21

Meeker: So whose idea was—

08-00:43:22

Gensler: Mine. This is mine.

08-00:43:22

Meeker: This is your idea. What did Cushman & Wakefield think of this?

08-00:43:27

Gensler: Oh, they thought I was a hero because I had saved their butt. They didn't figure out how they could lease the space. Because you can't put a wall in the middle of that glass. There was a big, what's called an induction unit, but the air conditioning was in this sill under the window. So you had to deal with the air conditioning and stuff like that. Here was that, and it got to there. You could arrange the offices. We had furniture, and we had smaller ones. Then they'd be like this, and we'd have one and one more. Then you'd get two secretaries [drawing] in this area. One more over here. So it was a way to deal with this situation, a building that had a beautiful design but it wasn't planned for the users that were going to go in the building.

I started becoming an advisor to Cushman & Wakefield on other projects around the country where they had architects that did these buildings but didn't know how to use them really. I would not touch the exterior, and still if I'm asked to consult, I won't touch the exterior. I may have to move some things slightly sometimes, but I really avoid doing that. I try to make the interior work properly. It's pretty simple, but it's terribly important. For example, you take a standard office building like the Alcoa Building. You've got a core [drawing] and so in the Alcoa, I think this is thirty-two feet and this was fifty feet from here. So the big space is here and narrower space is here. You've got elevators and toilets and stairs and a bunch of stuff. How that all fits together is really important. I got probably as good as anybody, although there are a lot of people now learn it.

I was [earlier] than anybody in the country in figuring out how to make this. Because you're dealing with different sites and different sized spaces and different things, and how do you want them all to work? And you've got columns. These are gigantic columns in here. You've got columns along here somewhere. How do they fit? And when it's real wide, do you have columns out here or do you try to span that whole thing? What do you do? I got really good at helping. It was great for me for a couple of things. One, I got to meet all these other well-known architects and work with them. I also learned a lot. So I was able to use that service, which ultimately went to, "Why don't you just design the whole building? You designed this; you might as well design the whole building." But it took a while. Because they kept thinking, "Well, gee, you just do interiors." In fact what happened was we could really do the whole building. It took a while, and at times it was painful because I knew I could do a better job than the other person. I bit my tongue quite a few times. I tried to be polite and stick with these people and help them.

08-00:47:22

Meeker: Apropos of that, what did you think of the B of A building when you saw the floor plans?

08-00:47:27

Gensler: Well, again, when I started, I didn't know. One of the things that we did was we put a glass wall here. There was a ceiling drop here that went across here. So we put a solid wall all the way here, and we put a glass here, so that a guy sitting in this office here could look that way and that way. He got the spread of a big office. We created this glass pane here. And then this office, you'd set it up with maybe a conference table or something down here, and the guy's desk was in here somewhere. He could look out and he could get the thing. So we had office arrangements that allowed people to see, so they weren't just seeing out of this ten-foot piece but they could get the view of the whole twenty-foot.

08-00:48:27

Meeker: So we're talking about how the bay windows were used.

08-00:48:32

Gensler: I took advantage of the twenty-foot bay window by this pane of glass between offices.

08-00:48:37

Meeker: The idea of creating a mockup outside of the building, was that something that was typically done?

08-00:48:43

Gensler: They mocked up buildings a lot, but they mostly mocked up the outside, not the interior. The curtain wall and all the things. To this day we use it a lot for working out the details of things that are very complicated. Like the Shanghai Tower. It was probably a five-million-dollar mockup, the New York Times building, at least a five-million-dollar mockup. We mocked up everything on that.

08-00:49:17

Meeker: On the exterior?

08-00:49:17

Gensler: In the New York Times, the interiors, as well. Complete interiors. They did all their evaluation of furniture and furniture systems and all. We'd have different ones in there, different kinds of light, window treatments—there was a lot of different things that we studied in mockup form. They had special automatic control systems that lowered the window shades and raised them, depending upon the weather but also the day of the year, angle of the sun, and had it all programmed. It is a very sophisticated system. We've done a lot with mockups. I'm a big fan of them. You can draw all day long, but if you see it in the real flesh you know whether it works or not.

08-00:50:08

Meeker:

But in 1968, '69, was doing a mockup of an interior, was that a rare thing to do?

08-00:50:13

Gensler:

I think it was rare in those days. Although the World Trade Center, when I was in New York, they had a mockup of the World Trade Center in their space. So I think on big, what I'll call in those days sophisticated projects, they would use a mockup. That was not that unusual. They were really breaking new ground. They wanted to make sure it all fit together and worked. They were using it. These were marketing spaces. In the case of New York Times, it was just for their own space—they were the tenants. They built their mockup to figure out how they wanted to use this space. In the case of the B of A building, it was to show people how it would work. In some of them we put cycloramas so you could see the skyline out here and all. Jerry Hines used to do these elaborate, elaborate presentation centers. We still do them for some clients.

08-00:51:18

Meeker:

Who's Jerry Hines?

08-00:51:20

Gensler:

He's the biggest developer in the country, probably the finest developer in the country. Out of Houston. I'll come to him when I talk about Pennzoil. But Jerry is amazing. He did these models of the buildings. The trick is to get the tenants to buy the building before it's built. If you wait until it's built, you lose a year of rent. Once you've got a building that you can put people in, you want to be able to start moving them in. So you've got to sell from a mockup, or with models and mockups and fly-throughs. It's like the football stadium, the new 49ers stadium. You can buy your ticket. They can put you in a room and say, "You're going to have this seat in the thirty-eighth row in the fourth section," and have you sitting in a seat and seeing what view you're going to see of the field. Well, they wouldn't go quite that elaborate, but pretty elaborate. These were multimillion-dollar spaces, so tenants felt they knew what we were doing. They'd have a model the size of this room that would be the model of the building, and then they'd have mockups of three or four of these spaces here. It's a big deal and it helps a lot. Some people do it, some don't, but a lot of people still do them.

08-00:52:51

Meeker:

How successful was the pre-opening leasing by Cushman & Wakefield for the B of A building?

08-00:52:56

Gensler:

Incredible. It was almost fully leased when the building opened. I can't remember, but I think we actually had some tenants in before the bank went in, so they were adding the bank space. The bank wasn't having to pay themselves, but they wanted the revenue from the tenants and get them in as fast as possible. It was a big deal. We were very successful leasing the

building. I mentioned a guy named Pete Dayton who was a really great broker. He represented the bank, and he had a team, Jim somebody or other. The two of them really, really did a great job. Great brokers find these tenants and get them into the building, and I was part of the team that helped to get them in the building.

08-00:53:49

Meeker:

Were there many tenants who you worked with who decided that this particular layout was not going to work for them, that they wanted something substantially different?

08-00:53:58

Gensler:

Yeah, there were some, but the power that the B of A had in those days was enormous. There were a whole bunch of big brokerage firms that felt they had to be in that building. There were a bunch of corporations that had to be in that building, and the law firms that represented them too. So I think that there was certainly some arm-twisting that was done on tenants who had strong relationships with the bank. It was expensive by comparison to what everything else was. It's a very high-quality building. It had this club on the top, and the location and the amenities that very few buildings had, and cachet that it was the Bank of America's headquarters. They were the bank in the United States, certainly in the West. We took time and struggled to get people. A lot of those decisions were made on the East Coast because they were big financial institutions, mostly brokerage institutions. They wanted to go in. McKinsey went in, and a lot of major people. The decisions were not made here in San Francisco. So it was important that we be able to convince them, because they'd never seen anything like this. They asked, "What's this funny thing?" [referring to the bay window design] But I'm pretty good at selling anything. So I was comfortable. It was such a quality product. It had this one unique feature and I kept telling him, "Well, you get something unique rather than standard. You're not going to get this anyplace else."

08-00:56:15

Meeker:

Of course, bay windows are associated with San Francisco and our Victorian architecture.

08-00:56:19

Gensler:

Yeah. It's a [controversial] building. There have been questions is it too dark. The criticism always been most of the buildings were white or a very light color, and that was dark carnelian granite. There was a lot of criticism. When the sun beams off that thing and reflects, in the late afternoons, I live in Tiburon, and the beauty of that thing glows like it's on fire. It's gorgeous. The power of the bank, when they knew that I was involved with the Bank of America building, was the door-opener to all sorts of other opportunities. We helped them, and that was a huge door-opener for me. Cushman & Wakefield would introduce us to people. That's how we got to Denver. I got to Houston where Pennzoil saw the Cushman & Wakefield brochure, had our name in there for working with the tenants. But they were mostly bank buildings,

except that we'd done the tenants, not the B of A. We hadn't done the bank space, we had done the tenants. So when Pennzoil called me they said, "Do you do other than banks?" I said, "Yeah, we do lots of things other than banks." I flew down and got that job, and I'll tell you that story later. So between the name Bank of America and Cushman & Wakefield, which was the powerhouse brokerage firm in the country at the time, I got around a lot of places.

08-00:58:07

Meeker: And they were satisfied customers?

08-00:58:09

Gensler: Very satisfied.

08-00:58:10

Meeker: Or clients, I guess.

08-00:58:11

Gensler: No, they were both. They were clients and friends. They became friends. It was a wonderful experience for me, and I joined the club. I was one of the original members of the club [Bankers Club] and met all the tenants. I became friends with them and the people in the bank. It was a thing that sort of got me going. I joined the University Club, and I was a member of the Olympic Club for a while, playing rugby. I thought I was going to get killed so I stopped playing rugby. It was fortuitous. They helped me tremendously. I had a lot of work to do and I was busy, unbelievable, trying to raise a family plus doing some really good work. The key was that there were people finding clients and tenants for me all the time. With Gerson and the Bank of America and a couple of other people—the roots of this firm are on about three branches in the ground, roots, and then the rest of it all came from those original contacts. The Alcoa Building, the Bank of America, and Gerson.

08-00:59:35

Meeker: I think that that's a perfect spot for us to wrap up today.

08-00:59:37

Gensler: Fantastic.

Interview #5: May 6, 2014
Audio File 9

09-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is the 6th of May, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler. This is session number five, tape number nine, and we are here at his office in San Francisco.

We, last time we met, and that was just last week, made a lot of progress talking about the beginning year or two of your firm and talking about the Alcoa Building and your project with B of A, Cushman & Wakefield. What I want to think about now is maybe rounding out the first couple of years of the firm. I'll ask you about some other parts about building the firm out that a lot of people have talked about, some of the business practices that you established, particularly around retaining and rewarding employees. I want to get your sense on how and why these were established, and then also the sort of first generation really of the key employees, people like Tony Harbour and Ed Friedrichs and a few others. Well, actually, before I get to the Gap, we'll talk about that, I wanted to ask you about something that I think Jim Follett mentioned. He said that one of the ways in which you met some of your clients was by riding the ferry in from Marin.

09-00:01:53

Gensler: Very much so.

09-00:01:54

Meeker: Can you tell me about the experience of commuting and what kind of relationships you established with people on the boat?

09-00:01:59

Gensler: Sure. I lived in Tiburon and I was able to walk down the hill. I was right above the town. I would walk down and in the morning get on the boat. They had a slower boat than they do now, so it took us about half an hour to get across. I was able to read the paper, have a cup of coffee, and meet with people. Although the meeting really took place more on the way home at night, at 5:30, the boat was a really important thing because I got to meet people. Part of that was that I joined a tennis and swim club, the Tiburon Peninsula Club; my kids played there. I'm a tennis player and I played there. My wife played tennis there. And we swam. We got to meet people in the community. You really meet a lot of people from your children; that's the way I met a lot of them. I would then see them on the boat and know them both as a family situation and as a business. They would ride in, and I was telling them what I was doing. There's some wonderful stories that I'll come to later—actually, I guess I did tell you the BART story about the boat, commuting, and the chief engineer.

09-00:03:17

Meeker: Yes, I think so.

09-00:03:18
Gensler:

I did tell you that story. But the point was that we had another half an hour to come home, so we'd have a beer and talk in the fantail of the boat coming home. It was a great thing for a lot of things. I met people. It gave me a physical break before my kids and work. I came home, had dinner, and then in those days, the early days, I would get in my car with my dog and go back and work in the office every night, maybe from like 8:30 till 11:00, and then get home around 11:30. We had a very small place and I couldn't really draw or work on the designs and stuff in those days. It was a different kind of time for me. The boat was a place for me to relax and get organized in the morning going in, and it was a place for me on the way home to really meet people and talk to people and get to know people. I made a lot of very close friends, which are still close friends. Unfortunately I've lost a bunch of them. I still live in the community and still know many of those people. I do like to learn and gain friends. I like to play sports with them; I played on tennis teams and all that stuff. My kids certainly introduced me to a lot of people and a lot of families.

The early life that we had was very hectic. I was trying to do work all day long and at night, but I was committed to my kids and still am, and my wife. So we went home and we had a nice dinner and didn't rush, and then put the kids to bed or calmed them down anyway, and then I would leave. I went to the soccer games; I was a coach and my wife was helping in the snack bar. There's a lot of sports in Tiburon. The kids did very well, and they're good athletes. I spent a lot of time—I shouldn't say sneaking away from the office—but leaving the office. Because I lived right above where the ferry comes in, it was a lot more convenient than driving all the way to the highway, driving in, and then parking, the expense. Our office was about fifteen minutes from the Ferry Building. The best part about it was that if you're in a meeting and you say, "Gee, I got to go," "Well, can you wait a few more minutes?" and your car's parked, you can wait a few more minutes. But I would say, "I'm sorry. The ferry leaves at 5:30, and if I don't get that the next one's at 7:15. I've got to get home to my family and my kids." So I was always known as the guy that at 5:15 split any meeting. People got used to that. So I would be able to cut off the day. Because people at the end of the day kind of drag meetings on and stuff. I just always split and ran and raced to get to the boat.

But I got there and went home, and it was a good catharsis for me to relax and then get ready for the rest of the day, trying to be more creative. I'd met with tenants and potential tenants in the Alcoa Building and then in the Bank of America. I would sit there in the office and draw up stuff freehand, sketch it all. Then, as you mentioned, a gentleman named Jim Follett, who was the first employee that joined me, when we opened the office would draw it up. He has a beautiful hand and he drew. He was wonderful, wonderful. I got very lucky with Jim. He was the first guy there. And then the gentleman named Hal Edelstein, who was the second person that came. Hal was very important,

because he was my former boss in Jamaica in a place called Rader & Associates, where I worked for about six months before I left Jamaica. He decided to move to California and get away from a divorce and some other things with a new wife. He was the technical guy who really made sure the drawings were put together, made sure things got built properly, set up a lot of our design construction drawing systems.

09-00:07:43

Meeker:

Structural engineer type?

09-00:07:44

Gensler:

No, more of just an architectural specialist in construction and construction techniques. He was a very organized person and ultimately loved technology. He was the one that kept pushing me to get into technology before I even knew what it was. In the beginning we had an ammonia tube to make prints and a gooey-goo that made copies. There was a, I think it was 914 Xerox, giant machine about the size of this table. That was the first commercial Xerox machine. We didn't have one, the office certainly didn't have one. We were using Henry Hill's office; I was using his equipment. That was what he had so that's what I used.

But we got started and we were successful. As I think I talked about last time, in Alcoa, and then went to the Bank of America, where we were very successful. I got to know the Cushman & Wakefield people. They really were helpful in introducing us to other opportunities. They introduced us to First Bank of Denver. We went and won that job and opened a small office in Denver. Then the people at Pennzoil—and I don't think we got to this last time. A person in Pennzoil named Leroy Paris, I'll never forget his name. Leroy was the project manager for Pennzoil, and a gentleman named Hugh Liedtke was chairman of the board and CEO. They had decided to work with a guy named Jerry Hines of Hines Development, a very good friend ultimately of our firm. We still work with Jerry and I see him regularly. Was working with Philip Johnson on a twin tower complex, which is that picture on the wall. I have that up there just because I remember working so much, closely, with Philip and putting that project together.

I went down and literally was hired when I was there. I went into his office and every competitor had a brochure on the credenza behind him. I didn't have a brochure. I went with some slides. He had called me on a Friday and said, "Do you do other than banks?" In this Cushman & Wakefield brochure, a lot of their projects were banks, and my name was on there as the interior architect. So anyhow, went down, saw them, and met with Mr. Liedtke and Leroy. They said, "Great, do it," and I literally flew home and in the plane wrote a contract out, handwrote it, and then phoned it into Western Union for them to deliver Monday.

And that was the agreement. I never did have an official agreement with him other than that night letter that I sent. Things were done a little differently in those days. One of the things I remember was that the lawyer for Pennzoil and the lawyer for Hines sat next to each other in the same firm, Baker Botts, the law firm. Today nobody would ever think of having the same law firm do both sides of a transaction. But in those days that was okay.

So we opened an office there. They said, “How are you going to start an office?” Somebody just that week had come into my office from Houston. I don’t remember his name. I said, “Oh, I’ve got a guy I’m all ready to hire.” He had just wandered into our office in San Francisco, but he was from Houston. I said, “I’ve got a guy and he’s going to be terrific and he’ll be—” So I hired him. [break in audio]

I put my arm around Tony Harbour, one of our young people. He had worked for Leo Daly, and he came over and was doing some nice things for us, and did some terrific jobs for B of A. One that I remember specifically, he did the BankAmericard office when they were first formed. He worked with a guy named Dee Hock, who was the father of credit cards. He was the guy that really figured it all out, because before it was just that Bank of America had their own credit card and MasterCard had their own credit card. Just one or two banks, Wells and maybe one other. Then they put these together, this concept of all the banks were partially owned by the percentage or the usage of their cards. This organization came out of Bank of America. Tony had worked with Dee about that, but he was a really good designer and a good guy. British. He and his wife just went to Houston, set up shop, and worked with this other guy, which after about three or four weeks we decided wasn’t very good and we let him go. I was looking for a really strong interior designer. A woman named Margo Grant, who had actually done the bank space working for Skidmore—

09-00:13:26
Meeker:

The Bank of America space?

09-00:13:26
Gensler:

Bank of America. In the Bank of America building, their floors two through twenty-six I guess it was. Margo had done all that work. Somebody told me she wasn’t very happy, because in those days Skidmore wouldn’t promote women so she was a little frustrated. So anyway, I called her, had a meeting with her, and she said she’d go to Houston. She had worked on a big project in Houston at one stage, Tenneco Gas, and she had worked on their headquarters down there, so she knew at least a little bit about Houston. She moved down there. Between Tony and Margo, they ran and built a fabulous office that has continued on and on and on, to New York, into Washington, D.C., into London, and all sorts of things just from that one setup. At the same time, the people in Los Angeles were building a new headquarters there for the Bank of America. The chairman was in L.A. and the CEO, president, was in San

Francisco. They built a building in Los Angeles with ARCO. It was a twin tower complex, built out of the same carnelian granite as was done here in San Francisco.

I was interviewed to do work down there. Cushman & Wakefield was going to do the interior leasing, so they asked me to open an office in Los Angeles and do that. We brought in a third party. Well, two other parties. One, a firm called Selje, Bond & Stuart, who was a local firm that did interiors, and a firm called JFN, a gentleman by the name of Doug Nicholson out of New York. He had done some work for ARCO in their facilities in New York before they came back. It was Atlantic Richfield, I think, and Occidental Petroleum or something. They merged the two and made ARCO out of it. So Cushman & Wakefield brought the three of us together and we formed a company called Group Three, which did the interiors, although we were the lead and sort of ran it. It was a successful project, and Ed Friedrichs was commuting back and forth.

Ed was a wonderful guy. I never can remember why I was at a Tiburon Planning Commission meeting because I never built anything in those areas, but for some reason that night I had to go to some hearing. I was there, and there was this young guy who had graduated from Penn, I heard him say. He was trying to get a house approved on an unbuildable lot that he had designed on the Corinthian Island. He was really impressive. So after the meeting I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I work for a builder." It was tough times in the market. He couldn't get a job out of Penn, so he was working for a builder in Marin. I said, "How'd you like to work for a real architecture firm?" I hired him practically on the spot, and he became ultimately the president and CEO of Gensler. I'm pretty good at spotting people and hiring them quickly, closing the deal. He went back and forth and finally turned to me one day and said, "I got to move to L.A. I can't stand this flying back and forth and all this moving. Build an office there."

We had some really great friends that I had met named Ketchum, Peck & Tooley. They were developers, but became advisors when Security Pacific decided they wanted to do their headquarters. They wanted to get me involved. When I went to L.A. with Ed they said, "You've got to hire a guy named Marv Taff. Marv is a terrific guy." Marvin and Ed really teamed up and built the first office. We started in a little place in Beverly Hills and ultimately went to Century City. Actually, the first was downtown. We were downtown right around the corner from Bank of America and ARCO Plaza when we first were there with Group Three, but when we started our own [office], Group Three disbanded. We moved to Beverly Hills because Marvin lived out in that area and we could see that there was a lot of work going to be happening in Century City. Ultimately we moved into Century City.

But to go back, there's one person that I went over quickly that really had a lot of influence. Gentleman named Doug Nicholson and JFN. They were, to their

credit, one of the real early leaders of analyzing how people worked in space. At one stage they did little like business cards, and they had boxes [break in audio] You dropped a card in this guy's box, and then you'd go back and sort them out to see who went where. Well, if you saw a person a lot, you tried to get them together. It didn't work quite so well, because everybody wanted to be near the chairman, and he didn't want to see any of these people. But they had done some really nice work, and they had a couple of really brilliant designers in New York. They got a little high-falutin' and had their own dining room with their own chef and limos. They got the New York thing, spent more time patting themselves on the back. So ultimately we didn't do a lot with them. I was trying to find out if Doug is still alive or not. But he was a really early thinker in trying to make design meaningful, not just aesthetically pleasant. He did a beautiful project for ARCO in New York. They brought him out here to do some stuff in the project here, although they used another firm. They didn't use JFN in the project.

Then the other part of that story is that—and it's a sad story, but it's a part of my life. Security Pacific senior people said, "We want to come up and see some of your projects." We didn't have that much finished down in Los Angeles. I'm not an entertainment kind of guy, so we brought him up and we paid. This was big money for us. I think there were two couples. Maybe there were three, but at least two couples came up and we put them up at the Huntington or something, nice place.

09-00:21:22
Meeker:

In Nob Hill.

09-00:21:24
Gensler:

In Nob Hill. We took them to a very expensive restaurant for dinner, and we had a nice dinner. Then we went back to the Fairmont, and Ella Fitzgerald was playing. I got front row seats for Ella Fitzgerald, and the most embarrassing situation happened. Ella Fitzgerald reached out her hand to these people and they all went—like, "I'm not going to touch a colored person." My wife and I went stone cold. My wife turned to me and said, "We don't want to work with these people," and that was that. They didn't hire us, and she would have killed me if we'd taken the job. It was a huge job. Nothing had such an impact on me. Ella Fitzgerald, it was when she was at the top at the—forgot what they call that great room at the Fairmont.

09-00:22:22
Meeker:

The Venetian Room?

09-00:22:22
Gensler:

The Venetian Room, yeah. And here I was spending my money to house them and feed them and wine them, and had limos picking them up and all that crap. In that one moment I decided I just don't entertain clients, do that stuff, any of that. I don't buy baseball tickets or football tickets or anything. I go do those things with my friends. If clients become friends, I do them. But to try to

impress somebody? Our work stands for itself. If they don't get that, then the heck with it. I'm not interested in making it a business relationship with them. So those are some of the early memories of our firm trying to get started.

To go back and talk about the organization of the benefits, which I did differently. A couple of things happened. I'm writing a book right now, which we're in the last throes of. So a lot of this is very fresh in my mind, because the book is more of a business book than a history of the firm. It's not really a history of the firm at all, but it talks about the things that we've started, and they all seem very logical to me. I had by this time three kids, with a fourth one pretty soon coming along. So I felt I had to have a decent income. How do you become a millionaire as an architect? Start with five million. That was sort of the story. First, I wasn't starting with a million, let alone five million. I didn't start with anything. I had to turn this into a business. I ran it like a business and set it up like a business and charged like a business. I had had that experience earlier with an architect who didn't, and I had an experience with the Alcoa Building where I got a fee better than the normal fee, but I delivered something better. I just took that attitude to move forward. From the very beginning, I remember the first gift that I gave to the staff, there were maybe ten of us, maybe, or something, eight of us—we used to just sit on wooden stools—I got them chairs with cushions and backs and wheels on them. I felt that I had to give them something as a Christmas present. I've always believed that.

In our budget, I set aside money for Christmas bonuses and for spring bonuses in June. I've always believed that I had to give back to them. They worked very hard for me. If there was stuff left over, then I [shared it], and I wanted to make sure I had some. I wanted to run it as a very strong business. So we set that up. We had a bonus program that was pretty strong. People were getting at least two months a year, one month at Christmas and one month in June. So they really got a fourteen-month pay package from the very, very beginning; I've always had that. We've now turned it to two weeks at Christmas and then we gave in base salary another two weeks. We still kept the one month in June, plus additional bonuses.

Then we decided that we really needed a profit-sharing plan for these people. I'd worked at places and I could see that people could never retire because they never put aside any money. It's very hard, especially for young people, to understand that they should set aside some money. Architects, they just keep spending it as if it'll come forever and they'll work. "I love it and so I'll just work until I drop dead." Well, it doesn't exactly work that way. I wanted to be able to look at people in the eye and say, "It's time, and here's a nice big, big, big, big, big check." The second thing that I tried to do is hire people that stayed with me forever, as Margo did and Tony did and Ed did and Jim Follett did, and a person named Charlie Kridler, who just recently retired, and a close friend of mine, did. He headed up our retail for years and years and years, and all of our renovation restoration work.

I thought that those kinds of things were really important. A little later we started a profit-sharing plan. Then we went in and had, on top of that, an employee stock ownership plan, which allowed every employee to be an owner of the firm. Not allowed: they were actually *given* the stock. Then on top of that, when you became a principal in the firm, in those days it was a vice president, I gave some of my stock in effect to you, although it was treasury stock. It wasn't actually my stock. So mine just got diluted. I wanted people that felt like owners, felt like part of the family, so the more that I could get under that hood of relationships, I wanted to.

Then I reached out to the best consultants I could find. I was very lucky with Denis Rice, a firm called Howard Rice, one of the most prominent law firms in town, San Francisco, in the country really. It was Howard Rice, Denis, the second guy, lived near me. I'd ride the ferry boat with him. He became my lawyer, and actually was the only outsider we've ever had on our board. Wasn't very active on the board, but he was an outsider and an advisor to the company and very close to Drue and to me. He was in town yesterday. He is a brilliant guy. He got me from a personal business into a corporation as we were growing. I think I have a t-shirt that has our financial statement, which we submitted. I think we were worth \$7,000 or something like that, which seemed like a lot of money at the time. I think we may be the one and only, or the last professional services corporation in California. They sort of gave up that thing. But he got us in there so that we are not like most firms, which are partnerships. Now they're partnerships, limited liability partnerships. We're actually truly a corporation. And we've run it.

Hal Edelstein was also good at the numbers, and I'm really pretty good at numbers. I never liked the way people in our industry sort of worked in terms of financing and analyzing how they were doing. One firm in town, I know, they would give the employee the contract that they signed, except they'd take a razor blade and cut out the fee they were getting and then they'd give the person a number. They were so not open. I always thought if everybody knows what we've got, we all can do better. I'd give everybody everything. We build into the number a profit and a markup that is fair, and we add tremendous value to clients. They seem to think so, because they keep coming back for years and years and years. We add an enormous amount of value, and we should be compensated for that fairly, not excessively. There have been times when we could have taken advantage of clients. They really needed us, and they just said, "Do it." But we always charged the same fair price. I think that loyalty has gone both ways between us and the client. We have a very good long-term working relationship with the people that we spend so much time with. They're called clients, but they really, in many cases, become our friends, as well.

I started the idea that instead of hiring for a project, and then when you finish you let somebody go, you build a firm and you have a responsibility for them.

I wanted people not to leave. I wanted them to stay and be part of our family. This business is really like a family. And know each other and like each other.

We have like a “no asshole” rule. I don’t care how talented you are. If you’re a jerk, we just don’t want you. You’re better off some other place. There are the people that wanted to stay but for many reasons they just didn’t fit, they didn’t fit the family. In the beginning it was really hard to let people go. It’s embarrassing, and it’s embarrassing for them, it’s tough on you and all that. But you’re not doing yourself any favors, and you’re really not doing the person a favor. What you really find out is they’re going to move along some way, so they might as well get on with the journey of their life rather than you being unhappy with them and they being unhappy with you. It’s fair to say, “Look, it just isn’t working. You’re going to be better suited in a small firm,” or, “You may want to be the boss and that’s not going to work here. So get on with your life,” and give them a fair separation. We’re not going to write a nasty letter that you’re not good or you’re bad. We do try to keep people only if they really fit the culture. We’re a firm that really believes in culture, and it’s about everybody. The receptionist, Bev here, you see when you come in, is as an important part of our culture as I am. People talk about visiting other Gensler offices, and they say it’s funny. They look different, but they all feel the same. People act the same and they respond, they’re respectful, and they try really hard. They do what they say they’re going to do, and all these simple trite words, but meaning, to me, an awful lot.

I get very excited when I find people that fall into that slot. Especially on lateral hires, but almost anybody, it takes almost a year to believe us. I always say, “We’re going to pay you the bonus.” People look at you and say, “Yeah, the last place I was at said they were going to pay us a bonus, and they never made any money and didn’t pay us a bonus. They made a lot of promises, didn’t keep any of them. Why should I trust you?” I said, “Well, I’ve been in business X years,” whatever it was, “and I’ve never not kept a promise. So if you believe that I’m going to keep my promise, I will.” There were times when I didn’t get any bonus but they got theirs. I always felt that I had an obligation to them that was more than what I had to anybody else.

The most common question I’m asked is how do you control people in now forty-six offices. The answer is really simple. You don’t. You trust each other. You give them support systems. You put some fence posts up and say, “These are the areas that we’d like you to come back and talk to us.” We’re not trying to sell a style. Everything doesn’t have to look like the other one. So that when you drive down the street you go, “Oh, there’s a Gensler project,” although people can sort of tell them by the quality and the approach that we take. But there is a respect for each other in this firm that you wouldn’t hurt the person in another office. For example, if I’m in Denver and I really need a person who’s a retail expert to help me out, I got a client and I don’t know what to really do, they call up San Francisco and say, “Can you send somebody who could help me?” They don’t say, “Well, who’s not busy? Let’s

send them.” They say, “Let’s get the best person, even if that person is fully committed.” Somehow they’ll carve out to help them in Denver.

The other thing that we do is we share all the money and the rewards together. If you silo it and each office keeps what they kill, as they say, then you have one kind of an attitude. That’s the way most professional service firms are set up. I said, “That doesn’t make any sense with these offices that we were asked to open.” Of the forty-six, probably forty-one or two were opened because some important client said, “Would you go to that city and open an office and we’ll give you a major project.” Like Pennzoil was in Houston, so we went to Houston. First of Denver was in Denver. Things were in L.A. and New York, Mobil Oil asked us to go to New York and open an office. We follow our clients, so we have to have a respect for them and work together. The idea of making silos isn’t for me. So we’re all supporting the offices opening, not just some group that says, “Well, I’ll take care of it, and if it doesn’t do real well real fast, well, then, we’ll dump it and dump those people.” People know that when Art comes and puts his arm around you and says, “How would you like to move tomorrow to such-and-such?” they’ll do it for us. I don’t do it anymore. There are a lot of people that are doing that now for us and doing a terrific job. But it all seems so simple to me. Yet for one reason or another, other firms don’t do it.

I worked really hard on a succession plan. We’re right now in the third generation. I was the first, and Tony, Margo, Ed and I, the four of us were the second. Then those three retired. I semi-retired and then moved up people who were already in the firm for many years. There are six of them. Andy, Di, and David, Joe, Robin, and Dan, and they’re terrific people. Andy, Diane, and David are the executive directors running the firm, and I kind of just faded from the leadership. I didn’t leave and cut off, never to be spoken to again. We never announced it all of a sudden. Just over a period of a couple of years, they became the obvious leaders in running the firm and now they’re ready to take it. They’re working hard to find their replacements. They’re in their late fifties, there’s a sixty in there.

So we’ve evolved this firm just differently than other firms, and I’m very proud of that. I do not want to be different just to be different, but because I think it’s more humane the way we’ve done it. We’re clearly the most financially successful of the firms. We’re clearly the largest architectural firm today in the world by twice. We’ve got loyalty. Nobody will go anywhere else. They want to stay because they like it. They have a good time. But we have to move people out and retire them to make room for those people going up. The reason we actually grow, and I do not encourage it but I know it has to happen, is because if you hire somebody young and then they say, “Well, what happens when I get to that level? Joe’s going to be around for ten more years,” or, “I can’t get through that person.” We’ve got to push it out and spread it out so that there’s new spots that are built for them.

We now have, when you look at our material, we've got like 150 leaders that are leading, and they'll be 250 or 400 or whatever. They're people that just are leaders. We've made different practice area leaders, office leaders, regional leaders. There are just lots of opportunities for people to do what they do best and let other people do what they do best. Then we built a very strong central—we call it the corporate or firm-wide group, which is the support. The accounting, the legal, the communications, the technology, the HR, and IT. They're very strong and they supported these people so they don't have to worry about all that. That's going to get done. And now we have offices in fourteen countries and practiced in ninety countries last year, over the last five years. Ninety different countries. Just the taxes and getting the business licenses and that stuff is a nightmare. But when a client calls and says, "I want you to go to Zambezi," I get out an atlas. Where the hell is Zambezi. People go, and it's all driven by the client's approach.

We're a "we" firm, not an "I" firm. It isn't about me, it's about us. There's a big difference when you have an organization. We really like each other. We just spent last weekend, two weeks ago, in Denver, 290 of us at what we call a super meeting. That super meeting is unbelievable. We had like TED talks. We had sixty-two six-minute talks. We gave people six minutes to tell what they're doing. They were brilliant presentations, amazing stuff. Then Friday night we had presentations on innovative things that are happening in the firm and gave innovation awards. Some of the stuff is just unbelievable. One just blew me away. I'd had no idea. I heard yesterday we got another contract. 3M has developed some new products and didn't know how to market to the marketplace. So we're becoming an ad agency. We produced an ad with animation, full animation, voiceovers, developed for an ad. It was so successful they've now asked us to do another ad.

My other favorite story that relates to that is—I don't think I told you this, and if I have, stop me. A gentleman named John Brickel has never worked for anybody else. John is a wonderful branding graphics designer. Mostly was a graphics designer, but has learned about branding and stuff. John started in this office, then moved to New York and wanted to be in the big-time New York. John came to our board meeting one day and said, "Art, we got to change the name of the firm." The original name of the firm is M. Arthur Gensler, Jr. & Associates, Inc. That was because when I went to name the firm, I looked and I thought, "Well, it's Frank Lloyd Wright," and it was John Carl Warnecke instead of Jack Warnecke or Warnecke. So I thought, well, M. Arthur Gensler, Jr. and Associates, although I didn't have any associates, but I put that there.

Then we decided that didn't work very well, so it became Gensler & Associates Architects. That seemed really nice. We were that for fifteen years, twenty years maybe. Maybe longer than that. Twenty-five years. And John came in and said, "We got to change the name of the firm." I said, "What are you going to call it, John?" There had been some rumblings about these senior

people, and why isn't their name on the door, and why isn't this and that. Everybody said, "Why don't they call us Gensler?" John said, "Art, I think you ought to just call the firm Gensler. Everybody calls us that, so why don't we just call ourselves Gensler?"

I said, "But, geez, John, I'm an architect. I'm really proud of being an architect." He said, "Yeah, but architects don't sell graphics and branding. Nobody buys it from us. But if I get rid of 'architects' and we're a design firm, then they'll buy it from us." He was absolutely right. We are now into product design and consulting, and lighting consulting and design, and now we have landscaping capabilities. No engineering. Engineering's very regional, as far as I'm concerned, so I don't like to have engineering. We did change the name of the firm, and it's worked out terrific for us. It's the brand and the mark, and everybody calls us that. People are very proud to be a part of that. I don't think of it as my name at all. I think it is this generic symbol that happens to be coincidental to be my name. It's really about an organization, and people think of it from the outside and the inside as this cultural-driven organization that does really great work for clients and is really committed to improving the environment, finding better ways to do things.

I just saw what we call a hack-able school this morning that we're working on, which is taking an old industrial building and converting it into three charter schools in one building. It's an amazing project. That's the fun I come to work for, because I see things that, when I was doing it, we wouldn't have thought of. This generation that's here today is constantly pushing the envelope. We have a philosophy, which I think I did start, that I wanted to raise the bar in the industry. I thought that the industry was all about the architects and the designers. It wasn't about the client and what we were delivering. I wanted to raise that bar up, so I would share with the industry whatever we were doing. I was very vocal. I'd go to conferences and say, "Why don't you do this and why don't you do that?" I'd tell them where we were, which was right here. A lot of people would race there to try to get there. But that meant that I had to get over here, because I wanted to keep ahead of them. I'm a fairly competitive person, and I think all of us here want to get—so we race over here, and then we tell them we're over here and that forces us to race over here. We've been evolving this thing, not dramatically changing it, but constantly evolving new opportunities, new approaches, new ways of doing things that most people can't do.

Sometimes I don't like to be first in, but I don't want to be last. A lot of times we'll let people go ahead of us on something. The first person often gets caught with the learning curve and the stumbles and the things that don't work. As soon as it starts to solidify, then we come racing in and take it on, as well. Like technology: I remember when we started with our first computers. Not typing computers but drawing computers. We built a glass box room so that people could see, and we had these big tape drive machines in this air

conditioned room, had a raised floor. It cost us \$250,000 for two machines, which was an enormous amount of money in those days. But it was the thing that we knew was going to happen. Now we buy those machines for \$1,600 or \$1,700. But \$250,000 for two machines is just staggering. They were pathetic what they could do as you look back at them.

Somewhere around here I have the first drawing that was ever done [with a computer]. It was just an elevation of a wall with over cabinets and a kitchen countertop and the cabinets below, or file drawers, I guess. The poor guy spent all day working to do this little drawing that you could probably draw in your hand for fifteen minutes if you were slow. He'd worked all day to do this first drawing. But we now are leaders in the use of technology, more than just software. We also don't let people go off on their own and just develop all sorts of things. We try to keep it so that we do the same in every office, so that if I want to move a drawing and get work done in some other office or somebody's transferred to another office for a week, a day, or forever, that they're sitting at the same screen with the same everything. Everything is done the same way. When we first started people we were, "Oh, well, I don't like that. I want to use this, and I like Apple better than Microsoft." All those things are really fine, okay, but at Gensler we're going to do it this way, just because it works. I bet you today there are at least 10 percent of our people that are working in another office than their in effect home office, let alone another 20 percent on the road traveling someplace. I hate to think what our travel budget is. But we will go anywhere for any client to help them; that's a commitment we've made.

Other people will say, "Why would you do that?" One guy I hired because I was mad at his boss who backstabbed me one time. I got really mad and I hired this guy who was running their San Francisco office. He came in and sat down after I hired him. He said, "Well, I've been here for a while and I've looked and you're doing everything wrong." "Oh, okay. Why am I doing everything wrong?" "Well, you see, you're wasting your time with all these little jobs and these projects. I'm going to go out and get you five big jobs and then you won't have to worry about all these little things." I said, "Fine, but I'm going to keep doing the little jobs because I don't believe—" "Oh, no, no, no." He said, "Oh, by the way, I need about \$250,000 in expense accounts to join this club and this club and travel to this conference." I said, "No, you're going to keep traveling and just keep going. You're out of here." We just parted company because he obviously didn't get the culture that we had—and it's a problem with the other firms. When you don't have the big projects, you don't get the little ones. And when things are bad, and I've been through three big recessions at least, you got to have [the little] stuff. When you have the loyalty of a client, then you do the little stuff. You help them shrink; you do stuff that isn't very glamorous but it pays the rent and the phone bill, the college tuition. You need those things. So we have a buffer that we like a lot and we're going to keep it.

09-00:51:42

Meeker:

So what you've just talked about, this broad overview of everything from 10,000-foot level practices to how to manage individual employees on a very personal level, is this the kind of business overview, if you will, that you're presenting in the book that you're writing?

09-00:52:08

Gensler:

Yes, it is. It's written for professional service firms and the business. How do you run a business? Have a culture, listen to the client. Some simple things, like succession planning and have a conference call every Monday morning, like we do, and count the cash on Friday. There's like sixty-four little chapters, each one with an idea. It talks about the power of design. I've tried to use design in the big D sense rather than the little d sense, in that whatever business you're in, you have to design. If you're chairman of the board of a company, you got to have the product designed, the stationery designed, the logo designed, the way your offices look designed. It's the impression that you want to share with your clients.

I must admit, I used to go through this thing where the law firms would have this terrible tug and say, "God, if it looks too good then the clients will think we're charging too much and they're going to go to a cheaper [firm]. No, I want to look professional." You don't hear much of that anymore. The idea of how you look and how you act, how your people dress and the material that you submit to a client, does it have a format and a consistency and a quality? Somebody has proofread it so that there are not a bunch of typos. It's just an attitude. Design is an important thing. We talk about that in the book, and those are the kinds of things that none of us ever get in professional education, whether you're in law school or doctors or architects or engineers or advertising.

We do one-offs, basically. We have to use standard products that are in the marketplace, but we reassemble those in so many different ways that everything, even if you're doing a rollout, is in a standard way. We have to deal with them. I just think that you got to learn to do it. Some of these things that you see in there get all sorts of publicity, but they're crazy. They don't work. They look good maybe, or goofy, or whatever you think. But my God, why would you do that? Is there any reason or logic? I've always felt we have a responsibility to our clients and to ourselves to make things organized, really work. We talk about a concept, a design from the inside out. That's, again, worked for us. I talk about those kinds of things in the book. Hopefully we're going to get it published pretty quickly.

Audio File 10

10-00:00:00

Meeker:

This is Meeker interviewing Gensler. This is the 6th of May, 2014. This is tape number 10.

I wanted to go back and ask you to provide a little more detail on your business practices. Let me just start with the first one: You had talked about the idea of bonuses and basically people were, in essence, receiving fourteen months pay for the twelve months of a year. Where did this idea come from? Were you basing it on firms that you thought were doing a good job, or were you having people advise you along these lines? Or were these ideas that you sort of developed *sui generis*?

10-00:00:49

Gensler:

I think most of them are just ideas that came to me. I read a lot, and I'm not afraid of borrowing or stealing an idea from somebody else. But in the case of that one, I just felt that I wanted to make sure that I could cover the basic salaries of people when I started, and I wanted to make sure I had enough money that I would get my salary. I wanted also to try to give them a little bonus. In our industry, there have always been bonuses. Very ragged and not defined. So I said, "Let's try to budget for two months' bonus as a part of the regular company operating budget." I was able to do that. That was for the staff. Then as you got to be an associate, it'd be maybe three months, and a senior associate four months, and a principal maybe five months bonus. But we only budgeted for the two months, and we still only budget for the two months.

I think I just felt that I wanted to be able to run it as a business. I really don't know why I had that. My dad was a salesman, but he worked for a big company and never took a commission. He just wanted a salary, because I'm a Depression baby, and he wanted to make sure that he got me through college and Mom and he were okay. So I kind of just learned it on the fly. I did it literally from the first day we started. I don't know why. I wish I did. It would be nice to understand. Either to thank somebody who helped me, but I don't remember anybody particularly. I just set it up this way. Even Denis Rice, our attorney, kept saying, "Why are you doing these things?" I said, "I don't know. It seems like the right thing to do." I'm not a moralist about it, but I'm very proud of the fact that we've sort of set up things for the industry. Now, the industry will keep saying, "Oh, we're going to do just what you do," but they never quite do it. I can't make other people do it. I'm not going to tell them how to run their business, but I'm certainly going to share with them in the industry and say, "This is the way we've found, it works pretty well." I think all boats rise in a rising tide. I believe that really strongly, so I'd like to see our people being paid well.

When I got out of college, we were the poorest paid of the professions. I think we still are probably the poorest paid of the professions. That seems dumb. We seem, to me, to add a lot of value, so I see no reason why it should be that way. It's that fine line between: are we artists or are we businesspeople? I think the line isn't that fine. I think we're businesspeople. We have to be. We spend enormous amounts of somebody else's money. We do like three, four, five billion dollars' worth of construction a year. We're spending their money,

and in most cases the client has no clue what we're doing. Some of them do, but many cases they don't. We tell them it's a million dollars, they say, "I guess it's a million dollars." But they don't really know what that million dollars is made up of. Then they walk through the space and say, "Oh, this is terrific. I really like this." But they don't know what the various components and how they went together cost that much. We're spending somebody's money, and we charge very little, ridiculously little, in my opinion, for that value that we provide and the responsibility and the liability that we take.

I've always felt that we had a responsibility to do it as professionally and soundly as a business as we could, and that didn't hinder us being creative. In my opinion, it enhances our ability to be creative because we're a solid organization. We're not flighty. We don't go off into little weird things. And it's hard. Kids come in out of school today, the millennials, hardworking, really good kids, but many of them are, "Gee, I want to save the world, Art." I have grandchildren that are going to save the world, and do this and that. We need people like that. But here we're trying to build facilities for people that really need them today in our country or other countries, and we need to do that. If you want to help a third world country, you should probably go there and help them. But that's not the business we're in. I think that there's nothing wrong with it, but there are a lot of people that want to do research or teach or what. I don't disagree with anybody's approach. We've carved out a niche. We want to be a professional service firm, and a successful and big one, that we think we can have an impact on an enormous amount of people. That's why I started with bonuses, and then went to profit sharing, and then went to ESOP [employee stock ownership program].

We do a lot of in-house training, for example. We spend a ton of money around here on training. We have a training director, and we put on 200, 300 courses a year in various offices, and you can get credit. You need continuing education credits, so most of our stuff is done in-house. You can go to online services or classes, but most of the kids can learn and get their credits in-house. We've worked out with the associations that they'll accept our course curriculums for acceptable credits.

10-00:06:59

Meeker:

So in the first couple of years in your establishing this firm, you're hiring obviously staff people, secretaries, you're hiring draftspeople and you're hiring architects, interior designers, accountants, business services people. How are you determining salaries for these people?

10-00:07:21

Gensler:

Well, you can get some surveys. You ask people what do you pay. I'm a great believer in asking. I'm in a very unique position, and the firm is very unique. We work with the best of the best firms, because the best of the best go into the best buildings. We've been associated with the best buildings. In the beginning when we were just doing interiors, we were meeting with a lot of

people. I always would ask questions, and it's amazing. They want to tell you about their business. I say, "What do you pay secretaries here?" or "What do you pay accounting people here?" or "What do you pay the receptionist?" And people tell you. I find that the easiest way to find out is to ask. I just ask people.

One thing I don't want to forget. One of the things that we started earlier is giving back and contributing to the community in other things. I got very involved, I can't remember exactly how, but I was asked to be on the [San Francisco] Chamber of Commerce board. I was the first architect they had ever had on the Chamber board, I think. Even though I was a small firm, I got to know some people on the board and said, "I'd like to do that." Again, it was a way to give back to the community.

In many ways, for me personally and my wife—there was a guy named Harry Orbelian who ran trips for the Chamber. He ran two kinds of trips. He ran trips to Washington, D.C., to meet with Congress and the President and other people, and he ran international trips, which were called business and goodwill missions. We would go with the heads, the CEOs of the companies. So here I was, a young guy traveling with the president of the Bank of America and head of McKesson and Wells Fargo and PG&E chairman and their wives, and Drue and I were with them. There's probably no place in the world that one would want to go, except maybe Nepal or something, that Drue and I have not been, and been at the highest level. When we went to Washington we would sit in the Cabinet Room, and the Roosevelt Room in the White House meeting with the President. Here I was, a forty-year-old guy, saying, "I've been in the White House three times with the Chamber here."

10-00:10:00

Meeker:

When was the first time?

10-00:10:02

Gensler:

God, I'm trying to think who it was, whether it was Nixon or whether it was—God, it could have even been Carter.

10-00:10:10

Meeker:

So in the 1970s.

10-00:10:11

Gensler:

Yeah. Started in the '70s. I was very active in that. I met all these people. I was a member of the Banker's Club and I was also a member of the University Club. I met a lot of very interesting people that I just kept asking what do they do, how do they do it, and I'd pick up little nuggets of things and then try to piece them together in my way that makes sense for our business, not that it's exactly the same. But I learned from these things. One of the things, having worked in Jamaica, they do things different in the UK system, and I have applied some of the things that they do because I think they do them better than we do. It's been an interesting assemblage of ideas because

of that kind of background where, as I say, Drue and I have literally been all over the world.

Then recently being involved with the SFMOMA Board. They travel once a year to all over the world. Again, you meet at the highest levels. So when one of our board members was the ambassador to Paris, we'd always spend time in the consulate over there and get to meet all these people, as well as see great artwork and things. So I've had the pleasure of having people open doors for me and be a part of that. We've been to Russia three times because of those trips. That's really valuable, especially for us now as a global firm. When I see China, I see it through my eyes when I saw it thirty years ago, and I see it when I was there twenty years ago, and I see it ten years ago, and now I see it having people there.

I got a sense of exposure to those things because of my job, that was unusual and very lucky for me. I give myself credit. I took advantage of it. For Drue and I, those were our vacations year after year after year. All my friends now say, "How'd you go? What did you do with your kids?" Well, we left them with friends or brought people in or farmed them out or some damn thing. I think I've got a great relationship with my four sons and their wives and kids, grandchildren. But we wanted to grow personally ourselves, so we did this. It was really, as I look back at it, the most important decisions we made, to invest our time and money on those trips. They were not inexpensive, but at the time they exposed me to things that, when I came back and met with people, I could talk about, "Oh, you have an office in London? Well, gee, I was just there with the Chamber, and then we met with so-and-so and with the House of Lords and then went out to Oxford." It sounds corny, but I am a more interesting person and had more interesting stories to tell than a person that just sort of hung around and didn't do those things. And I think my wife is the same way. So we've lived a very rich life from a group of people that grew up very—my wife's father was a college professor and mother ran the YWCA stuff, and my dad was a salesman and my mom was a housewife.

10-00:13:48

Meeker:

Your wife Drue had mentioned, when I spoke with her on the phone, the year that she spent in Egypt growing up, and she claimed that this really gave her an entirely unique outlook, particularly around traveling and encountering different cultures.

10-00:14:06

Gensler:

Yeah, very much so. Her mom was a really outgoing and terrific lady and took Drue with her to help reestablish the camp system in Egypt after the Second World War. Drue was in high school. She ended up getting to know a very wealthy couple. A gentleman named Saba Habashi. Saba was the lawyer that negotiated with Pillsbury Madison Sutro, represented Standard Oil, and he represented Aramco Oil Company, a Saudi Arabian oil company, which put Aramco together. Fascinating man. He learned English by reading the Bible,

and he knew it so well. That's the way he learned English. He was doing the negotiation in both Arabic and English and put the whole concept of that together. He was actually Farouk's finance chairman at one stage. A little tiny man. He was 102 or something, still was working out every day. Crazy guy. But a wonderful guy, and his daughters and sons are still very, very close friends of ours. Drue especially.

Living in Egypt was just different. It was a totally different kind of lifestyle in those days. There were big parties. It was before [Gamal Abdel] Nasser came in. Drue had been living in a little apartment in New York, seventh floor of an apartment with a rickety elevator. So this was a big deal for her, and for her mom. Her dad came over in the summer between when he was teaching and was off. So it was an interesting experience for their family. She also became very interested in the Middle East and the whole thing, so her involvement now, which is not exactly the Middle East, Afghan woman program, is an amazing follow-on to her relationship with people there.

One of the interesting points. The family she was with was a Coptic family, which is quite different. They're part of the country but they're not as—

10-00:16:36

Meeker:

Christian families.

10-00:16:37

Gensler:

It's a Christian family, although they're certainly Arabic. They all went to foreign schools in Switzerland and Paris and stuff like that.

10-00:16:46

Meeker:

Well, it sounds like maybe because of this experience she had a profound impact on your lives.

10-00:16:54

Gensler:

Oh, no question about it. She was certainly not afraid to do them, wasn't reticent. Everybody loves to be around her. I don't have to shepherd my wife around or worry about that. She takes good care of herself and is very comfortable doing that.

10-00:17:12

Meeker:

I want to throw open a few of these other things around. We talked a little bit about the development of the bonus and profit sharing. How was that organized differently than the bonus program?

10-00:17:26

Gensler:

Well, that's a separate pool. It goes into a retirement account. You get it when you leave.

10-00:17:35

Meeker:

Like a 401(k) or something.

10-00:17:36

Gensler:

Very much like a 401(k). But in this case we manage it; a 401(k) you manage it, or you can select. In our case, we hire professional management. I think the first contribution was \$32,000 to the pool the first year. It's now \$250 million or something like that.

10-00:18:00

Meeker:

Annual.

10-00:18:00

Gensler:

No, profit sharing pool is \$250 million or something. It may be \$300 now.

10-00:18:08

Meeker:

So it's like a large pension fund.

10-00:18:11

Gensler:

It is, it is. You're not guaranteed a certain amount. You're guaranteed your portion of what's in it. It's tax-deductible to the people, and they have to pay a tax when they take it out but it accumulates untaxed, so it's a bigger number that gets accumulated. The first time I couldn't get anybody to manage \$32,000. It was just too small, the banks and everything. Finally Western Bank, Great Western Bank or somebody took it. It was in the hot stock market. "All right, I'm going to make double your money. I'm going to just do this." Well, they took \$32,000 and drove it down to about twenty. I panicked, got it out of there. Actually Hal's wife was working for a firm that was money managers for Stanford and others. I think it was Dodge & Cox. Anyway, they took it over and then managed it for a while.

Then ultimately a good friend of mine, who was managing money for Industrial Indemnity and Insurance Companies that the Bechtel family owned, retired and started his own investment management company. He and I had done a little investing together. We bought a house up in the Russian River for \$6,000, which I won't go into. No, \$12,000. Six thousand each. It was a full giant house, five bedrooms. It was crazy. It was a Berkeley professor who wanted to get out because of the Free Speech Movement. He said, "I want out," so we bought it with furniture and the whole thing. It was a big hunting lodge. It was marvelous. So we had done some investing together and he had some of my money. I said, "Will you handle the firm's profit sharing?" He'd done a terrific job for us for years and years and years. He recently died, but his follow-on people are doing some, and we brought in some other advisors so we have multiple advisors.

10-00:20:36

Meeker:

Who was that person?

10-00:20:37

Gensler:

Guy named Arno Raynor. Arno was a Cal grad, big Cal grad and fairly well known there, especially in the business school. He really did a good job for me. In the early '70s and '80s we bought apartments together, limited liability

apartment deals. They were all over and they were all tax deals. We actually did very well in those, we didn't get killed. He was a very cautious but smart guy. He had run the big pools of money for insurance companies and understood bonds and stocks. We had a nice balance. He always did a great job, and now we have an independent guy who is doing a fine job for us and I'm very pleased. So that kept growing. And, as I say, it started with \$32,000 and now it's—I should know, but it's about \$300 million or something.

Then we came to the ESOP, which is employee stock ownership plan, and that is interesting for a couple of reasons. One, a guy named Louis Kelso developed that plan, a guy in San Francisco. [He was with] Kelso, Cotton, Seligman & Ray, a law firm which I actually did their offices in the Alcoa building, one of the first law firms I did was with them. Didn't know much about it, but always thought it was an interesting idea for taxes. The only thing I was worried about was how do I ever get out? I certainly don't want the firm to go public. I'll come back to that later when we talk about London and opening that office. I had all of a sudden seen other professional firms where the partners were borrowing money to pay off people when they retired. They were taking on debt, and I don't like debt at all. They were taking on all this debt, or they weren't getting any money out and they had to sort of save it on their own. It's hard to be your own saver. I thought that we needed a way. An ESOP does that because the ESOP is a stockholder, so they bought my stock back and they pay a multiple of the price of what I had. ESOP is valued at fair market value vs. book. I had a contract with the firm from the very beginning that Denis Rice developed.

10-00:23:14

Meeker:

Well, at the beginning I assume that you were a sole proprietor, right?

10-00:23:19

Gensler:

Sole proprietor.

10-00:23:20

Meeker:

Well, along with your wife, who would have, through community property, had 50 percent of it. So then there was a certain point I guess in the process of becoming a corporation. That corporation in essence becomes the proprietor of itself, right?

10-00:23:36

Gensler:

Right. The corporation becomes a proprietor, and they issued 300,000 shares of stock to me. So I had 300,000 shares of stock. As we got principals, then the firm gave them stock. The firm gave them 500 shares, and the firm gave them another 500 shares, and the firm gave them another over many years. Normally, in most firms, they have to buy in. They pay for it. Well, 500 shares may have been \$25,000, let's say, at the time.

10-00:24:12

Meeker:

Yeah. If you were to try to determine the value of firm?

10-00:24:15

Gensler:

No, it's book value. So the book value. It's pretty simple. It's not market, it's book value. So it was book in, book out. So if I gave somebody 500 shares, then there were 300,500 shares of stock. Then it got more and more and more. Now there's like 600,000 shares out.

10-00:24:44

Meeker:

It split?

10-00:24:45

Gensler:

No. It diluted each share's value. It's practically doubled. So my original shares are half what they are now. But each share is worth many times more than the original shares. Now, I've sold my shares and other things. So those are gone, and I've given it away to my children and other things. But the point was that nobody ever had to put any money in. I put the original money in, and we never put any more money in. It's all been internally generated. And when they pay for it—

10-00:25:13

Meeker:

So in other words—sorry to interrupt—it's not like, for instance, the venture capital model, where they'll go and you'll get X number of dollars for percent ownership of the firm?

10-00:25:24

Gensler:

No. No, no, no, no, no. The original money was the \$200 I started with, and we never looked back. We're going to do a billion dollars this year and it all started from \$200. It's all been internally generated. But the premise was that people didn't have money to buy. As a matter of fact, one of the bonus things that happened was that when they got stock, they have to pay the tax on it. Once they pay the tax on it, then the cost basis set at that price. If you don't pay the tax, then when you actually go to sell, it's not capital gains, it's ordinary income. It's a terrible situation, so you don't want that. So maybe if they got something worth \$25,000, they may have had to pay seven or eight thousand dollars for taxes. So we would try to bonus them extra money.

10-00:26:28

Meeker:

To get to your long-term—

10-00:26:28

Gensler:

They were long-terms. It has vesting to it, and that's important. In those days I think it was ten-year vesting. Maybe it went down to seven-year vesting, and I think it's now five-year vesting. The law has changed along the way. I would prefer longer vesting. But it sort of has a little bit of a handcuff on people.

10-00:26:59

Meeker:

A golden handcuff!

10-00:27:00

Gensler:

A golden handcuff. They get some money. So we just built this thing up and built it up and built it up. All the people that have retired have walked out the

door with a hell of a lot of money. They're living very comfortably, built second homes and all. It has worked out really well, those people that have been with me a long time. It's amazing what forty-nine years of compound interest does. The stock value just keeps going up.

10-00:27:28

Meeker:

So who amongst your employees were determined to be eligible for the ESOPs?

10-00:27:33

Gensler:

The ESOP is for every employee. The ESOP's different. Profit sharing is every employee in our firm. Everybody. And profit sharing, we'll come up with a number. We'll say like 10 percent of everybody's compensation goes into the pool for profit sharing and the ESOP. Ten percent or 12 percent or whatever we come up with. If you're making \$50,000 you get 10% of it or whatever. Each one is set up as a percentage of your compensation as the compensation of the entire firm. Each person has his own little cubbyhole, nobody else's. That's the way it is. But it goes up and down with the stock market. The ESOP is primarily Gensler stock. The first ESOP stock was I sold my stock, a portion of it, to the ESOP. So they own some stock. And then I sold a little more and I sold a little more. There are some very nice tax benefits to do that, but the best part is that now I'm comfortably set and the firm has no debt obligation to buy me out or take me out.

My partner was just at what's called a large firm roundtable, which is the top fifty largest architectural design firms, AIA has this group and get together. They're people that are still trying to pay people out ten years later for their obligations, and they don't have any money to pay them. They're wondering, "How are we ever going to pay these people? They've left the firm and we don't want them to have the stock and they would like to get the money and they don't have any money." This way we put money aside every year, and we balance between the profit sharing and the ESOP how much we put aside for each.

The ESOP works very well. Most ESOPs don't work quite the way we did. Most people sell a whole lot of stock, and the ESOP borrows cheap money to pay for it. There's a law that allows the banks to only pay half taxes on interest on the money they loaned the ESOP. So they make very attractive loans to ESOP, but the firm still is in debt for the money. [The recipient of the money does not pay taxes on the money received until a stock is sold if the firm buys US registered stocks.] The ESOP has 30 percent of the stock. The ESOP needs to own 30 percent of the company's stock to do that. I said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to pay the tax." I took a hit on the first 30 percent I sold. It finally took the ESOP like five years to get over 30 percent there because I didn't want it to have this debt. Most firms take on debt, and we didn't take on any debt. So if we wanted to stop it, we could just stop and not fear where are we were going—because we didn't have any debt

obligation to this. Then we got to 30 percent, so the stock has gone into the ESOP.

The other stock has been given to people when they become a principal. We call principals now—we used to call them vice presidents because we are a corporation, but the state of Texas had a law that said that you couldn't deduct the compensation to vice presidents or above. Well, how can you run a business like ours with vice presidents and not have it part of the tax-deductible expense of a business? So we changed the name to principal so now that's a deductible item. That was literally the name change.

I might actually be able to tell you pretty accurately. I've got this book. Let's look under—the finance thing. Jesus. Where is it? Why don't we take a break?

[Break in audio while Gensler looks for a document]

We started the profit sharing about forty-seven years ago. The firm's forty-nine. I think it was the first, second, third year we started. Forty-six years maybe. Then ESOP was probably thirty-five years old now, something like that. Anyway, it's interesting that it started here in San Francisco. It always seemed like an intriguing idea. I think I've gotten a lot of people to follow me in doing this as a way to get the principals a fair return on their investment. Book value on the basic stock that was given to these people, but the percentage that they got into their ESOP account, that comes out called fair market value. Every year we have to have the stock evaluated.

10-00:33:35

Meeker:

Based on 600,000 shares, yeah.

10-00:33:36

Gensler:

Yeah. We have a firm called Houlihan Lokey which evaluates companies, they've evaluated us from the beginning. We've, again, been very conservative. I think if we actually went to the market, which hopefully they will never do, we could get twice what we get probably. But it's a fair, fair market value, fair market being what a willing buyer and a willing seller will do the transaction for. They come up and do all sorts of calculations and stuff.

10-00:34:10

Meeker:

How did you determine who the principals were?

10-00:34:11

Gensler:

It's sort of traditional in architecture firms to have associates, senior associates, and partners. We would go through very rigorous things. People pushed in the early days for wanting to be partner right now. I think they've got sixty on the promotion list for partner, and I think this year we made 425 promotions between the three. I think there were twenty principals made. We go through them. Later I'll tell about the McKinsey relationship, which was very important. We'd all sit around the room and make a decision. People

would push for somebody in their office, because usually the managers of the offices were the principals. The board was made up of the people in the offices or the leadership group, let's put it that way, at that time. Not the board, but the leadership group would all sit together for a weekend. They'd say, "I think Harry ought to be it." And we knew who Harry was, but we didn't know him very well.

So McKinsey's advice, and we've followed it pretty rigorously, is that an office can propose somebody, but then the committee will send two representatives from two different locations, not that office, to interview and get to know the person. There's a whole series of forms of what that person has done, why they would fit, and what they're doing. Then they are interviewed by these two outside people, and then they write reports. It's all brought back to the board now and they review it. Actually, it's brought back to the management committee, and that's another whole funny deal. It has to be the management committee. It's for some tax reason that it has to come back that way. So it comes back, and it is approved by the management committee, not the board. They select who they think are worthy of getting ownership.

This year, there were, let's say, twenty, and most of those people have been in the profession for twenty years and had been with us for at least fifteen, or twelve or fifteen years. So they're mature people. When I started they were people in their thirties. Now they're more mid-forties. We all think that's too high, but it's just hard to keep it low. You don't want too many. I think there are 202 now. There'll be probably 240 or 230 something at the end of this year. It's done once a year.

10-00:37:27

Meeker:

What group do they form? Are they considered—

10-00:37:28

Gensler:

They're considered partners.

10-00:37:31

Meeker:

Partners, okay.

10-00:37:32

Gensler:

But we call them principals. We have a principals' meeting once a year where they bring your wife or your significant others. They participate in a lot more information and stuff. But they are a principal in a major firm is what—

10-00:37:53

Meeker:

Is this the super meeting you were talking about?

10-00:37:55

Gensler:

No, that's not. A lot of the people that are there are principals, but the super meeting is all the practice area leaders and the expertise in certain fields and the corporate head of technology and the head of this—it's bringing all the

disciplines together that we practice, and how you share each with each other and what we're doing technically and design-wise in the firm.

10-00:38:23

Meeker: The intellectual leadership of the firm.

10-00:38:24

Gensler: It's really intellectual leadership, not financial.

10-00:38:26

Meeker: So I understand that, I believe it was in 1970, the first board was established.

10-00:38:33

Gensler: Yeah.

10-00:38:33

Meeker: Can you tell me about the process by which that happened?

10-00:38:36

Gensler: It was Tony, Margo, and Ed, and myself. Those three were really the standout people that we had in the firm at the time.

10-00:38:50

Meeker: Did board membership have anything to do with ownership of stock?

10-00:38:56

Gensler: Well, I had given them more. I had been giving them stock so they had more. But compensation and ownership is not tied together at all. You could be highly paid and have no ownership, or the other way around. We've tried to not totally separate those, but they're pretty separate. For example, an owner doesn't get a certain percentage of the gross revenues or net revenues or whatever. It just isn't we assign numbers to people. One of the things that we do is we literally—they don't do it anymore quite this way, because there are just too many people there, 4,200 people now. But when we were up to a thousand we were still literally doing it where each office and each region would put their own numbers together. They'd been given a pool. I'd give them a pool of numbers. I'd take ten million dollars, say, and divide it up. You get \$500,000, you get \$100,000, depending on your size, and a little bit on performance. The better-performing offices would get a little better, but the poor ones would not be down at the bottom. If you didn't make a profit it didn't mean you got nothing.

Anyway, we'd balance it all out. They'd do the pool and then they'd make recommendations on bonuses for everybody in their office. Then we'd take the computer and blend them all, highest paid to the lowest paid. Then we'd sit in a room for two days and run by everybody's name and say, "Suzy Smith, she's a project manager in Denver. We're proposing \$10,000 bonus and her total comp will be \$47,000," or whatever. Then this is Joe Smith, da-da-da-da, and just keep going on and on for two and a half days.

What it did for us was it got us to know the people who were being thought highly of. Somebody whose name, “Oh, boy, I got to give this one \$25,000 because they are really making a difference; I know they’re new but this is the reason why.” So we started to hear people’s names. When you’d go to the office you’d go, “I want to meet that person,” and you got to know them. Even with a thousand people I could kind of juggle the key bunch of new people that were really making a difference in the various offices. Then it was the argument, “Well, Denver’s a heck of a lot cheaper than San Francisco, so you got to pay them less.” There’s a real knowing the family and treating it fairly. I was the arbiter in those days. I did the best I could possibly do. And sure, people said, “I think I deserved more, and I heard so-and-so got more than I did, and why did they get more?” But by and large I think we have a history of being very, very fair and very generous.

It’s gotten very large, so it’s now a little more formulaic. It’s the regional senior six people that are making the arguments and the fights: “Damn it, we’re providing so much revenue for the firm and we ought to get more.” “Where are you going to cut it? There’s so much money. You can’t take it all. You’re going to take it away from those people?” “Well, no.” It’s still one of the most difficult things you do. You just got to do it absolutely fair; if you don’t, you’re dead. Only occasionally with lateral hires who didn’t trust our bonus program, I would say, “All right, I’ll pay it. This is your bonus. But if you do better than that and the firm does better, that’s your bonus. You’ve made a deal and you’re not going to be in the flexible pool. Granted, you won’t go down but, I assure you, you won’t go up.” People do it once and then they say, “Well, I’d like to be in that other pool. I think that that’s a little better.”

Compensation in a professional service firm you’re a grade one and a two, so you’ve got regional cost differences, you’ve got the office’s performance cost differences, and you’ve got seniority. Seniority doesn’t, I shouldn’t say, mean much. If it were my world I’d have no titles at all. I always tease about one firm, I went to a meeting with somebody, and he’s fumbling. He had six business cards, each with a different title. He was director of hospitality. He was a director of juvenile delinquency or something. These crazy titles that they gave him. And which card am I going to give this person? I’m thinking, “You’re either a principal or you’re not.” People do want titles and it’s really important to them. But we only have three: principal, senior associate, and associate.

10-00:44:26

Meeker:

So back to 1970. You were basically the sole owner of the firm.

10-00:44:31

Gensler:

Yeah.

10-00:44:34

Meeker:

And the governing structure was you, as president and CEO. Did you take a title like that?

10-00:44:44

Gensler:

No, it was just Art. I'm Art.

10-00:44:45

Meeker:

It was your firm, you were the proprietor.

10-00:44:47

Gensler:

Yeah, yeah. I think the first person I made a principal was Hal Edelstein. He was the first, and he was older than I was, senior guy. He was important. I think he became the first vice president. I can't even remember. I don't think he went up through associate and senior associate. I said, "Hal, here's some stock and here's some things." We'd have to go back and really dig for the records. It's all kind of flowed fairly naturally. I'm watching them now struggle because of their scale and size and the complexity. We have a lot of international people.

One of the things that's even more complex—bonuses are fine. For example, ESOP and stock ownership and other things are not—in foreign countries, certain countries, they don't have such a thing. They want pensions, and we don't do pensions. So we're trying to get things that are comparable to us but also legal in their countries. That's a very complicated—we had one in London, an ESOP program, and then the government decided after they approved it and we had it for a couple of years, that they didn't want to approve it in England. So we had to dissolve it and pay out the money. But, again, we work very hard to be fair and the same. Some of them get it all in cash, some get it in stock and cash, some get it in just stock.

They're now talking about phantom stock. I don't like forward obligations. Phantom stock is a forward obligation. You have the stuff but you don't really have it, and then somebody's got to find the money to pay for it. I'd rather do it all as you go along. We've tried very hard to help simplify the world, but the world doesn't want to be simple. That's why there's a hundred people in that room behind me working that stuff out every day, trying to figure out where stuff is and where taxes are going to be paid, and do you get paid in this country or this country, and you're on temporary assignment or permanent assignment. It's just a mess. Working internationally is a very complicated thing.

I was with the chairman of the board of a very big bank at a nonprofit board meeting. He's the head of the finance committee and audit committee. He had to sign the audit, approved audit. He said, "I can tell you, I don't even understand the audit for this nonprofit." Can you imagine, I have to sign the audit for the bank and I don't know whether it's right or wrong. It's this thick. "I don't know if every number in there is correct." But we're in a strange

world right now; it's too damn complicated. I get a thing this big and it's enough to scare me. I just sign and hope that the people I've been working with for a long time do it right. I think we have to do it. We have to do compliance and a lot of things. We're working with a lot of companies. We've got different currencies we deal with. It makes for an interesting day.

10-00:48:23

Meeker:

So sorry to bring us back to 1970 again. So you moved from this position of being a sole proprietor to a member of a board of directors.

10-00:48:33

Gensler:

The board has had one vote in its career, official vote. I lost. I knew I was going to lose, that's why I wanted to have a vote.

10-00:48:45

Meeker:

One vote in the entire career of the board of directors.

10-00:48:46

Gensler:

Yeah.

10-00:48:47

Meeker:

Everything was consensus. Okay.

10-00:48:47

Gensler:

Everything was consensus. We had a board. There were Tony, Margo, and Ed, and then I had my wife, Drue, Denis Rice, and me. So I always had three and they had three. To be blunt, when I was just dealing with that kind of a situation I didn't vote. But one time I called a vote. Well, one other practice that I had. I paid everybody overtime. Everybody said, "Well, architects don't do that. You don't need to pay them overtime." We were billing most of that stuff then by the hour. I didn't think it was fair to bill the client a hundred bucks an hour for somebody and then put the whole hundred bucks in the firm pocket. I felt I had to give twenty-five or whatever it was to the employee. Just to say round numbers. I felt I should pay them. I think they were very pleased; we kept busy and they could make some extra money.

Well, after a while, for some reason the group decided they didn't want to pay vice presidents for overtime. There is always a question, "Am I working at home? Am I doing firm work? Is it billable work? I'm reading a book that I'm learning from. Is that business? How do I charge my time?" They said, "It's too complicated." Some people were abusing it, and some people were not putting down what they should have put down because they wanted the numbers to look good so they wouldn't do it. They assumed that I would be fair, and then I would. So we had a vote for principals, and so up to senior associates everybody gets paid for overtime. Now, they get straight time. Now, there's a whole group of people that get paid time and a half because, again, that's the law. Exempt and non-exempt people. But for principals we could do nothing to whatever we want. These were principals and they said, "No, we're not going to pay them. We're going to give them the bonus and

that's it." The problem it's got is that there are senior associates that are making more than the principals, because there's some people that make \$20,000 in overtime in the year. You've got to make up that, plus the fact that they're principals. They're going through it now. They're changing the rules.

We were in a meeting last week. I happened to be at this meeting, they were trying to juggle a new way to approach overtime and approve it. It's awful. That's one of the things of running a business. The point is you have to address these things. Especially when you've got people all over the world. They get seventeen days of vacation in Timbuktu and they get eight in the States. London, you get four weeks' vacation the first day you walk in the door; you get two in the U.S. You want to treat everybody fairly. It's just very hard. But that's, for me, the joy of running a business. I love that part. I love the design part. This afternoon I'm going to sit and work on drawings. That's what makes my day so different and exciting, because one time I'm worried about how do you pay somebody in China and in Tokyo. You think they're similar, but totally different. And then totally different in the UK and Bangkok, Thailand.

10-00:52:25
Meeker:

So in these early meetings when you established your board, it sounds like it was certainly legally binding because in order to have a corporation you would have to have this.

10-00:52:35
Gensler:

Yeah.

10-00:52:36
Meeker:

But it also sounds like it maybe operated in reality somewhat informally.

10-00:52:42
Gensler:

It was run like a partnership more than a corporation. We were legally a corporation, but the day-to-day running was—we sat around and talked about it as a partnership, what are we going to do. Hopefully it will always be that way. There isn't a CEO that just says, "The edict comes down from on high." I think the thing that I have been able to do is to build the trust of the people that I was not—not that I wouldn't look out for my own interest, because I'd be a fool if I didn't, but that decisions were not made because they were better for me and screw the people. It was, "How can we come up with decisions and approaches that are fair to everybody?" And that's from the receptionist to the top.

So the bonus pool is cut, the first bonus that's given to the receptionist and the office boys and office girls that we have that help around here, and the last bonus was given to me. If there was a lot of money left over then I did really well, and if there was no money left over I didn't get anything. That was fair to me. People know that, and they respect that. That's the way we tried to run it because I, at the time, had the most influence. Therefore, if we didn't do

well then we shouldn't—the receptionist doesn't have that much influence, so shouldn't be beat up if the firm hasn't done well. I just have a feeling like you pay for what you perform. If the company and the firm and the world isn't doing well, I got to take the hit. When it's really good, I can really be very successful.

We've had over the years advisors that have sat in with us. There's a gentleman, Jim Edgar, I don't know whether you talked to Jim—

10-00:54:39
Meeker:

Yeah, I did.

10-00:54:41
Gensler:

And Ted Hall and others have been very, very influential and helpful, give me an outside perspective. I didn't put them on the board. I didn't want outsiders on the board, but I did use outside consultants and advisors. Fairly early on, I can't remember exactly when, I joined a group TEC [The Executives Committee], which is like YPO. Are you familiar? Young Presidents Organization. TEC is a poor man's YPO.

It was a group of twelve of us that would meet once a month with a consultant, and half the day was with a leading expert. Milton Friedman or somebody of that caliber. Where you'd have an expert who would come and talk to you. Oh, who's the famous—Peter Drucker. We'd sit with Peter Drucker. We'd sit with guys like that. One day a month we'd have somebody. We'd work in the afternoon, the twelve of us, on ideas and issues. Each month we'd say, "Can I be the one?" and I'd say, "I got a real compensation problem with a guy in accounting or the director of finance," or something. Or, "I've got that." There were twelve of us with non-competing industries, but all sort of practice areas. We'd come together. One day a month the consultant would come. I'd spend all day with him learning ideas and talking things. That was the thing that I talked, I think the last time, about Glenn Strasberg. He was another consultant that I had early on who came and used to help us.

YPO is, I want to say, more expensive. They have a YPO University in cities, programs all over the world. You take your wife and all that stuff. It's pretty fancy. But, boy, is that powerful. It is probably the most powerful thing that nobody ever talks about in the country in terms of CEOs getting together and learning what's going on and how to do things. The people in that group are really powerhouses, and they are bonded together. They'll do anything for each other. We were pretty close, our twelve. A few dropped out and a few came in. One was Anchor Steam Beer, and one was one of the first solar panel companies for heating swimming pools. That was what they were selling.

10-00:57:35
Meeker:

When was this established, roughly?

10-00:57:38

Gensler:

Well, we were on Clay Street. No, we weren't on Clay Street. We were in Sansome. Probably '72 or three, something like that.

10-00:57:47

Meeker:

Pretty early on.

10-00:57:48

Gensler:

Yeah.

10-00:57:49

Meeker:

And it was something that wasn't already an ongoing concern?

10-00:57:56

Gensler:

Well, no. No, no. This was an ongoing organization. I think they actually had an annual conference, and I was invited to it. I heard about it. They hustled me or something, so I joined. One of the things that, being a single proprietor, is very hard because you have nobody to talk to and bounce ideas off of, especially when I have no business training at all. I'm always interested in ideas. So when you get a chance to sit—we flew down to Claremont College and sat in Peter Drucker's living room. He just talked to us for a whole day in that case. What an experience. There were lots of people like that who really, really gave of their time. Just to have the twelve of us there.

The problem with YPO is they're groups of thirty or forty people, so it's not quite as intimate as ours was in terms of getting with the people. There'd be people who were the heads of companies or they'd be a top accountant or somebody. But most of them are public lecturers type of thing. They taught us a lot. My idea, two of them, have a Monday morning phone call and count the cash on Friday nights, came from them. Still the most important thing is that count the cash seems really simple. Like why doesn't everybody do it? But Friday nights I get a report, and now the senior people get a report, how much is in the bank. Don't tell me how much is coming in, but how much do we have in the bank. Which banks, and where, and what's going on with the cash that we need Monday morning to pay people.

And we started this Monday morning call, which they recommended. Now it's religion to be on that call and it's a very, very important call. It goes like ten pages single-spaced, about 500 items on it, maybe more. All new projects and new opportunities or changes, or things that we didn't win and went after. It bonds this firm together like glue. We all know and respect that we're all forty-six offices talking on one call, all listening, from 8:00 to 9:30 every Monday morning. Those things came out of TEC for me. A lot of things that I learned that are embedded in our organization are from my early exposure to some of those. And that's been very important.

Interview #6: June 11, 2014
Audio File 11

11-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is the 10th of June, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler and this is tape number eleven, session number six.

So there was a small retailer of blue jeans on Haight Street in San Francisco, late 1960s, and I understand that you at one point in time had a meeting maybe on a beach?

11-00:00:34

Gensler: I'll tell you.

11-00:00:35

Meeker: All right. Let's hear the story.

11-00:00:36

Gensler: The real story. The real story.

11-00:00:37

Meeker: Let's hear the real story. Not the myth, but the real story.

11-00:00:39

Gensler: All right. This is the real story. I often vacationed with my family down at La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club. I was a pretty decent tennis player. We had a lot of friends from Marin and other places who went down there. So I was down lying on the beach, playing with my kids, and the guy literally came up and kicked sand on me and said, "You're an architect, aren't you?" I knew who he was, although I had not met him. I knew his father, who was a cabinetmaker, and I had used him in some of our projects. I knew his brother just through some social connections, and his wife. So we were all together. I had heard he was going to be there, but I had never met him. He said, "You're an architect? Well, I have one store," it was originally on Ocean Avenue, the original store. "And I'm trying to get this second store done, and I can't seem to get it done. I want to borrow a draftsman." I said, "Well, that doesn't work for me. Why don't I just do it?" He said, "Well, no, I just got to borrow him for a while. I'll pay him directly." He was trying to be cheap, and I was trying to make a living. I charged in those days by the hour for our employees. He said, "Well, just let me borrow a draftsman." I knew his father and his brother. I said, "Okay, you can borrow one." I had about fifteen people. I didn't have very many people. So anyway, I sent a guy down to work with him.

11-00:02:14

Meeker: Do you know what his problem was?

11-00:02:14

Gensler: Well, he didn't have very experienced people. He was trying to do it on the cheap, and he was just getting started. They just had a store. I'll come back to tell you how they got even to the first store. He just didn't have any capable

people to do it. You got to have decent drawings to get a contractor to bid on it and city approval of the plans and all this stuff. Anyway, he calls me in a couple of weeks and says, “I still can’t get the damn thing done. I need to borrow a manager.” I said [to myself], “This is not going my way very well.” So I said, “All right. Okay.” I sent a manager down. Byron Leslie Linford III, who’s a character, who worked here for a while. Byron went down there and tried to get it organized.

Finally Don, the guy, calls me and says, “Okay, I give up. You do the store.” That was his second store. Since then we’ve done 3,000 stores and millions and millions of feet of office space, and designed and worked on everything, all their various brands. We’re working now on some new brands that they have. Whether it’s Banana Republic or whether it’s something else, they just call us.

Now, Don Fisher was the guy. He and [his wife] Doris started the business. He started [The Gap] because his family owned the Senator Hotel, I believe, in Sacramento, and he was up checking it out. He was sitting at the bar one night talking to the guy next to him. He said, “What do you do?” The guy says, “I sell Levi pants. I’m a salesman for Levi and we sell pants.” Don said, “Why are the stores arranged the way they are? They’re hard to find the right sizes, and the colors are all mixed up.” The guy said, “I don’t know. That’s the way they’ve always displayed it.” So Don came back, got the idea he was going to set up a store differently. The first store was jeans and records. The records went pretty quickly, and I don’t think made the second store. So he was just a Levi’s pants store basically when he started.

Don was a brilliant guy who was in real estate. The family was in real estate, had a series of buildings and things. His father had this cabinet business. We started helping him, and he just kept growing and growing and growing and growing. Every once in a while he would say, “Oh, you’re much too expensive. I’m going to do it in-house.” So he’d bring it in-house for a while. And then he called and said, “Well, I don’t want to have all these people,” because in some way it’s seasonal. He tried to get most stores open just before Thanksgiving and get the big bump off of the Thanksgiving/Christmas period. It’s a little seasonal. What he found out was that he had these waves. People were sitting around doing nothing. I said, “You’ve got an overhead bigger than I do and you’ve got to pay them more than I do. I can get better people who want to work for me. They don’t want to work for a pants company—a retailer. They want to work for an architect. I can hire better people.” So we’d go back and forth.

He was wonderful. He’d come in and we’d have a session where there’d be six stores and we laid them all out. He said, “Oh, no, no, no. You got to move this shelf around the corner here. I can get two more pants on that shelf if you turn the corner.” Probably very unfair to him, but he really didn’t know anything about fashion or any of that stuff. He was just buying the product

from Levi's, the product Levi's sold him. One day then Levi came and said, "You know, Don? We're going to start selling to Penney's and Macy's," I think it was. I know it was Penney's. Maybe Penney's and Sears. Don said, "Uh-oh. I better have my own line." That's when the Gap converted to being a manufacturer, a designer of product as well as a retailer of product. That was a dramatic shift, from a company that was just building stores and buying product and just selling it for a company that was a leader in the fashion industry. But Don could go into a market and assess it from a retail point of view, and the location in the mall—and most of it started in malls. There was a guy named Harry Murphy who did the super graphics; they started with this big super graphics. We'd do the design and the drawings, and Harry would do the super graphics, and we'd patch it in.

11-00:07:02

Meeker:

Super graphics? Can you define that?

11-00:07:06

Gensler:

They used to have big arrows and shapes and stuff painted on the wall. The original stores had—all very colorful. They had big glass globes that were a thing, and the gray carpet, and that was about it. So it was just colored, colorful. The name "Gap" was big. I remember a real estate broker came to me and said, "There's this company that's trying to figure out their name. I think it's going to end up being Gap or something." The first ads were a zipper undone, kind of a thing. It was The Gap. But Doris kept claiming it was "fall into the gap," which was the generation gap. They became a team, and they built an amazing company. We still work for them; we do their flagship stores, and we do others. When Mickey [Drexler] was there we did some and then we didn't do some. But basically I think we almost sent him a bill every month for forty years. Luckily they've paid it every month for forty years. So we have a long relationship with them.

11-00:08:21

Meeker:

In those first couple of stores that you did with them, was there any particular sort of spatial problem that was trying to be solved? Something that maybe resulted in something not typically retail?

11-00:08:34

Gensler:

Gosh, I can hardly remember them. The first stores were very straightforward. They were just shelves on the wall and tables where stuff was piled on it. There's always been a lot about the dressing booths and those things. Harry Murphy and he had come up with this super graphics and the glass. So we were really executing an early kit of parts to fit into the various spaces that were there. And we were neophytes. We didn't know anything about retail. I had done a couple of small retailers over in the Golden Gateway, but I had really no experience in retailing at all. I had done a women's clothing store and a barbershop and a couple of other stores. I can't even remember. I think a shoe store. But I didn't know much about retail. We were really a drafting and production and get-it-built service.

Then his brother, Bob Fisher, became the contractor, and we have built a wonderful relationship. Bob is the guy that I knew through social connections. Bob built the stores for a long time, did all the work. Then as they got bigger and bigger and bigger, all the lawyers said, “Oh, you can’t have your brother being the sole source. You got to bid out everything. People just won’t accept the fact that you’re using your brother.” Well, he got a much better job, a much better price, but that’s the way it goes. So his brother doesn’t and didn’t do anything for him, which is crazy because he built up a tremendous capability around the nation. They were just in the U.S. at the time. They weren’t international. Now they’re pushing hard in China and working with them on some stuff there. They’ve been a lot of places.

It’s been a very interesting relationship. I’m not as close to it as—one of my partners who was very close to it took it over, and he ran it for a time. Now another guy’s taken over. They keep changing people in there. They’ve kept some capability in-house. They expand it and then they shrink it down, then expand it and then shrink it down. But, as I said, we’ve done buildings for them, and we’ve done almost all their office space. They have a lot of offices in that building there, and the big headquarters. We were the architect of record and did all the interiors in the building there. They have a whole big [facility] down by Daly City, they’ve got a big operation down there, and then they’ve got operations in New York and other places. It’s a wonderful relationship with an organization.

11-00:11:47
Meeker:

Could you describe the difference, if there was one, between working with a retailer and the corporate clients that you had started to develop a portfolio with?

11-00:11:57
Gensler:

Two things. In some ways, in those days, it was somewhat similar. In the early days, and this is in the late sixties, early seventies, maybe into the mid and later seventies, most of my connections that I would deal with were the CEOs of the companies. They wanted to know exactly what was going on and would spend the time. I also found that they frankly enjoyed the experience. They wanted to put their stamp on it, but it was so different from what they do day to day that it was kind of fun for them, to be looking at an office space which never had been looked at before. Just rows of desk and linoleum asphalt tile floors, and some light fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. That was an office space. Then we were starting to talk about the productivity and relationships and work flow. This is way before computers. But they were really involved.

The meetings were with Don. There wasn’t a department of facility [planning] for real estate or construction department. It was him, and he had some backup people, but they didn’t come to the meetings. He finally got some good real estate people who we still work with—one guy went to Apple and kicked off all the stores, and then he went to Microsoft and kicked off a bunch

of stores, and then he went to Tesla and kicked off a bunch of spaces with them. But that was what happened in the beginning.

Then there was a group called facilities managers and program managers that got involved with companies. Companies then got nervous that they were building up their portfolios of real estate and they really didn't know what the hell they were doing. Finally they hired some people, and they were in the beginning not very knowledgeable. They didn't really know what to do, so they were being fairly protective of themselves and in turn protective of the CEO. They'd say, "I know what the company wants and needs, so you can't talk to him." "Well, you know, I've built a relationship." "No, you can't talk to him." That never happened with Don; he wouldn't have let that happen. Where I really didn't in many cases know the person, these facilities people were just so insecure that they didn't want me to get involved.

11-00:14:49

Meeker:

Perhaps they were protecting their own positions?

11-00:14:51

Gensler:

Well, they were protecting their positions, and they wanted to be more powerful. One of the problems. They put the facilities people under the chief financial officer, or some person. All that guy was concerned about was dollars, so rather than report—they wanted to move up in the pecking order and get into that inner circle where they had an actual direct relationship with the CEO and the top people. As it's evolved over the years, most of the major companies have people, head of real estate and facilities, and they have become quite professional, quite knowledgeable. There have been trade associations, lot of research, a lot of things. I used to give a lot of speeches to those groups. Gensler, the organization, still interacts with those people every day. Ninety percent of our work comes from most of those people, because the CEOs today don't seem to have time or interest. There are a few that do and want to really get involved. But the attitude has changed.

Now, retail is different. A retailer is really two kinds of people. Mickey Drexler, who Don brought in when they really had to get going and have their own products, and he's now J. Crew—a rare exception in that he is a really good businessman and wants to run everything but also is a fashion guy. He really understands the market, wants to approve every damn garment. He was running around doing everything across the street. It was right over here in those days [pointing across Harrison Street], then finally moved to the new building [a block to the north, across Folsom Street]. Don's office was right up in that corner up here [again, looking south across Harrison Street]. If you look up you'll see a window where the mullions have all been taken out and there's just one giant pane of glass, so that Don could look out at the bay without all the interruption. But most retailers, especially if they have their own stores, not just doing products and then selling it to Macy's or Bloomingdale's or whoever, really the store becomes their front door. So the

Gucci's and the Armani's and those things, those people in their design world of fashion are really heavily involved in the look and feel of the store. The president is usually a businessperson who is dealing with Wall Street and that stuff but not so much connected with the fashion, although some cases they are.

But in the business world, Bank of America, I used to sit down with a project guy, but I'd often meet with the president. Pennzoil, I met with a guy, Hugh Liedtke, chairman of the board and president. I got to know those people. It was an interesting time. But Mr. Liedtke couldn't visualize anything, and we didn't have the capabilities of doing renderings like we do today with computers. You maybe do one sketch. He just couldn't visualize anything. So we'd do full-size mockups of almost every damn thing that we were going to do. And, "Oh, I like that." "No, I don't like that. Change that." You could see it in mockups in an amazing way.

Now, when we did the Apple stores—I'm jumping ahead. But when we did the Apple stores with Steve [Jobs]—we worked in a warehouse, sealed warehouse. Nobody could get in, because he didn't want anybody to know that he was going into retailing. We built mockup after mockup after mockup for him. And he'd say, "That's awful. Terrible. I don't like that. Let's try this direction." So we'd do that. "No, I don't like that." He said other things slightly differently than that. Anyway, he didn't like things, he'd let you know about it. We tried a lot of different things until where they are today or then when they started. They've changed and morphed even more today. He was a guy that was obviously more of a business guy than a technology guy, but he had a vision, his vision of what the customer needs and wants. He didn't believe in focus groups. He said, "I know better than they do what's possible." There's a very good point to be made, although I do believe in my case I need to listen to understand at least what the management of an organization believes is their problem and their issues, and how we might address it.

11-00:20:04
Meeker:

Well, this is an interesting dichotomy or comparison that you set up, in that whether early on for corporate clients you're talking to CEOs. I know later on, like with Goldman Sachs, they actually set up these meetings that you would have with all of their senior partners and they would talk about what they want in their offices. So there's a clear relationship between you the architect and them the client, and your job is to interpret what they really want.

11-00:20:40
Gensler:

You mention Goldman Sachs. Whitehead and Weinberg were the two guys running the company. I would go into New York maybe once every two months with my partner, who was running the job, and we'd have breakfast. They had a chef that made the best omelets in the world. We'd have breakfast and we'd talk about the project. We'd get a room in their headquarters, their committee, and then Whitehead and Weinberg would come in and join them.

Not to totally drive it, but they had delegated to this very senior level committee who were investment bankers and stuff. They weren't real estate people at all. We were building 85 Broad, their headquarters, and doing the interiors for it. And they would really participate in decisions and processes and things.

And when Mobil Oil—I'll jump ahead, I'll tell you one story that still is bizarre, but it's indicative of what used to happen. We dealt with Rawleigh Warner, who was the chairman of the board of Mobil. We did our presentation to him. He had a guy who he assigned this project to. They were going to build a new headquarters outside of Washington, D.C. The story's interesting in that Warner was the chairman of the board and Tavoulaareas was the CEO and president. All our dealings were with Warner; we never met with Tavoulaareas. They had started the project. HOK was the architect, and the project was going to be open plan. They saw Pennzoil, which they thought was terrific, and it was open plan. It was done really nicely and that's what they wanted, and this open plan. So the architects designed this building with not a center core as a traditional building, but the core is on the end of the building with a big gigantic open floor, and there were sort of sausages and there were three of them linked together. The building was starting construction when we got on the job.

We took the plan and developed a scheme of how to do it. They said, "Well, what is it this going to look like?" We had a space across the street from the Mobil headquarters in New York on Lexington Avenue, and this was on Second Street, there in the corner between Lexington and Second. They could walk across the street. We took a floor and got various furniture manufacturers to design stuff the way we wanted it, and showed it in the colors and carpets and all that. Then we called Mr. Warner, Rawleigh, and said, "I want to show you what we've done." We had worked almost a year on this thing, and he had been part of process, and he said, "Oh, I love this. This is great." Because we'd made little models. In those days it was easier to make models. So we did that, and then we did the full-sized thing. And, "Oh, I love this. This is just what I want." Somebody said, "Geez, maybe we ought to show this to Tavoulaareas. He's the CEO." It was at a time when they were going to move the whole headquarters down to Virginia, just outside of Washington.

They had never announced about a lot of what's going to happen. They decided, "We'd better announce to the employees and everything else." It was just at that time when New York was at the depths. It was just a dump, everything was going wrong with New York. They started that "I Love New York" campaign with a heart and all that stuff. All of a sudden the people are saying, "I'm not moving down to Washington. New York's a great place. I want to stay here." Then all of a sudden they look around, they got two thousand, three thousand people. They set up a room with all the things, and

moving and helping the people decide where they should buy a house, etc. And everybody's saying, "I don't want to go."

And Tavoulaareas, it was even more interesting. He had gone in a helicopter, said, "I want that site right there. That's the one I want. And I want to be there." The people in Washington said, "This is government town. We don't want any businesses located here." He said, "I don't give a crap. I'm putting our headquarters right there on that site." It was a big fight, because they needed an off-ramp of a freeway to get onto the site. So why not just pick a site. Anyway, they finally gave up moving the headquarters to Washington; they moved the U.S. refining division, I believe it was, down there. Didn't expand the campus quite the way it was. Ironically, now Exxon Mobil are doing a gigantic five million square foot and we are doing the property for them outside of Houston.

So anyway, Mr. Tavoulaareas, we walk him into the mockup thinking, "Oh, this is terrific." Warner never showed up. Tavoulaareas came in and looked at it, says, "What the—is this crap? I'm not moving my people into this open stuff. Our people need private offices."

We said, "The building is designed for open plan. Private offices don't work." He says, "Figure out how to make it work." We scrapped it and had to start all over again after a year of work. We just went back to ground zero and started again. We figured out a system of having the offices perpendicular to the exterior walls so there would be light coming into all the offices, rather than putting a ring around the outside and then having everybody on the inside with no natural light.

11-00:27:08

Meeker:

The project architects for that were HOK, right?

11-00:27:10

Gensler:

Yeah. They were for the building only. They didn't have a thing to do with the interiors.

11-00:27:13

Meeker:

Did you have any interaction with them?

11-00:27:16

Gensler:

Not much, not much.

11-00:27:18

Meeker:

The shell was already there?

11-00:27:19

Gensler:

Yeah. The shell was going up. They had bought it and the contractor was building it. We didn't have any way to change it. It was too late to go back to square one on what you put on a site for what he wanted. But the question here was the chairman of the board and CEO not talking to the other guy. That

was the kind of level we had. We had it happen not a lot, but enough times. Especially as we've been trying to evolve the way space is being utilized. Now, I can't swear to it, but Mobil has a whole different psyche about the way they do things now than they did then. It's now Exxon Mobil, and I can't tell you whether it's Exxon's influence or what. But a guy has a job for three years and then he's moved. I don't care if it's right in the middle of the groundbreaking ceremony or right in the middle of the project or six weeks after everybody moves in. If his three years are up—I think it's three years—he gets moved to another assignment. They don't want anybody to get too comfortable.

11-00:28:38

Meeker:

It's like the military.

11-00:28:39

Gensler:

Yeah. We are now doing a new headquarters complex in Houston. This is a big, big, big project. We've done a big huge data center there and research facilities and stuff like that for them. It's been a wonderful big project for us, and they're just about to start moving into the first buildings. I think it's going to take two years to move in or something. But they kept it secret. It was Project X or something for a long time. Because they were in Dallas, and they didn't want anybody to know that they were moving everybody to Houston.

Why they were leaving Dallas for Houston, I have no idea. It was somebody's idea. Those things happened. But from my position, what a fantastic opportunity to see these wonderful organizations, companies, that handle their situations in such different ways. Right now we have a whole team of people. Exxon Mobil has—I'm making a number up—but it could be 2,000 facilities around the world. They don't know what they have, to be blunt. And they feel now with the sustainable green movement, they don't know what their buildings are doing. So we have a group of people going around and helping them green the entire portfolio so that they can publish as part of their annual report greening of our projects and stuff. The various steps of relationships with some of these clients have been just amazing.

If you go back to banks, which we started with Wells [Fargo] and then Gerson, I did some things for him. He said, "No, no, no. You got to go move over to Bank of America because I got a guy over there. He's going to really help you. You have to have a banker." I can't remember his name. He started helping me, and we started getting a little work out of B of A. We weren't getting very much work out of Wells, although Bank of America at that time had their own—like a whole company that just built branches. We weren't doing many branches. We were doing some of the office space and stuff like that. We've since been with them for another forty-year, forty-five-year relationship. Each time they've either bought a bank or were finally bought by another bank, Nations bought them, we've been able to be the one that's done the merger. We integrated Republic Bank. God, there was one down in

Atlanta, that's why we opened at Atlanta office. Republic was in Houston, and I think they bought some banks in Boston. They bought Bank Boston, and we rolled that in.

It's been a fascinating route to follow all these. You follow both the company, but you follow the people. The people don't always stay with the company. Frankly, that's where we've gotten more and more business, because we keep with this company, and then the guy who moves over to the competitive bank said, "Well, I really like working with you." In many cases, we've helped him get a job someplace else. If he has a conflict or something we put him over here, and then he's our buddy over here and we start working on that. So we've got two projects. I'm jumping ahead. A gentleman, Marv Taft, one of our early partners, who was the first guy that helped us in Los Angeles, drew a chart once that all of us never will forget. It was a chart of the tree and the roots, and how three or four of our original clients are the roots that have sprouted and developed into branches. Now 20,000 clients we've worked with or something like that over the years, all from those original four. It takes a while to get, but they come in one way or another from just that early beginning.

11-00:33:18
Meeker:

Like a family tree.

11-00:33:19
Gensler:

It's a family tree. We really work hard to keep those strategic relationships with these people, what we call a trusted advisor relationship, and continue to work and provide services. The thing that's been interesting is we provide services in two ways. One, we go to different cities and different locations for them that have helped us open and grow offices. And the second is bundling services. Initially we were doing just interiors. Then we started doing architecture, and then started doing graphics and branding and workplace consulting. Now we have a group in La Crosse, Wisconsin, which keeps the database of all the real estate and all their plans and everything. We saw this service, and we got jillions of feet in this giant database up in La Crosse, Wisconsin. So if Bank of America wants to know when the lease is coming up on a space, and could we use the space for six months and then drop the lease, because we need approval for six months to put somewhere in the country or in the world. Things like that have branched in so many ways, it's fascinating. A lot of our competitors do fabulous work, but in the process they don't seem to build long-term relationships. Some of them do, but most of them are always out looking for new things. We're always looking for new things, but basically our job is 80 percent servicing our current clients, expanding the capabilities that we provide to them.

11-00:35:17
Meeker:

I wanted to follow up on something about retail. You provided a really interesting description of the complexities of simply having a corporate client. That there's going to be oftentimes many different voices, and you need to

make sure you're talking to the right person. But then with retail you've also got this sort of nebulous third group, which are the retail consumers that maybe will like but maybe won't like the designs that you're coming up with. How does that influence the design process for retail spaces that you end up with?

11-00:35:56

Gensler:

Well, I'm not the best one to talk about this, because we've got people that are really closer to the days of retail. But I'll give you one story. I got to know Howard Lester, who was the guy that bought—

11-00:36:11

Meeker:

Williams Sonoma.

11-00:36:12

Gensler:

—Williams Sonoma. They had a catalogue called Hold Everything. Gerson Bakar and Howard were good friends, and I got to know Howard a little bit, and he hired us to do a store for Hold Everything. Said, "We're going to do a store, see if it works, and we'd like to expand in another line." So we got a warehouse in Emeryville, I remember, and we put every product that was in the catalogue on the floor. Just put it on the floor and some shelves. Well, Christ, it filled up the top of this table practically and that was all. I said, "That's not enough stuff to have a store." I'll come back to that later with Steve Jobs. But, "What are you going to sell in this store?" "Oh, yeah, we got to start adding stuff." So anyway, we did a neat, neat, really nice store in the Corte Madera shopping center for him. It was a really good store. But what we also found out is that the stuff that they had come in God-awful packaging: This box was this type [demonstrating with his hands] and this box was this way, and this box. The store looked like a junk heap. It just was terrible. Although we had a lot of good products and things that were really interesting, and this concept had done pretty well in a catalogue. We built a bunch of them, did the graphics and the branding and all that, but the products came in different kinds of boxes and colors and things. It was all over the place, and it had no sense of a store that had really been thought through. It was a little like one of these 7-Elevens with stuff all over the place.

Or I was in Walgreens yesterday. I had to get a passport photo. I was sitting there waiting for the passport photo to process and it was just a junk heap. Even Red Bull had a little tiny refrigerator on the counter where the guys make photographs. What the hell is a Red Bull? Like a refrigerator for eight cans of Red Bull. I couldn't believe that they had a whole refrigerator and eight cans—it was all it could fit, it was so small—on the counter where they're processing film. Just crazy. We're actually working with Walgreens on a lot of stores right now, so I don't know, I hope we can do something.

But we finally realized that we had to learn to package it or display it in a totally different way. In some cases you can't see it. We'll talk about Apple later. But I said to Steve Jobs, "You don't have enough products to put in a

store.” All they had was a Macintosh and a laptop and that was it. He didn’t tell us he was going to do things like iPhone and iPad and all the Nanos and all that. That made it a little harder. I kept saying, “What are you going to sell in this darn store, and where are we going to store all the computers?” “Well, we’re not going to store them all here. We’re going to ship them.” I don’t know.

Our guys and gals are always out looking at new things—and you go to Europe. There’s interesting stuff. That’s the same thing that the fashion people do. They go to Paris to see the fashion, then bring it back. Sometimes when you go to Asia, there’s some great stores. It’s always some little boutique that’s come up with a great idea of how to display stuff.

Right now we’re doing Starbucks stores all over the world. Starbucks had a very tight set of critical standards and what we call a kit of parts. Now we’re going internationally with them in Brazil and South America and some places, and they’ve realized they’ve got to localize them. They can’t just use what they did here, just plunk it down there and think it’s going to work. You have to tweak it. Like McDonald’s. They found that the menu that’s in the U.S. isn’t quite the menu you got to have in China and other places. I think we all learn as we go along.

I’ll just give you one more. Because I love retail, I really do. We were called in to McDonald’s to help them on their facilities and their office space. They have a huge campus outside of Chicago. They had hired a consultant to analyze the work flow in their stores and to do time and motion studies and flow. It had become apparent in two areas. One, every time they bring out a new product, it probably needs a new piece of equipment to grill it properly or boil it properly. And the kitchen, which once was a very efficient kitchen, was a frigging nightmare. Everything was just—“Here’s a little slot, we’ll stick this bagel toaster in over here,” and it was a disaster. They kept adding product.

So people would get up to the counter and they didn’t know what the hell they were ordering and what they wanted. How do you communicate with a customer? The people on this line of cashiers were taking orders—it’s interesting that In and Out Burger has such a teeny limited menu—but if you keep adding all these other things. “Oh, you don’t want lettuce on yours? And you want mayonnaise but you don’t want mustard.” Every time they do that, it sounds like it’s more customer-friendly, which it is, but man, does it screw up a rapid fast-food concept. Anyway, somebody said, “Could you design some stores?” I said, “Yeah, we can design some stores.” We did two stores for McDonald’s. We did a bunch of things, but we did two stores. Implementing the new kitchen, and they built the whole thing in a warehouse. Then they would send their employees over to buy lunch and see the flow and everything, did the employees like it. They don’t just do this thing willy-nilly. Anyway, we got approval, we finally built two. Maybe there were more, but I

know we built one in Colorado Springs and one in Chicago, fairly near their headquarters. I never figure out why they do it. You'd think they'd build them around the headquarters so the senior people could go.

Two things are vivid in my memory about it. Our branding and graphics people figured out some really good ways to do the signage, to change it so the people could read and make their mind up before they walk up to the counter. We worked out the kitchen with a kitchen consultant and food service person and a bunch of other things. Three things. The person who takes your order, goes and gets it. So you see the person, you see their face, and then the whole rest of the time you see their backside, which isn't exactly the nicest way to see people. So now I think they're doing a lot of things, getting the order and the collecting and packaging and then getting it to the counter without turning around. Certainly that's what In and Out Burger does. The people on that cash register are on that cash register. They're not going and getting the food. There are other people that are getting it and a separate place you're receiving it, not right there at the counter. That was one thing that just was driving us crazy.

The second thing is we had this wonderful entrance, and we had a big Ronald McDonald made. A big six-foot to seven-foot-tall Ronald McDonald. Fun. Maybe it was even bigger than that. Up in a space that was sort of the branding of the thing. And then the third one was that in that space, another store, we had just a carton of French fries hanging down. We had it made. "Well, we can't do that." "Why?" "Well, the manufacturing company that does all of our signage and things doesn't know how to make that, so we can't do it." "Well, why don't we go to somebody else?" "Well, we always use this company." "Yeah, but this is a better idea and would be more fun and would be no more cost." "Yeah, but we always use these people."

The punch line of the thing though is—one of the shockers is that in most McDonald's, seventy to eighty percent of the revenue comes through the drive-in window, believe it or not, which I never thought, but true. So we said, "Why don't we make the drive-in window a really nice experience, rather than just a hole in the side of a building? Let's make it nice and be interesting." Now, you go in and then you take a sharp left turn and then you take a sharp left turn, and you get to this stupid window. So we're going to make this thing really nice. One of our guys said, "Why don't we just round the back of the building, and you can just drive right around it and right up there? Wouldn't that be a nicer, easier, smoother way for people?" "Oh, that'd be wonderful." So we built it. We built a really nice way for people to pass stuff back and forth. And these numbers are not exactly right, but they're pretty close. The best they'd ever had was like seventy cars through a drive-in window in an hour. After the first five days they had 120 through this, through our thing. That's a hell of an improvement from a financial point of view.

I think the chairman was Greenberg. He went out, because he lived in Chicago, went out and saw this store and they told him that figure. He turned to the guy and he says, "Build a hundred of them tomorrow." Five days later he dropped dead. We went back and said, "Let's get started." And they said, "Well, we've talked to the guys in the real estate and the architecture department in McDonald's, and the contractors that we use to build the stores say they don't really know how to build a curved wall." I said, "Guys, look at the throughput we got for you and the revenue we can generate for you. At lunchtime you get almost 50 percent more cars going through in a shorter period of time." And, "No, we always build them with rectangles." So there are frustrations in this industry. They never did build any. The new guy, he was onto something else, he wasn't interested. So they never built any. We had really made an opportunity. We still do all their office space, but we gave up doing stores for them.

Retailing is a very personal industry. It's sort of like developers. I don't believe in corporate developers. They're like an insurance company trying to develop. They sell insurance. It's like, we're an architecture firm. People keep saying, "Art, why don't you develop your own buildings? God, you could make a fortune doing that." "Yeah, but that's not the business I'm in. I'm in a design business." Real estate developer is a whole different business. You do a project, you make all your money. Then you wait six months, you do another project, you make all your money or you lose all your money. We do it an hour at a time kind of a business. We sell so many hours a month, whether it's bundled in a lump sum or what, but we keep track of it by hour. We earn our money in little pieces in a consistent cash flow, where a developer has this whole total different mentality of making a living. Then, of course, then they've got a thing which is like an annuity. As you get a space leased, every month a rent check comes in, and that's pretty wonderful for you. But until that space leases up, or if you're going to sell condominiums, until they all get sold. For the developer, the last 10 percent is the profit on a condominium project. It could be a huge profit, but you got to get the first 90 percent [sold] before you even get to where there's actually cash coming in, not going out. It's understanding those kinds of issues that I think this firm has—understands it, and knows how to help with people. We work hard at that. So it's a fun time.

11-00:50:16

Meeker:

Okay. I think just to wrap up with the retail question right now. So you had the Gap as a client, and with some ebb and flow they remain a client until today. What were some of the subsequent important retail clients that you got say through maybe the 1970s or so?

11-00:50:41

Gensler:

I'm just trying to think. We certainly did Pottery Barn, early days. They've got a guy named Howard Backen who's doing some really nice work for them now. We had not a lot more of what I'll call the roll-out. We got some very

talented people who did one-offs. There was a luggage company that we did work for, and there were some other companies which were start-ups. Because of the Gap, people would come in here and say, “We’re going to design a store for a product that we don’t really know yet, but it’s going to be terrific. We’re going to do 500 stores, and we’d like to work with you.” Well, unfortunately the world doesn’t work that way. You got to build one or two or ten, and then you say, “I can maybe roll it out.” Oh, another group that we got involved with was Victoria Station.

11-00:52:04

Meeker: The restaurant.

11-00:52:05

Gensler: The restaurant people. We did about a hundred of those for them. Maybe not that many. Maybe fifty. There were a whole bunch of smaller operations that came and went, and we did stores. And we did things like reservation centers for United Airlines, which were a retail space. We had a corner, Post and Powell I guess it was, in Union Square, right on the corner of Union Square. Disney went in there later, and now there’s a Chase bank. We remodeled the building forty years ago, and it keeps changing who’s in there. But United, of course, doesn’t have any reservation centers at all anymore. Actually, this was our first AIA design award. It was a really beautiful building.

11-00:53:00

Meeker: The United center?

11-00:53:01

Gensler: The United Airlines ticket office was really a classy, classy-looking space. We did some branch banks and some other stuff. Not so much clothing retailers. We got some things from some of the big names. But they are really in most cases—and we get our share of them now today. They love to work with these really custom high-end designers that just know how to plaster money onto the walls. There’s some guys and gals that are really good at it that way. We’re good at it, but our strength is taking a really strong concept and rolling it out. There’s two kinds of people in the retail business: One is the one-off people, and then there are people that can take a concept and roll it out and adapt it to the various places that it’s done. We’re able to both roll it out and have that capability and to do a custom store, what is in the trade called a flagship store. Something that’s bigger and more different, kind of unique. Doesn’t fall into the standard category because of its location and the volume that they’re anticipating they’re going to deliver out of that store.

11-00:54:33

Meeker: What was the process by which you built out capacity within Gensler to do the retail spaces?

11-00:54:41

Gensler: I wish I could be honest with you and tell you there is a method. But one of the advantages of an approach we’ve taken is that, again, most large firms—I

may be exaggerating—but all large firms except Gensler basically focus all their efforts on large projects. We have always focused our effort on small and medium sized and large projects. This shows you how long ago. One of our clients called me up and said, “I want a really custom ashtray on the reception coffee table.” I had to go personally in those days, went to Gump’s and bought an ashtray for him and gave it to him. We’ll do anything to keep a client happy.

The point being that because we have lots of little projects. At the same time we have lots of small interior projects, tenant development work, people who were not just retail people. They were people that could move from a job that took a week or two days, then you get another one and another one and another one. The worst part about it, which is also seasonal, is that projects in our industry stop and start. Somebody comes in, “Oops, there’s a little problem with my financing. Stop everything until I get my financing set up.” Or you’ve got a team. So we are within an office. We have studios. If you think of a studio as a homeroom, that’s the homeroom. Most of the time you have your class in that room, but also you go off to other places for classes. The core group of the homeroom stays, but the rest of the people go out. We did that within an office. Today we’ll do that between two offices or three offices. “Well, geez, our project just got stopped. I got four people that I need to get busy tomorrow morning.” I’ll get on the phone and somebody will say, “I can take him, I can take him.”

We do it two ways. Now we do it mostly remote, but in the old days we’d get them on a plane the next day. They’d go there and spend three or four days there and come back. But now we can do it electronically, passing documents back and forth. That’s where we use Costa Rica and Bangalore as our offices to produce a lot of stuff if we have a surge. If they’re sitting not as busy as the people here, they cost a hell of a lot less sitting than the people here. Because you got a fixed cost to them, and all the equipment and everything. That’s not so bad overseas, although like China is now so expensive that you got to go to Bangalore, you got to go to Costa Rica, although Costa Rica’s starting to sneak up in cost, too. They’re also doing their own work, not just support for the other offices.

11-00:57:58

Meeker:

It sounds like what you’re saying as far as building out capacity to do retail work, it wasn’t necessarily like a whole new discipline that you needed to bring in?

11-00:58:06

Gensler:

We didn’t think of it as separate. We thought of it as just interiors that were different than a workplace interiors. But interiors is interiors.

11-00:58:15

Meeker:

Was that the right way to think about it, do you think, in hindsight?

11-00:58:19
Gensler:

I think at the time it was. Obviously, our clients' demands weren't as sophisticated then as they are now. Our knowledge wasn't as sophisticated. So it gave us and gave a lot of people exposure. Standard line around here was, "When are we going to do real architecture, Art?" and that meant a building. In the beginning we were like eighty-five or ninety percent interiors and five, ten, fifteen percent other things, actually doing the whole building. It's now shifted dramatically. Interiors is probably thirty-five or forty percent, and architecture is forty, forty-five percent, and then the rest is all the other stuff. They actually measure quite differently now in the practice areas. They measure architecture interiors, but they also measure it by practice hospitality interiors, etc. In those days, the library was the library. Now there's a whole library broken out that deals with products they use in retail, and then there's a whole library of things you use in hotels and restaurants, and there's a totally different library of furniture and carpets and things that you use in an office space. They're just different. If you're in healthcare, you have to have a whole different one.

But in the beginning, we were just trying to keep the doors open and keep ourselves busy. Everybody was a jack of all trades. And that helped. Then as the accounts got larger and more complicated, we assigned people to account managers and also to a discipline. Like a Charlie Kridler, who was doing all sorts of stuff, ultimately would go to the ICSC convention, which is the retailers convention and the shopping center convention. I'd go, and one of the facilities managers, to give talks and get us out there. And ULI, which is the Urban Land Institute. I'd go and give talks and be on committees there, getting to know people and developers. Now there's a whole group that goes to airport meetings around the world. Those branches keep branching out. Probably a good analogy is that we cut a branch off, stick it in the ground, and create a whole other tree. We're grafting things and letting that grow independently, where under the ground it's still connected to the same root structure. Partially connected, but it's really a whole new branch with whole new relationships and their whole new connections and knowledge, research.

We have this book, which is just an amazing document, the Gensler research book [pulling out a book on Gensler's research program]. This is the twenty-two major research projects that we did last year, and it is an amazing book. Just blew me away. I knew they were doing research. Now this stuff is picked up all around the world. We're getting it out there. But it's where we actually work with clients. In some cases they partially fund it, we partially fund it, and some we fund ourselves so that we can be better in each of our practice areas, and smarter. We're investing in things like that. I wouldn't even think about publishing or doing something like that twenty years ago or thirty years ago. Now it's a different world. It really is a different world. There's plenty of room for small firms that aren't going to do that. There's plenty of room for mid-size local firms, and there's plenty of room for very large firms. We are

now playing in a capability of still doing teeny little projects for friendly clients and doing gigantic projects for other clients.

Audio File 12

12-00:00:07

Meeker:

Today is the 10th of June, 2014. This is Meeker interviewing Gensler, tape twelve now. So we've in previous interviews touched on Pennzoil Oil a little bit and establishing the Houston office. I believe finished, or occupied in 1973 or thereabouts.

12-00:00:28

Gensler:

I think so.

12-00:00:30

Meeker:

And from what I can tell it really was a pivotal transformative moment in the history of the firm. It was the first major project outside of California. It was the point at which you hired Margo Grant, who played a big role in the firm. It was an extremely visible project in that you were working with Philip Johnson, who already by that time was a world renowned architect. And it then results in—

12-00:01:09

Gensler:

Lots of other things.

12-00:01:09

Meeker:

—other projects. I'd like you to maybe sort of walk me through the general story of this and how it was that you, a small San Francisco firm, ends up doing this big high-profile project in Houston when you had never done anything like that before.

12-00:01:33

Gensler:

It all started with a phone call on a Friday afternoon from a gentleman named Leroy Paris. Never forget him. He said, "I am Leroy Paris. I'm with Pennzoil. We're more than a little yellow oil can." I love that line. Never forgotten it. "We're a natural resources company." He said, "Do you do other than banks?" I said, "Oh, yes." He said, "Well, I'm sitting here looking at the Cushman & Wakefield brochure, their projects, and I see your name"—we had done a few things. We had done some bank work. Actually, tenant work in the Bank of America building. We were getting started on First Denver Bank in Denver, and we had done some other banks. But basically we had never done a giant corporate headquarters. I said, "Oh, yes, we do other than banks." He said, "Well, we're going to do a 600,000-foot space," which was like six times bigger than anything we had done, probably more than that. I said, "Oh, yes, we do that." He said, "Can you come down here Monday and meet with me and the CEO?"

So I got on a plane on Sunday and flew to Houston. Ironically, a guy had walked into my office earlier that previous week. He was from Houston, and

was wondering if we were ever going to do anything in Houston. I don't know whether he was vacationing here or something. He was an architect. I said, "Well, I have no plans."

So anyway, I flew to Houston. I met with Mr. Paris, and I showed him some stuff. He says, "All right, let's go next door and show Mr. Liedtke." Hugh Liedtke was the chairman of the board, and his brother was the vice chairman, I guess. They were in the process of buying—I want to say Louisiana Natural Gas. Actually a company bigger than Pennzoil, and was going to merge them. They were in Louisiana. They were going to merge them into Pennzoil in Houston. They had made a deal with Jerry Hines, at that time a prominent developer in Houston but not anything out[side] of Houston, to build a building. Hugh kept saying, "I want more than a cigar box on its side or a cereal box on its side for a building." So Jerry had gone to Philip [Johnson]. Philip had the idea of making, which was unique at the time, and the picture on my wall is of the project, twin towers. Rather than trying to be the tallest building in town, being two towers uniquely joined at the base only with a sliver slot between them, with a trapezoidal shape on the plan, a trapezoidal shape on the slope of the tower. They had a model about this size of the building.

So anyway, I walked into Mr. Liedtke's office, and I knew he and I were going to get along. He had a big picture of W.C. Fields on his wall. I thought, "This is my kind of guy." I went through my slides and my presentation, some stuff, and then I walked out the door. Now, I forgot to say that when I was in Mr. Paris's office talking to him, on the credenza in the back of him I could see the brochures of every one of the major competitors in the field had come to see him.

12-00:05:36
Meeker:

Who would that have been at the time? Skidmore and HOK or—

12-00:05:38
Gensler:

No, no. No, they weren't so much in corporate interiors. There was a firm called Swanke out of New York. There were a couple of other firms that were around. There was a firm out of Atlanta. There were some smaller firms in Houston. Not that I was very big. We were forty, fifty people. Forty people maybe. Anyway, I went in. They said, "Would you mind stepping out for a few minutes, wait in my office." So I went in Mr. Paris's office, and about ten minutes later he came. "Well, you got to do the job. Write us a proposal." I went out to the airport, got on a plane, and said, "What the hell am I going to do?"

12-00:06:21
Meeker:

What was the nature of your presentation? Do you recall what you presented? Was it your work on the B of A Building?

12-00:06:26

Gensler:

I hate to be crass, but I sold myself. I said, "I'll make this happen," and I'm pretty convincing that I can make something happen.

12-00:06:36

Meeker:

So it was more of an attitude, less of a—

12-00:06:37

Gensler:

An attitude. I think they felt I would listen. I talked a lot about, "I will listen to you and work with you. We'll find a solution." And I had some nice-looking projects, nice projects I had pictures of. In comparison to what we ended up doing for Pennzoil, it was pretty amateurish. It was a Kodak carousel. I had probably forty slides, and I went through them and told a little about this project and that project. Cushman and Wakefield probably helped me, although I don't know. They may have said, "Well, you ought to talk to Gensler." Because we had been very successful working with them, and they had been brought in as an advisor for the project a little bit. I'd worked with them on the Bank of America building.

Anyway, he came in and said, "Write me a proposal." So I literally wrote on the plane back to San Francisco a proposal, handwrote it out, and then went back and called up Western Union and dictated this two-page contract of what our fees would be and what our approach was, and stuff. I didn't have anything that was a contract. Luckily, they never signed it. I never asked them to sign it. They started paying us, and we just went.

I knew I had to send somebody, so I came back Monday morning and put my arm around a guy named Tony Harbour and said, "Tony, you and your wife will love it in Houston." He said, "Oh." He was a Brit and had been with me for a while, and was a very good designer and good guy. He packed up and moved to Houston. I said, "But don't worry, because I've got this other guy that I've met the other day. We'll hire him. He'll know where the building department is and all the players and what to do." And he went down. I guess I went down with him. We set up, and we found a little space that we could take and rent. So we just started.

Then maybe two or three months, maybe two months after that, a furniture dealer, I can't remember who it was, said, "You looking for somebody who's really good?" I said, "Of course I'm looking for somebody. I'd love to have somebody really good." He said, "Well, this woman named Margo Grant is at Skidmore. She was the interior architect for the Bank of America space. She's not happy, because they just promoted a guy over her to be partner, because she's a woman. They're not making women partners and she wants to get ahead in the world." She was breaking up with a boyfriend and a bunch of other things. So I had lunch with her, and off she went to Houston to join Tony and be a team. At the time, I didn't realize, but the rule of two people really is a good idea, to have two people, not just one, running an office. They built a terrific group, made a great relationship. Margo was an incredible

relationship-builder with people like the Liedtkes, and got to know Bessie and Betty, the two wives of the two brothers. She became close buddies with them. And we became really close friends with the Liedtkes. Not close, I shouldn't say that, but good friends.

The project got going, and then the Liedtkes wanted to be up at the very top of the building. Elevators go up, but if they keep going they go right through the sloped roof, so you got to take an offset and go up.

12-00:10:47
Meeker:

Was there an understanding early on that the unique architecture of the building posed some challenges along those lines?

12-00:10:56
Gensler:

I don't think anybody even thought about it. Philip wanted to do the executive floors and I said, "Geez, I really want to do that, too." "Well, I'd like to do it." The original thought was we might share it. Then they said, "No, you do the whole thing," because they got really comfortable with Margo. I went to New York and sat in Philip's office for two weeks, which was a wonderful experience for me. Literally, he sat with a clean desk and ten, what I call grocery store yellow number-two pencils all perfectly sharpened and lined up here. He couldn't draw. He was worse than I was, a terrible draftsman. He's terrible, but he did these sketches that are just awful. I think it was like Quasimodo. He had a guy chained in the basement of the Seagram's Building in a model shop. So the next morning would come up a model. "How's this look, Art? Do you think this is good?" We wanted to build some interconnecting stairs between the floors. It was fascinating to work with him. He became a very good friend.

12-00:12:14
Meeker:

Well, sometimes people report him as being rather prickly or sometimes quite exacting.

12-00:12:18
Gensler:

Oh, yeah, he was a prickly guy. Always dressed perfectly. He worked in his suit jacket. You didn't see Philip with his jacket off or anything. His office was very formal and stiff. And then he would go downstairs and—

12-00:12:40
Meeker:

Was it traditional or contemporary?

12-00:12:41
Gensler:

Oh, it was very clean and simple, but very contemporary. He had all Knoll's furniture in the office and stuff. It was a very nice office. But the back of the house was pretty plain. He would go down to lunch at the Four Seasons every day and talk to people. But Philip was not a young man when he started his practice. He was fifty, fifty-five, so probably—he lived to be ninety-six or something like that. He had done one building. He did the building in Minneapolis. God, I can't think of it, but the big tower in Minneapolis. That

was really the only high-rise he had done. Other than the Seagram's Building, which he'd worked on with Mies van der Rohe.

12-00:13:35

Meeker:

And that's where his office was? In the Seagram's—

12-00:13:38

Gensler:

Was in the Seagram's Building. Yes, oh, yes. He was part of the Alcoa family, so he was independently wealthy. I remember in college going to his glass house and seeing that. Now, Philip had plenty of money. Money wasn't the problem. He was an art historian, architectural historian more than an architect. I guess he was a member of the AIA and graduated with a degree, but I'm not sure he did, to be honest with you. He had a partner named John Burgee at the time, who was a good guy. He was the guy that ran the back of the house and got the building drawings done. We got to know each other.

I had done some consulting work for some people. Cushman & Wakefield brought me in to look at buildings, to make sure they were tenant-friendly and worked. I was the guy that figured out how to make the Bank of America Building with twenty-foot bays work for fifteen-foot users, which were mostly law firms and financial institutions, offices.

I'd make the commitment. Look, "I'm not going to touch the outside of your building. I won't touch it. I'll just figure out how to work the insides, maybe shift some toilets around or something." I got pretty good at making the buildings more efficient. Buildings are measured in a very strange way. People think you pay for what you see, is where you can put carpet or flooring material. But no, you pay for restrooms and you pay for corridors and telephone rooms. You only don't pay for shafts—elevator shafts, stair shafts, and mechanical shafts. You measure to the outside glass line. Buildings used to have the glass set back in and the columns out; you see a lot of buildings with the frame of the columns. Well, the developers realized that if you moved the glass out, you didn't have to build a building any bigger. You measured to the glass line, which is out by the face of the column, not back in the back of the column.

12-00:16:05

Meeker:

Do you think that's why the curtain wall became so prominent?

12-00:16:08

Gensler:

That's why it happened.

12-00:16:08

Meeker:

Not necessarily an architectural feature but an economic feature.

12-00:16:11

Gensler:

Yeah. That's exactly why it happened. For example, you see here [pointing to the design of the Gensler office building, constructed originally in 1926]: this glass is back here from the edge of the column. That's about a foot. Well, that

foot measured all the way around this building is one hell of a lot of real estate that you're not paying for. You don't pay to the inside where you can put the carpet. You can't put the carpet out there. There can be a shelf inside. It's where the glass is. Then people decided to take the glass all the way to the floor. That was a whole other shift that we had.

Anyway, I got a chance to work with Philip in that. He and I became friends and we kept in touch. He was nice, helped me when I became a fellow of the AIA and other things. I've always had a fond memory of him.

12-00:17:01

Meeker: I'm sorry to interrupt.

12-00:17:03

Gensler: No.

12-00:17:03

Meeker: Obviously he's a towering figure. And he already was, to a certain extent by this point—

12-00:17:10

Gensler: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

12-00:17:11

Meeker: You, as a younger architect, you have the Cornell credentials and everything. But did you find him intimidating?

12-00:17:20

Gensler: I was around so many senior people. I was like thirty, thirty-five years old. I had been running a business, and I think he respected that enough. He was interested in making Cushman & Wakefield happy. He was working with Jerry Hines on this building and he wanted to do more work with Jerry, which he did.

[break in audio]

For some reason, and I really don't know why, I have always been comfortable in front of people. I never even thought about it, but maybe I'm a big enough guy that I don't know if they feel comfortable or they can't yell at me or something.

12-00:18:18

Meeker: Physicality.

12-00:18:19

Gensler: Yeah. I don't know what it is. I do try to listen, and I do try to be responsive to what they want and show a commitment to them. One of the things that I do is most every time, especially with new people, is ask, "Explain your business to me." People love to tell me what they do. Like I'm enjoying telling you what I do and have done. I find that when they open up that way, it becomes very much—first I learn a heck of a lot about them, but I learn a lot about their

business and why they're making the decisions they're making and where they come from on that. This is an interesting phone call which I won't go into but it's for Jerry Jones, the Dallas Cowboys' owner, for a whole training facility and headquarters for them. I was trying to figure out my calendar. It's an interesting example. For him, he brings his two sons and a daughter and his wife to every meeting, because it's a family decision on this facility that we're working on for them. Don't have that often. I'm working with the Gallos and it's the same way, where they bring the family. Each project is kind of different but interesting.

12-00:19:38

Meeker:

I'm curious about the Pennzoil building, right, and the interiors. There were some challenges, particularly on the executive level.

12-00:19:52

Gensler:

Well, the challenge is in the point, which is hard to get stuff to fit in there.

12-00:19:55

Meeker:

How was this solved? What was the nature of the challenge and then how—what were the Gensler innovations?

12-00:20:02

Gensler:

There's a lot of space out in that point and it gets kind of small. It's a forty-five degree angle.

12-00:20:08

Meeker:

And then you also have the roof.

12-00:20:09

Gensler:

And the roof is a space. So how do you get a stair that comes up and steps back so that it follows the slope of the roof? What floor do you have a transfer elevator that goes up, and how does that work in and tie in with the elevator, so that if the chairman wants to go to another floor you've got one transfer and then he can go down? Then you've got a low-rise and a high-rise. They were taking all of one tower, so he wants to go to various places in the building. I'm pretty good, and I was in those days, maybe I'm decent now, at analyzing that kind of stuff. Philip was really interested in the form and the shape and what the outside looked like.

12-00:20:53

Meeker:

Sculptural elements.

12-00:20:54

Gensler:

It was sculpture. The details of the curtain wall were very important to him. He was trying to figure out how to do buildings that weren't monuments. The Seagram's Building with all the bronze curtain wall. Nobody can afford that now. He was working with a guy he knew—Jerry Hines—who was beginning to become a real force, not on just Houston but all over. He sized him up quickly, as I did, that Jerry's an amazing guy. I was asked to sit in on all the negotiations of the lease. He'd sit there with a slide rule. I haven't seen those

in a long time. And he'd, "Okay, that'll be okay. We can do that." And, "No, no, no. That's not going to work."

Philip wanted, for example, lights. It's a five-foot module building. He wanted a two-by-two light fixture in the middle of every five-foot module. In those days, believe it or not, we used to search for like hundred-foot candles, 110 foot candles. Now we've got the thirty- or forty-foot candles. I said, "Fine, that's fine. We'll take that as a credit," because we'll only put them in every other one, not every one, and get half the money that is set aside for light fixtures to put them for something else. We're not going to have a lot of offices. We're going to have very few. So we want all the money for gyp board walls. Jerry has beautiful wooden teak doors that was part of the original package, the rent package, so I wanted that for money for the interiors, for other things. I earned my fee real quickly in just the lease negotiation. But one of the classics of the thing is only in Houston and only in those days, the lawyer for Hines sat in one office in Baker Botts and the lawyer for Pennzoil sat in the office right next to him. The two guys in the same office sitting next to each other negotiated the lease. Today you couldn't possibly have a situation like that.

12-00:23:11

Meeker:

Apparent conflict of interest.

12-00:23:13

Gensler:

Just a tremendous conflict. But nobody worried about those things.

12-00:23:19

Meeker:

You were actually there in the lease negotiations between Liedtke and Jerry Hines. What role would you play in that? I'm curious.

12-00:23:30

Gensler:

I'm everything from making sure the building is measured properly to the tenant—in those days, instead of giving you a dollar amount, Hines would provide the ceiling, the lighting, so many power outlets per square foot, so many square feet of carpeting that's a certain dollar value, so many doors and so many linear feet of partition. So many phone outlets. And the finishes and stuff in the restrooms and the lobbies, elevator lobbies. That had a dollar value, but it was really all—he was going to give you the wall. If he could buy it cheaper and you didn't know what—and he would build it out and stuff. In this case we said, "No, we'll take all the money and we'll build it out." Yet Philip was very adamant that, for example, from the outside of the building—said all those light fixtures on the outside row had to be there, because it looked uniform at night.

So it was a negotiation. Well, we didn't really need them, but Philip—and what did we get for that? What are the window treatments? Are they drapes? Are they shades like these? I actually can't remember whether they were shades or little Venetian blinds or what we put in there. I think it was actually

little Venetian blinds, because this product hadn't come out yet, MechoShade. So I was advising them as a tenant architect, advising Pennzoil and negotiating with Hines. Pennzoil didn't have anybody to build buildings. They built refineries and pipeline.

12-00:25:24

Meeker:

This was also a period of time that a few transitions were happening. One, that's kind of the beginning of the high-flying Houston oil boom era, where I imagine cost was not the biggest consideration. It was also a point in time I think that you start to see a transformation from much more traditional wood panel office spaces to more open plans, more contemporary furnishings. How did that play into this?

12-00:25:54

Gensler:

Oh, very much so. I think Hugh Liedtke had said, "I wanted this open plan." No, not the executive offices, but all the people, open planning. It was new. He didn't know. The reason he wanted it was because he was merging two companies and he said, "They're coming from different companies and they're from different cities. They don't know each other. I've got to get them all up to speed and running at the same time. The only way to do that is to have it open." He wanted it all in wood. They were all wood units. So we ended up in Grand Rapids with a company called Stow & Davis. We had a bunch of mockups. We developed with Stow & Davis an all-wood furniture system. It was more case goods than panels like we have today. You see panels and they have little cubes that you have today. Well, ours were a series of case goods, so they were file cabinets and walls and things all tied together.

12-00:27:00

Meeker:

Not as flexible but still open.

12-00:27:02

Gensler:

Not as flexible, but movable and much more solid-looking. They had more of a traditional wood, dark stained oak, if I remember correctly.

12-00:27:14

Meeker:

What did Philip Johnson think of that? Because here he is building this modernist masterpiece.

12-00:27:17

Gensler:

Well, he didn't get into the interiors really at all. When I started doing all the interiors, then he stepped out. Hugh had this guy that took some fancy stone out of Africa, he made jewelry and stuff. I want to say malachite, but that isn't exactly right. But the boardroom table was made out of this unbelievable stone. They had it smuggled out of Africa in some way, because you couldn't take this stone out. He smuggled it out in some plane or something, shipped it. He was involved with it. It was just a different time.

We started to use artwork. They had a wonderful history of photography of their projects in the countries they were working in. We used big blowups.

They were beginning to be able to blow up these big photographs. It was very personal. And then we made glass dividers. It was a really new thing, floor to ceiling glass dividers, and we had silk screened onto the glass oil rigs and things. They were really quite beautiful. Give some sense of just not being a clear piece of glass. We had those in the lobbies and special places. But there was a uniform thing. We really did introduce the open plan down in the cafeteria.

I remember one of the things. The tables that people sat in the cafeteria were a can, looked like a Pennzoil can. It was a round top with a Pennzoil—big yellow oil cans and stuff. It was really a fun place. So we did some things that today are just throwaways but then they were like, “Ooh, look at that.” Mobil saw that and they said, “That’s what we want.” Now, that wasn’t with Mr. Tavoulaareas. As I said, he wanted private offices and all this other stuff. But the rest of Mobil people wanted this open planning. Pennzoil was a real entrée, because we got other good projects in Houston. Then we got almost everything in Houston. A bunch of banks; we did the Allied Bank and the First Republic Bank, and there was two or three others.

12-00:30:09
Meeker:

Well, the other Philip Johnson building that was built there too, right?

12-00:30:11
Gensler:

The RepublicBank [1983, now called the Bank of America Center] was Philip’s also. By then we had a really good relationship with Philip. That was an interesting problem. There was a Western Union switching station right on the site. So we had to build the Republic building right over the top of it. It was like Cape Dutch architecture.

12-00:30:45
Meeker:

A banking Guild Hall.

12-00:30:45
Gensler:

Yeah. And the Guild Hall. I don’t know what’s happened to it; I remember it had like twenty-eight teller stations. Well, you don’t need twenty-eight teller stations in today’s world. It was a big open area for all the people that do banking. Then Bank of America finally ended up owning it. Again, that was a company that wanted all private offices, so we went in there and did that. Beautiful, beautiful space. But the Guild Hall banking hall was an amazing space, just an opening space, and we finished that all pretty cleanly and simply but very, very nicely. That’s one of our nicest jobs. Margo and Tony did all of that work. She sort of led the interiors, and he’d do the interior architecture. But she did a lot and she’s trained in that, as well. They worked as a heck of a couple, but she was the real day-to-day contact with most of those.

12-00:31:45

Meeker:

Well, that's what I wanted to follow up on. You had mentioned that even before this there was a project going on in Denver. Which one was that? I'm not familiar with that one.

12-00:31:54

Gensler:

Denver was a project that—I want to say it was Welton Becket. I think it was. Welton Becket out of L.A. was the architect, and we were doing the interiors. Cushman & Wakefield put us into that project, and that was about 400,000 feet. I think we got almost at the same time, and Jim Follett moved from San Francisco to Denver. He'd been the guy that started with me originally. Moved his family. He ran that office, and built that into a nice office. I think it is actually officially our oldest. I think we were in Denver a little before Houston. I have to go back, but I think it's months, not years, difference. A few months different.

12-00:32:40

Meeker:

Do you feel like by this point in time, and this would have been very early 1970s, you had what you would now recognize as a Gensler company culture?

12-00:32:54

Gensler:

Well, if you'd asked me then, I would have said I don't know what the word culture means. I've learned over the years what it's meant to us, but it's taken me a long time to really formulate it, that I can really articulate it. I certainly haven't changed my story. I don't mean that in a flip way. I was doing some research for this book and I was reading an old speech that I gave like twenty-five years ago. The words in that speech are almost the same words I use today. So things have not changed. The scale has changed, and the complexity's changed; the market changed and technology has changed, but the basic core principles of listening to the client and working all together and sharing.

In the early days the accounting systems were all set up for silo-thinking. They were set up as a manager had to manage a financial statement. Our managers managed to hours billable and made all their charts based on how many hours [worked]. We work with a set billing rate, even though the billing rate is a multiple of compensation and costs. It goes up and down because this month you've got a big insurance bill and next month you've got this. The way the old system was, your billing rate was going up and down like that, and these guys are going crazy trying to manage their jobs. We were doing all that and then we were saying, "Well, we're helping you out and shouldn't we change the standard system?" I finally said, "This is ridiculous. Let's just do it." There were no accounting systems then that were available that worked that way. So we've had to work when software really came along and accounting systems came along. Again, it was all hand-entered in these spreadsheet forms; there was no computer.

But we have had, I think, a culture from a design point of view of listening, cooperating, going with the building, not having a style, having what's appropriate for that client, hiring people and paying them better than anybody, having bonus programs and other things that people just didn't have. I wish I could tell you where I came up with these ideas—and, today still, they seem like why wouldn't you do it that way? I read a lot about business and all these very complicated things, and they make it complicated. *Harvard Business Review*, on this book that I'm working on, we sent it to them and they said, "Geez, we love the book, but we do all of our books on basic research. So for the faculty we can't have a book that's kind of loopy-goopy." You want to treat people nicely, well, pretty obvious, but not always. People with giant egos may not be the thing you want. We all have egos, but there's an ego and then there's a giant obnoxious ego. We just don't have room for those kind of people, or tolerance. And, by the way, when I say we, I really mean we. A lot of people. Tony and Margo and Ed and Jim and all these people in the early days, we all got together and we talked and just shared. Everybody contributed. This firm has my name on the door, but the ideas are a compilation of a lot of people. I had the leadership role and the direction of the leadership and the willingness to say let's go for it, but they certainly made big contributions.

12-00:37:35
Meeker:

Well, that's kind of what I was getting at. So here you are, what, forty, fifty people with this fledgling but successful firm in San Francisco and then in a short period of time you're in—

12-00:37:47
Gensler:

A hundred or something.

12-00:37:48
Meeker:

Or a hundred. But a short period of time, there you are in Denver.

12-00:37:52
Gensler:

Well, when you get Gensler Houston, Denver, and San Francisco and we were probably a hundred or something.

12-00:37:56
Meeker:

So what was the process insuring that this culture, such that it existed at the time, was able to be replicated?

12-00:38:06
Gensler:

I didn't realize it at the time, but the culture was that we all got together on a regular basis. A lot of us flew around a lot. We had six or eight meetings a year with all of us. They weren't board meetings because we didn't have a board then, but we would get together. The leadership group would get together. We would spend time, and we always invited the wives, because I felt that they would understand why their spouses or their husbands—although the only woman didn't have a husband—that they understood why the guys were never home and were working quite the hours they were working. I

wanted the whole family to support. I know I needed my family to support. Drue went with me everywhere, and I wanted them to learn. Drue really helped me in bringing the wives together as a part of the family of the firm.

A lot of things happened because we all like each other. Again, I didn't realize how important that ultimately was and is. But liking the people you work with makes a heck of a lot of difference. Both liking and respecting them. In an architecture firm, there are some firms that are built on egos, where each one has their own little ego group and that's it, and they don't give a damn about the rest of them. They don't want to share, they don't want to give anything up. They'll compete against other offices. There are firms, we'll see two groups from another firm, each trying to get the project. Well, we never do that. It's about what's best for the client. We may bring people from two or three offices, but one office will be the point and will represent the project. The talent may come from—and then they'll work as if they're working for that office and contributing from that office. It's stuff that we just evolved.

[two paragraphs deleted: repetition]

12-00:42:06

Meeker:

Do you recall any specific challenges that came with the expansion into other geographic areas?

12-00:42:14

Gensler:

Oh, God. Well, you have to understand, literally, the fax machine didn't even exist. You couldn't get documents back and forth. There wasn't a Federal Express. It was the U.S. mail. That isn't the most efficient way. And telephones, long-distance calls, were damn expensive. Fifty years is a long time, or almost fifty years. You can't imagine the changes that have happened over that period of time in terms of impact that technology's had on our ability to do stuff. I was on the plane a heck of a lot of time. Of course, planes were a lot cheaper. PSA, you could go to Los Angeles for thirty-five or forty bucks or something. Every hour and you're back and forth.

12-00:43:18

Meeker:

There wasn't the whole security establishment that you got to deal with.

12-00:43:21

Gensler:

I used to go and run down the gangway and knock on the plane door. "Don't leave, don't leave. I'm here." Can you imagine today just running to the plane and knocking on the door? "I'm late, I'm sorry I'm late. Please open the door." They'd open the door and let me on the plane. That isn't going to happen anymore. So it was a different time and a different kind of an attitude.

One of my favorite thing was the Liedtkes, going back to them. They decided they wanted a corporate work vessel. That meant a yacht for them, but it was on the books as a corporate work vessel. They had rigs, oil rigs out on the Gulf, so the idea was to design this boat with a big fantail, and they would put

oil pipe and stuff on the—we put rubber cushion mats over the deck and protect everything. But down below it was gorgeous staterooms and dining rooms. I think it was like a 125-, 130-foot yacht, which was big in those days, really big. It was being built down in Louisiana, in the Bayou area. We flew down in a DC3. That was the Pennzoil plane, a DC3, to go down there.

I brought Drue down and we went down to see the work vessel. It was under construction. We had lunch in Aunt T's, I'll never forget this, a black lady's home. They had card tables and dining room tables and sideboards and things. There were about fifteen of us. This table marched through her house, from the kitchen to the dining room to the living room to the front porch. Every kind of chair you could find, they could find. She served probably the best meal I've ever eaten in my entire life, at least to that time. That wasn't corporate jet world, but it was in those days the corporate jet world to go down and see the Pennzoil work vessel. We were doing all the interiors. I didn't feel we were capable; I hired a really slick interior designer who did that kind of yacht stuff as a consultant, to work with us on this stuff, and he got along with the Liedtkes really well. Because we don't do residential and don't want to do residential, and this was like a residential project for them.

I think I may have mentioned this but it is so interesting, whether it's the Liedtkes or any of us. If you go to their home it's traditional, it's very old world in many things. And yet in their workplace, the idea of putting a wingback chair and an English partner's desk in a law firm office now would be unheard of. Nobody does that. Maybe someplace in a little town in the Midwest. But nobody's asked for that in twenty-five years, and yet when I first started—I was always in antique stores looking for partner's desks and wingback chairs. The world has changed a lot. I guess one of the things—a lot of architects and designers, it's about them and it's about their project, not the clients, and it's about their style and their reputation and their this and their that, which is fine. If that's the way you want to do your life, like an artist does—this is my painting and you like it or you don't. Unfortunately, we're not selling paintings. We're providing spaces and stores and convention centers or whatever the heck it is, hotels, that have to work for the general public, for everybody.

What my taste is and what my home looks like is not like an office either. It's very comfortable. I've got four sons I raised in it. We played soccer in the living room. It's not exactly the slickest place in the world. But that's the way people live at home, and they live differently in an office. Our culture was to accept those kinds of things and the change in people from wanting different things. We're very open and listening about what do they want and why do they want that? Why do they feel comfortable? Many of them, you'll find they're colorblind, they don't have a clue what you're saying. That's when you finally say, "Why don't you let us pick the colors?" "Okay, okay." If you ask a CEO for something he'll give you an answer, especially a lawyer, because they know everything. They finally are hiring professional managers,

because lawyers are lousy managers, like doctors are lousy managers of their business. They also hire professional staff that knows how to keep a standard and things going. So the world has changed, and I think if I was conceited I would say I figured it all out and thought it all out and that was the way it happened. But, in fact, we did things and they worked, so we did them again. And then when another thing came, we tried, it worked or didn't. If it didn't work, we tried something else.

Over a period of time, we've done a lot of different things, and because we've done a lot of different things, we've kind of gone through most of the issues. We now have a checklist, so when we open a new office we know who to get, from the phone to the IT guys to the name on the door. Then your name in the phone book, get a decent address and get stationery made. All the little things, that we know how to do it now. We've got a system and we just go ahead and do it. But for when you're starting out, you just kind of—so we just sent people. They found where the building department was and where you do these things, and they fed it back into the system. Over a period of time we learned how to do things.

12-00:49:50
Meeker:

This point you made about the personal relationships that facilitated the culture moving from San Francisco to other offices is pretty interesting. A lot of projects that I've done, people talk about this. I'm thinking about the Kaiser Permanente project, and they're talking about their leaders in the 1970s. It was, without exception, men and their wives and they would go to a meeting in Hawaii or something like that. And the men would go off together and the wives would go off together. But your group was somewhat different. Not only did you have Margo Grant, but you had people like Orlando Diaz.

12-00:50:36
Gensler:

Yeah. Well, that came a little later.

12-00:50:37
Meeker:

A little bit later. But I wonder how those people with different backgrounds or different identities maybe influenced the tenor of these personal relationships.

12-00:50:54
Gensler:

I mean, in the case of Margo, I think she certainly had a lot of influence. But she came in with a—I don't want to say a chip on her shoulder, but an annoyance. She was really annoyed. So when we gave her the freedom and the opportunity—and she had worked in Houston with Skidmore on Tenneco, which was a very prominent project with a guy named David Allen out in New York. So I think each of us, we learned from each other, but we kind of learned how to get through issues. We're not bashful about talking to each other about, "Hey, I got a problem. What do I do?" Tony is—I use it as an example because to me it always is—his father was in the secret service in England, like the CIA.

12-00:51:56

Meeker: MI-6 or MI-5, yeah.

12-00:51:58

Gensler: M6. So he had a door in his office and insisted on a lock, and every one of the file cabinets has a lock on it. Every night he'd go around locking everything up. If you want to find out what I'm doing and what my financial statement is, come into my office and poke around. You'll find everything I own and know about. He was obsessed with security, and I'm obsessed with being open and sharing with people. So we've had differences of style. But I think always the basic tenets of this relationship with the client and the fact that they're important. And Margo came to the job with that. She was always very, very client-focused in all of her work. Her best friends are either people that work in the firm or the clients. I don't think she has any friends outside of that circle. Maybe some people in the industry, the furniture industry and stuff. But she really got to know the wives. She got to know the husbands. She got to know the people in the industry, the client and family. She would write notes, find Christmas and birthdays and send about their kids. Her clients are her family.

I think that's a feeling that a lot of us have, that our clients are our best friends. We treat the work that we provide for them as we would treat a family member. We just found out it's the way we're comfortable working. Again, I don't say it's the only way, but it's certainly one that's for us worked awfully well. So each time this firm grew, it grew because some client who we really cared about said, "Can you help me?" Cushman & Wakefield opened a lot of doors for us. First they became friends, but more important, they knew that when they recommended this firm, their client was going to get a good job and say to everybody, "Oh, geez, Cushman & Wakefield is great. They brought in Gensler and they did a great job. If you're looking for somebody, use Cushman & Wakefield because they give you the right skinny." For us, that couldn't be better, and for them it couldn't be better. So we shared with each other.

As I was saying, we're open. We're not keeping all of our secrets and closed in. Whether it's a furniture manufacturer that hears about somebody—we don't play favorites. We work with all our manufacturers. We don't have one or two that we got a little side deal with. In the old days of furniture, everybody was getting a kickback and a royalty on stuff—"We'll give you a yacht trip." We don't allow our people to take anything. "We are having a conference in Europe, in Positano," or something, "and wouldn't you like to have some of your people go over?" "No, we don't want them to do that." If it's a special case we'll do it, and maybe we'll even pay for it if they wanted to speak or something. We don't want to be obligated to anybody. We want to be extremely neutral.

It's like we design furniture for manufacturers, and light fixtures. We design them because there isn't a product in the market that we think is right for a need that we have. We still have problems convincing our people, "It's okay. You can tell the client it's our design." They say, "Well, we get a royalty." "Well, somebody else is getting a royalty if you use their product, so we might as well get the royalty. But is this the right fit or fixture? Which one did they pick?" "They picked the one we did." "Let them use it. Don't try to say, 'Well, you shouldn't because we're getting a royalty.'" "Don't we want to kick back the royalty to them?" I don't think so. Why? That's a whole different department. It doesn't make any sense. We've invested our money. We need to design it. Now we need to get paid for it. But it's always interesting. Everybody around here is very cautious about the reputation of the firm. It takes years and years and years to build one, and you can lose it in thirty seconds if you do something stupid. So you really got to be careful. But everybody understands that.

Interview #7: June 11, 2014
Audio File 13

13-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is the 11th of June, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler. This is tape thirteen, session seven.

We've been talking about some of the early achievements of the firm. Big clients like the Gap, big projects like the Pennzoil Building. This is done in a historical context of the sixties and, particularly, 1970s, where there are some contextual challenges that any new firm is going to face, any firm at all is going to face. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the 1970s and particularly the economy of the 1970s, which had a whole series of—

13-00:00:59

Gensler: Ups and downs.

13-00:01:00

Meeker: —ups and downs, mostly downs. Particularly in the early 1970s you have a recession. Then you have the oil embargo. Then you have Nixon's economic policies, which involve price controls which limited the kind of capital investments that a lot of companies were going to want to do. And then there was a modest recovery in the mid-seventies followed by the stagflation—high inflation, low growth or recession—of the late 1970s. By its nature, architecture is tied to growth. People need to want to build and make major investments. How did you shepherd your company through this difficult period of time?

13-00:01:51

Gensler: Well, because I'd never been through running a business in a depression, a recession or whatever we want to call it, I never, as I look back on it, realized how I was supposed to react. We were fortunate in the late sixties and early seventies to have some clients that we really got close to. They couldn't stand still as we couldn't stand still. So I kept working with those people even as they were doing a little remodeling or a little of this or a little of that. And then there were pockets around the country that were better than others. One of the things that we got lucky—I would like to tell you that it was a design plan but it wasn't—of diversifying not just in interiors but a little more architecture, a little more other things that we got into. We were just not offering a traditional service.

There were not a lot of new buildings that we were doing, but we were remodeling older ones or we were doing little things. We got a lot of them. We found that even though the oil problem happened, Houston was a good strong market, and when we got to New York that was a really good market for us. A lot of law firms. We got in early with the law firms and the accounting firms. In those days there were the big eight, and then became the big four, and I guess it's now big three or something. But we were working

with all of those. Today, we're working with forty-nine out of the fifty largest law firms. They're our clients. So we deal with people that have issues about real estate. It may not be very glamorous stuff, it may be pretty straightforward, but people like the Gap kept building stores and seeing opportunities where there were vacancies. Other people went out of business, and they'd go grab a good location.

One of the things that happens in the tenant world, in the interiors world, is kind of interesting. Leases roll and come up every five or ten years. At the end of the lease you got to do something. You got to decide to stay or you got to decide to move. That's a big decision, and especially when an economy is not strong there's a lot of opportunity for those people to take advantage of the market. Unfortunately, when things are high and your lease is up, you get stuck with very few opportunities. The rents are really high and you're getting locked into them for five or ten years. But when things are tough, it's actually for us a pretty good time, because when people's leases roll they want to look at a whole bunch of things. We were looking at a variety of options for clients, trying to figure out.

It was also the time that this whole concern about work and productivity was coming in. People were really recognizing that their facilities were not supporting the flexibility and up and down of business. One of the things that I can remember clearly, we would do work for like PG&E and they'd say, "Well, we can tell you exactly where we're going to be for the next ten years. We're going to grow at 3 percent and we're going to add these number of people and we're going to do this and do that." They probably were. But then we get to the seventies and people starting saying, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't even think about a five-year plan, I can barely think about a one. Two would be really a stretch." So people were saying, "I've got to look at my facilities in a whole new way that nobody had ever looked at," because before you'd do a five- or ten-year plan and you'd just say, "Okay, I'm going to take this much space, and then I'm going to negotiate so I can take this much more, and then I'm going to take this much more, and then I'm going to take this much more." We would design the space so that they could do that, and every two years they'd get some more space. That was the way it was. Well, now it was like an accordion and you had to think differently.

Also projects. The rate of change is a really big deal, and people don't talk about it a lot.

13-00:06:32

Meeker:

Is this the churn idea that I've been hearing?

13-00:06:33

Gensler:

No, it's not a churn idea.

13-00:06:34

Meeker:

Okay. That's later.

13-00:06:35
Gensler:

What it is[, as I mentioned before], is the rate of change is my great-grandfather did, my grandfather did pretty much the same; my father did a little more; but then about the seventies it started going uphill. It just shot, and now it's going straight up. And we change. This office reconfigures every six months probably, shifts people around. Movers come in on a weekend and change the whole thing around. This whole concept of short projects, teaming and short projects was something that was coming in at that time, so there was a need for our services. Even though on the outside it looked like a very slow time, it was an opportunity time to readjust and reshift.

The other thing is that a lot of the companies who had real estate departments and an interior space plan or something, they said, "Geez, we don't need to carry these people. We'll contract it out when we need it. But we're not going to have them sitting there anymore." A lot of that was outsourced because of that. Companies were cutting back. They cut their fixed budgets for salaries. Where before we were almost competing with the in-house people, now there weren't any in-house people. If they needed somebody, they came to us. And the real estate brokers, we got to know them very, very well, and we really worked. We probably worked that network better than anybody in the country or world. They don't make money unless they make a deal. So we were there. They knew we would help them make a deal. We could help the client from what their costs were going to be, their flexibility, what the options are, and look at various efficiencies. So they were glomming onto us at that time trying to understand how they could make their living, because they were literally—we're in a business where you get paid a salary every week. In the real estate world you don't. You only make any money when you do a deal.

It was an interesting time. I think it was the beginning of us understanding that we had leverage and an advantage of being diversified. Different regions of the country aren't always just the same. We were lucky in one sense that we never got into two areas that were going up and down. One was schools, which they were at the time building, and then they'd just stop completely. And the second was housing. Housing is an interesting problem, because they were starting to build condominiums. There weren't a lot around, but they were starting to build them. There was a series of lawyers that decided that they would go to the homeowners' associations and say, "Hey, there are a lot of defects." And the people say, "Geez, my condo's fine. I don't have any problems." "Oh, yes, there'll be defects. I would suggest that you sue the owner and the contractor and the architect."

In those days, you didn't have to even say what the damages are. They said, "Oh, there are defects," and they would sue you. Everybody would say, "Oh, [don't?] fight this thing and go through court." Everybody will just pay them the money and get out. Well, it became a hell of a cottage industry, where these lawyers would just go to every single homeowners' association and say, "If you don't sue the architect, you may be sued by the tenants in your

building, the other homeowners, for not doing your fiduciary responsibility to sue these people.” It became a vicious cycle. I saw that really early, and we never got in that business. All of my friends who were in the condo business got killed. They spend their whole life defending lawsuits.

13-00:10:49

Meeker:

Did Gerson Bakar ever ask you to do some condo work with him?

13-00:10:52

Gensler:

Yeah. I did a huge project for him. It was rental, not condo. I only did one housing project called Park Newport, 1200 units down in Newport Beach. I did that for him. I worked with another guy who he had used before, but was smaller and couldn't handle the project size. I knew the guy pretty well. So we teamed together, and it worked very well.

13-00:11:16

Meeker:

But I think that project actually did have some lawsuits.

13-00:11:20

Gensler:

Oh, it had some problems. It's incredible. We built the parking garages like for four dollars a square foot and the units for six or seven dollars a square foot. Now that's what they rent them for a month. It's insanity. He almost lost it because it was so much built at one time. You get 1200 units rented. He was in the rental business. Condos are much different than rentals, because then they're homeowners. But Gerson is one guy. The contractor was Williams Burrows, and they had a great relationship. Oh, God. I can remember his father. Mr. Frank Burrows was a fabulous, fabulous guy. His sons are Bill and Bob. I know them well, but their father was a special, special individual. I didn't have any troubles with that. But the costs, if you think what they are today versus what they were then—and he still owns it. You can imagine what it's worth today and the leverage he's got on that thing in terms of just—I'm sure he gets as much in rent checks as he paid per square foot for it every month. It's incredible.

We were very lucky to be in the market niche where we were. The rest of the design industry hadn't caught on. Now, if you'd asked me then, I wouldn't have even known how to tell you that story. But as I look back on it, I see that that's what we did. There's an old adage: I'd rather be lucky than smart. I was very lucky that I was in the right place at the right time with the right services and not a lot of competition. Now almost every architect wants to be in the interiors business, I think, as I may have said before. About half the revenue of the industry comes through interiors of some form or another. When I started fifty years ago, there was none. We caught the front of a wave and we've stayed in front of it the whole time.

13-00:13:31

Meeker:

Well, it's also interesting. If you think about that period of time, people have a tendency to flatten out the economy as a single force. In reality it's countless forces.

13-00:13:44

Gensler:

We've probably been in four or five major downturns in the time of this firm's history. You just have to accept that's part of life, and you've got to be flexible enough to say, "I'm not going to just sit here and give up." I was talking to somebody last night and he was saying, "How you doing hiring people?" I said, "Well, there's a huge gap. In 2008-2009, a lot of people left the profession." We've got young people that were terrific coming in, and they're some of the best we've ever seen. Well, we've got some senior people that are terrific, but they're coming to the end of their career. There's a middle block, ten-, fifteen-, twenty-year experience, and they're not there. It isn't that we can't find them. We can't find them because there's nobody there to find. They've dropped out and done something else with their career. So the industry, and we especially because we hire so darn many people, we are struggling finding that middle manager, middle-experienced-level person that runs projects and is doing a lot of the work. We have just a few seniors, now a few juniors; this block in the middle is the one that is short on people. We keep the ones that we have. but we just could use more because you need that level for running the jobs that we've got.

13-00:15:19

Meeker:

Thinking about the nature of the economic expansion and contraction in the 1970s, you were working in finance, you were working in professional services, you weren't working in manufacturing and heavy industry.

13-00:15:33

Gensler:

No, no, and never really have until fairly recently. Now we have some major manufacturers that we work with, GM and Ford and Caterpillar and others, 3M. There's a bunch of them.

13-00:15:47

Meeker:

And you weren't very much in the public sector either?

13-00:15:49

Gensler:

Not in the public sector at all. We didn't go in the public sector until maybe fifteen years ago. And we got lucky. We got an airport, we got the San Francisco Central Terminal, which we now have remodeled totally. People came down from Vancouver about law firms. They saw we had done some new things with law firms and they were looking to figure out what they needed to do. The Canadians came in from Canada, so I went up and did a whole bunch of law firms and projects in Vancouver. Now it's more difficult to work as an architect and designer in Canada. They've got a very restrictive—but now we have a Toronto office, and we had a field office in Calgary. We tried to do work in Vancouver, but it's just really tough. You

need a license in Canada. Each province you have to have a license. We have licenses in Toronto and Calgary.

13-00:16:56

Meeker:

You had just alluded to something, which you said nobody else was really doing this work that you were doing in the 1970s. But by the end of the decade Skidmore and HOK and—

13-00:17:10

Gensler:

Yeah, they all start.

13-00:17:11

Meeker:

They all start to develop a real robust architecture interiors program. Did you see this happening, and how did you feel about that?

13-00:17:24

Gensler:

You can look at your competition in a bunch of ways. Our profession is pretty small. We have a thing called a large firm roundtable, which started a long time ago. It was an offshoot of the American Institute of Architecture. The problem that the AIA has is that like 90 percent of their members are small practitioners, so they're designed to deal with the small practitioners and not the large firms. They kind of say, "Well, you guys will take care of yourselves." But they need us, because we pay the dues. It's all a percentage of the number of people you have. The firm pays an enormous amount of money to the AIA. If we drop out, and I've at times threatened to drop out and say, "I don't give a damn what you say." It's a trade association, not a licensing body. Everybody thinks it's a licensing body, but it isn't. It's a trade organization.

A long time ago, I can't remember the year, we formed what was called a large firm roundtable. Now, the AIA again panicked because there was a federal agency—the Department of Justice or something said that we were price fixing. In those days there were fee schedules: for a building of 10,000 square feet you got 7 percent. For 20,000 feet, you got 6 percent, and the different things. Now, it was an advisory schedule, but the Justice Department in those days thought that was price fixing. So they came down hard on the AIA. And the AIA made one really bad error in that they said, "Architects, get out of the liability part of this world. Put it on the contractor and the owner, and don't worry about the construction. It'll get done right. Don't worry about management. Just do the designs." Well, that is not the way we should be doing projects. They got themselves so wrapped around themselves about liability, and architects don't want any and this, and lawyers were coming on more and more aggressively to sue. So the large firm guys got together and then the AIA panicked and would always have a representative. "You can't talk about that. That would be price fixing or conflicts and giving trade secrets."

13-00:20:13

Meeker:

At these large firm roundtable meetings?

13-00:20:15

Gensler:

Yeah, this large firm roundtable. But we kept it going, and it's still going. So I got to know pretty much every competitor personally. The other thing is because of what I was doing, I was often brought in, as I maybe mentioned yesterday, by the developer to review the design of the base building architect and see if I could make the interiors better. I learned to work with a lot of these guys. I worked with HOK, and I worked with Skidmore a lot, and I worked with Cesar Pelli and I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson, as we talked about yesterday. So I've worked with a lot of these guys who are in a sense competitors, but in many ways they're also very good friends of mine.

I have felt that if we all do quality work and don't try to cut each other's throats by cutting fees and doing stupid things, that we would be as a group better than if I was trying to sabotage them getting into the business. Then I had to compete on quality of what we offered, the quality of the people that we offered, our creativity, our control of schedules and budgets and programs. We worked hard on being able to compete with that approach rather than we're the cheapest. And, of course, we're not. Whenever we're competing, even from that day, is we're maybe not the most expensive, but we are certainly never even in the bottom half of the pricing. We have to convince our clients that our fee is acceptable to their budget and their financial parameter, and that they're going to get something better and different. That puts a great deal of pressure on references from other clients, speaking well, we've done what we say we're going to do.

That's something that I'm very proud of, because as a firm, we need those friends. We're not doing it so we get richer; I think architecture is a very valuable service. It can help society, it can help businesses, it can create environments. And why we should treat ourselves as if we're artists, starving artists and we'll give it away? We have this idea that they have these competitions and we give away our creativity and then sell working drawings. It's the dumbest idea you ever saw. It's just stupid. You're going to give away your intellectual property. If you want to give something away, give away stuff that anybody can do. If you don't get that, that's fine. But your intellectual property you don't want to give away. I've been fighting that for a long time.

I've known all these competitors, they've been coming in and they're good. Challenges us to be better. Every time they step up, we have to step a bigger step. I like that. I'm a competitor. It's like a sporting event. We go out and play a game every day. I was talking to somebody about the World Cup, and apparently the coach of the American team said, "We're never going to win this World Cup but we might do something." Everybody said, "Wow!" No, he's a realist. In our field, we think we're the best by a long shot, but we don't

win every project. You have to just learn to accept it and go on. There's sometimes chemistry between this client. There's sometimes a friend of a friend that you never knew about, or somebody that you thought had control was going to make the decision, and somebody totally different is making the decision. In our field you just never know how that decision's made. One of the things you work hard on is to try to find out who the real decision maker's going to be. And it's interesting.

Right now, I'll bet you once a week, maybe more than that, we get a client calls and says, "I made a mistake. I know we didn't hire you, but it's not going real well with the firm we hired. Would you take it over and we'll let them go?" Now they start begging, like, "Please take us. We realize we've made a mistake." I'm honored that they do it, but I'm disappointed in our profession that somebody got in and wasted their time and their money and now they have to start over with somebody else. That doesn't speak well for the profession. It's like unfortunately one bad doctor puts a taint on all doctors, and one bad lawyer puts a taint on all lawyers. I don't like the fact that at times we have people doing irrational stuff. It especially happens in downturns, where people have a staff and have no work and go out and do stuff that's below cost, you know it's below their cost. How long can you keep paying people and rent and telephone bills and software licenses when you're losing money every day that you stay open? We don't like to see people close, but we learned early also that if you don't have enough work, you got to let a few people go. It's just part of doing business in today's world.

To finish the rate of change story. What has happened is that the cycle time—and Silicon Valley was the key, ultimately, kind of broke the thing open. Two things happened. You do projects not by an individual but by teams of people. Then that project and team dissolves when the project is solved, and you go on. They reconstitute a new team, but some are the same and some are different people. So you're constantly shifting the way people are working. I can remember I did a job for Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company. Very wonderful company. I think they started in the twenties or something. Literally things were so bad that they gave everybody breakfast and lunch.

13-00:27:13

Meeker:

In the thirties or—

13-00:27:13

Gensler:

Yeah, it was in the thirties, I guess. When you joined the company, you were assigned a seat in the cafeteria and this was your seat. And for the next forty years of working there, that was your seat. If you didn't like the person there [on the left] or the person there [on the right], you couldn't say, "Could I move to another table?" You sat next to those two people for forty years at lunch. I said, "You guys got to be kidding me. You don't do this to people." "Oh, yeah. Well, we've always done it that way." This was twenty-five years ago probably. I'm sure that they had to change because the young people

today wouldn't put up with that for two minutes. But people would sit next to somebody they couldn't stand because they were the next person hired and that was the vacant seat.

13-00:28:05

Meeker:

When some of these larger firms start to either emerge newly or take on architectural interiors in a way that they hadn't previously, do you recall any maybe major projects that you worked especially hard to get that you really wanted that went to one of the competitors? Was there a reckoning or a drawing of lessons from that experience?

13-00:28:35

Gensler:

Well, yeah, there's one. There's one. One Market Plaza and Embarcadero Center. I had finished up the Bank of America Building. Those two projects were coming in. Cushman & Wakefield I was sure was going to get One Market Plaza as the tenant rep, and I was very close to them. So Embarcadero Center came to me and said, "We'd love to have you do the interiors." I knew the guy who was running it because he had been at the Alcoa Building. I said, "Geez, I'm going to do the One Market Plaza." Well, I didn't get One Market Plaza, and I can't remember who did but somebody else got it. I just don't remember. Probably those things you blank out of your mind and go on. By the time I went back to Embarcadero Center and said, "Would you take me back?" they said, "Geez, Art, we've already made a deal with somebody else." So the two major projects that were fairly big and really down our alley I blew it.

I've learned when a job is offered to you and it's a good job, take it. Don't look ahead. It's sort of first come, first served. We learned that painful lesson. It's like some of the things at the airport. We're jockeying for position. Do we go after this one or this one and this one? And maybe we wait because this one over here is bigger. I've just said, "Guys, get them as they come out and we'll worry about what happens later. The thing later may never happen." It was a painful lesson and a business lesson. Literally, I'm 95 percent sure I would have gotten it. But for whatever reason, there was a New York group of people that came in in One Market and said, "Oh, we're going to use these people. We've used them in New York and they're really good." It went okay, and we did a lot of work in the building anyway. But that meant that we had to go in and grab a tenant that signed a lease and get him away from the landlord's architect.

Those are the kinds of things that I remember. You either learn from your mistakes or the decisions that you made. Every mistake can be a lesson learned that will help you in the future. That one was painful at the time, because it was a big piece of business and it was in my back door. It was almost embarrassing that we lost it. But life goes on, and you just have to go out there the next morning and forget about it. We're much better now than we were in the early days of trying to get client feedback of why didn't we

get—what could we have done differently? What did they do that got your eye that we didn't do? Sometimes they say, "Just chemistry, Art." Sometimes they say, "It's fee. You just were too much, and we didn't want to spend any more money." You can look at them and say, "Good luck. I hope you do well."

One of the other things that these ups and downs have taught me is that when things are really good, don't jack up your fees and your prices because you know you've got leverage on the client. Because there comes a time when it's not so good. We have a markup to the salaries that people have that makes us the profit margins that we believe we should have. There are times when we could really sandbag someone, lump sum. We say it is a hundred grand and we know we could do it for fifty and we put fifty in our pocket. We just don't do that. We say, "Look, it probably is worth a hundred, but we've got some research and we can do it for fifty and so we're going to charge you fifty." They remember those things, they remember you didn't gouge them when you could have. They knew it. We didn't [do that].

So when we say, "Look, guys, we need this to keep the doors open and things aren't so good," then they say, "Okay, I understand. Your fees aren't that much and we understand. If that's what you need then that's what you need." We've been able to be a firm that's able to budget and look at our profit and our financial statements with incredible consistency. We write a budget and we know where we're going to be. Some of the firms are like this. They'll have a year where the principals don't even take a salary. We just never had anything near that. One or two years we kind of cut the bonuses a little bit, and I took the biggest part of the hit. It just isn't a style that I believe in. I believe in long-term relationships, where a lot of firms, because of the size and skill and the nature of the way they work, and especially that old silo. If it's my silo, I want to fill it and to heck with the other guys. So they're over there doing something, and it just doesn't balance and integrate. And we can help each other between offices and share work, which is a lot easier now than it used to be. Those are things that really help in building this and dealing with the competition. We're on the ground.

A lot of people have one big office and maybe a satellite, which is almost a marketing and field observation office, and not really do any of the design work or production work there. We just feel two things. One, if the client is there, we want to be near the client. Changes happen, they happen all the time, and you got to respond to them. You can do a better job if you understand the market and you understand what's going on. So we build a relationship with the community and the people and work there. Most firms get their work and bring it home. Like a lot of firms, many, many, many, are trying to do that with China. Well, first, it's a killer because flying to China every month, back and forth, and then the client says, "Geez, I got to have a meeting this week." "Well, I wasn't coming for two more weeks." "You got to be here." You're flying. You wear yourself out. It costs too damn much money for anybody.

You can't afford it. But, oh, no, we want to control design. We want to control this.

The most important question I'm always asked is how do you control the firm and how do you control design to make sure it's quality? I was talking to a guy yesterday, he called me, an architect friend of mine, we were kidding about some stuff. His son's got a firm now. And he said, "Art, how do you control it? He could have had opportunities to build offices." He did housing. "He could have had opportunities to build offices, but I wanted to control all the design because he did it, most of it." He was very proud of his design. He was a very good designer. I said, "You hire people that you trust."

We have this concept of constellation of stars, not this one guy who was the star and everybody else was his minions. So we don't control it. We set standards. There's a little—and it's friendly—competition. We have GDA, Gensler Design Awards, every year. We have outside jurors. All the offices submit. We get 150 submittals, and then we have a group that cuts it down maybe to a hundred because it's too much to ask a jury in one day to review. We bring a jury in at our annual meeting. They come a day early, pick five or ten or whatever they feel appropriate award winners. Then the next morning, at our annual meeting, they take about two hours to give out the awards, but also explain why they picked what they did and what they didn't like. These are heads of magazines or architecture deans, writers like John King or somebody like that coming in and seeing our work. So it pushes us. Competitive pressures.

One of the fun things, it's really interesting, is, "Oh, well, the large office will win all the prizes, damn it. But we're a small office, we're doing good stuff." Well, what happened? We've looked back and tabulated, and the small offices have consistently won more prizes than the large offices. People really look forward and are very proud when they're selected. Again, they're not selected by us. They're selected by an independent jury. So we're constantly challenging ourselves, and I think that's a healthy thing to do. But it's a friendly challenge, and a proud challenge. "God, I wish I had done that. That's pretty special. Maybe next year I'll get my project up there." So it's an interesting approach.

13-00:38:32
Meeker:

One thing that was brought up in one or two of the background interviews I did was a lawsuit that happened in—well, it was resolved in the early seventies. *Gensler v. Barrett* (1972). And the reason I bring this up, and I don't know how much you remember about this, it was pretty early on, was that it was based on a 1968 business disagreement. I went back and read about it, and it seemed at the heart of it was there were some misunderstandings and disagreements that arose from complex permitting contractual regulatory issues.

13-00:39:33

Gensler:

Well, I think I remember the case you're talking about.

13-00:39:34

Meeker:

Yeah. It was in San Francisco.

13-00:39:35

Gensler:

Yeah, yeah. It was an interesting issue. A company had a new concept which was to—this was before any internet or anything like that—to go to conventions and video the convention and livestream it to hotel rooms, so that if you were a conventioner and you didn't want to get up at eight o'clock in the morning, you could sit there and watch the convention. There would be a charge to the convention and it would get people—I don't even know whether they had a recording so if you wanted to get the nine o'clock you could see it 2:00 in the afternoon. I don't think they had that capability then, but they might have.

13-00:40:25

Meeker:

Like a closed circuit television is what you're saying?

13-00:40:27

Gensler:

Yeah, it was sort of that type of thing. And they were going to pump it to the various hotels, because hotels were just getting that little box that, in the old days, you could get movies and stuff on the box. They had rented a space. There's a parking garage in the corner of O'Farrell and—it's right behind the Clift Hotel.

13-00:41:01

Meeker:

Like Taylor?

13-00:41:02

Gensler:

Taylor. It is Taylor Street. Perfect. Yeah. A big parking garage, and it's right next door to that.

13-00:41:09

Meeker:

Across from the Hilton.

13-00:41:11

Gensler:

Yeah. And we signed up to do the work for this company, which wasn't very stable but we didn't realize. They signed a lease in this building. We started building it out. Designed it and then built it out. The building was just sort of a shell. There had been some stuff but it was old, so we ripped everything out and put some value into the building. They reneged on the deal. We had a very good lawyer, Denny Rice, decided that we were getting screwed. We had improved the building by fixing it up, and they had signed a lease. There was a clause in that that somehow Denny had figured out that the landlord then was responsible, and he didn't file a lien release or a non-responsibility. I can't remember exactly what it was. I was a young guy and I said, "Denny, you take care of it." It was like, I don't know, \$20,000. It was not a lot. To me then it was a lot of money, but it wasn't a lot of money. But Denny was just

determined to be fair. Denny had incorporated us and was an advisor and a close friend. He said, "I think you're getting screwed. They are required to do this as a landlord, and they didn't do it, and therefore they're responsible." Well, it ended up going all the way to the State of California Supreme Court, which we won, actually. The classic of it is that our case, if you look at case books, is the next one to Sirhan Sirhan case.

We've gone to court so few times, gone that far so few times. I'm not sure on one hand, that many. Now, we've had litigation issues. There's trip-and-fall lawyers out there. "Oh, my client walked in the garage and tripped over the curb stop." One guy sued us three times on the same car bumper. He didn't know when he fell, and nobody got hurt. They come in, and then the problem in the insurance world is the insurance carrier wants to just get them off their books, pay them off and go. I believe that when you do that you're encouraging these people to keep doing this stuff. So I want to bleed them and just make it so they'll at least stay away from Gensler because he's not going to settle.

The problem is that the insurance companies now take an interesting attitude. Let's say, okay, we'll give you \$100,000. You either take that and say, "Okay, they can settle at 100," or you say, "It isn't worth 100. You're giving your money away, and you're going to charge us more premium next year." That's why we fight it, and also the principles of fair and right. But if you don't take the hundred to settle and you say, "Let's keep going." But in court you lose and it's 150, they don't give you the hundred. You pay the 150. They said, "You didn't take what we offered." So it forces you to say, "Oh, God, I've got to get rid of this situation."

Now, we used to have pretty low deductibles, but today the deductibles are high and so these nuisance lawsuits—we're paying them on our own. There's a bunch of them that happened. You do as many jobs as we do, you have nuisance things. Eighty percent of them are slip and fall. "Gee, I walked into a door in the Gap and the door swung back and hit me on the back and I fell down and broke my arm." There are 3,000 stores out there and all of a sudden you get hit and the door's defective? And the owners want to pass all the risk to you. I didn't have anything to do with the guy walking into the door. The door is your standard door they put on every damn store. There's that kind of stuff that goes on and on and on in our profession, and there's a whole team of lawyers. I talked earlier about the condominium raiders, as I call them. They're just terrible. We do a lot of work with lawyers and a lot of them are fine and wonderful people. But that one lawsuit was the only one that I know that actually got written up as a famous case. Most everything else is settled out of court between the insurance company and [the litigant].

13-00:46:31

Meeker:

I read through it, and granted I'm not an attorney so I didn't fully understand it, but it seemed like one of the things that people were wrestling with was an increasingly labyrinthine permitting process.

13-00:46:49

Gensler:

Well, it's partly permitting process. I was in a meeting the other day with Dick Kovacevich of Wells Fargo. We're on the audit committee of SFMOMA. Dick was handed the tax return for SFMOMA, and as the head of the audit committee he was supposed to sign that and certify that everything in that was correct. I teased him and said, "How is it that when you have to sign the Wells Fargo tax return, which has got to be this high, and sign your name," and the Dodd-Frank Act requires him—everything in there he's liable for. And everything in Wells Fargo, every tax is correct. He said, "Art, there is no way in the world that I could possibly know whether it's right or not. I just sign it and hope to hell one of us know what is in there."

My little tax return is like this and it's ridiculous. I have no idea. I've got people that do it. We bring accountants in there and they put the taxes together, but the fact that I'm signing something and some guy in Washington says, "You are liable for everything." Well, what, the tax code's 22,000 pages or something long, and I'm supposed to know what every damn line in that thing means that they can't even interpret themselves? Every year I get a letter from the IRS saying, "You're not filing correctly." Then my accountant talks to them and says, "This is the way we're doing this." "Oh, okay." Every year I get the same, "Oh, okay." They don't even go back and look what they did last year. We go through this every year.

The worst part is not even that. The worst part is the life and safety codes. The State of California's life and safety codes are in conflict with the San Francisco life and safety codes. Which one do you follow? One says you got to do this and the other says you got to do this. It's not either-or, or which is the most stringent. Then you're making an interpretation in certain cases of which is the most stringent. And then it's all your liability. To the architect's standing there saying, "Where do I go to hide?" It's a very, very complicated problem that this country faces, and all countries face, that independent agencies, each city and little burg has little variations.

For this firm now, where we're working in—I read yesterday—seventy countries this past year. I didn't realize it was that much, but seventy countries. Somebody wrote an email yesterday that they're making a presentation tomorrow on our bonus day with all the—sort of the great stuff and it's knock your socks off. I've read it. I showed it to my wife last night. I said, "How the hell did we ever start this thing?" I said, "No, you got sixty-nine countries," but there's seventy. We now started a convention center in Myanmar. I'm thinking, "What the hell are we doing in Myanmar?" Apparently it's now a democratic country, so the Singapore office is working

up in Myanmar. So we put another country on. Maybe it was eight or nine new countries this year that we had never worked in before that we had. And the total is now ninety countries around the world. No, is it ninety or 120? I think it was 120 countries around the world that we had worked in some time in the last twenty years.

13-00:50:52

Meeker:

I don't know that I could name 120 or even seventy countries.

13-00:50:56

Gensler:

Well, my standard issue to this is I didn't know there were seventy or ninety or 120 countries that needed an architect, period. We don't do mud huts. I don't mean that fliply, but I just didn't know that there was any way that we could be in that many places. They're certainly not initiated by us to go there; it's some client that we've got that said, "Can you go and help me there?"

13-00:51:24

Meeker:

In thinking about the increasing complexity of building codes and permitting processes, do you see this as a slow evolution or perhaps devolution? Increasing complexity slowly? Or can you identify points in time where either in a particular political regime or response maybe to a natural disaster or something like that, the codes become that much more complex and you have to really get your staff up to speed in this new regulatory environment?

13-00:52:05

Gensler:

The answer is yes. I'll give you an example. The Northridge earthquake in southern California was an interesting earthquake. The big one down there. There was a very interesting situation. When people talk about earthquakes they say this side to side shake, buildings shake like that. So all of our engineers and our designers and our thinking is that they go like that. And the Northridge earthquake didn't go that way at all. It went up and down. It went up and down. So the connections did not hold. The bolts and all got sheared off; they were all good in tension, but they weren't the other way.

13-00:52:58

Meeker:

They just kind of bounced off.

13-00:52:59

Gensler: Yeah. So the damage was that we had designed for one way and never think to design up and down. I don't know why. So now we have these shock absorbers built in to take that, both-direction movement. It changed everything about the way things are put together. The thing that's going to happen—it's good in the sense—one, we're collecting a lot of data so we know what works and what doesn't. I'm talking about everything, not just structure but in all the world. Secondly, computer technology, and especially this thing called BIM, building information modeling, which is the sort of second-generation CAD stuff, is building a lot of these things into the system. I believe pretty soon you'll be able to plug in San Francisco code, run the drawings and it'll say, "Well, you've got a problem here and you've got a

problem here and you've got a problem here." It's going to be done automatically. Now, that may be ten years more away, but it's not that far away. Probably some of it's done that way now. Oh, you got to have a four-hour wall here. You've got a two-hour wall. Or you do this or that. So technology is going to help that, and it's going to also force some national codes rather than all of this local.

I'll give you an example: I was working in New York and got a chance to transfer out here. I have only done one moonlight job, is to work at night working for a private client when you're working for somebody else in our profession. People do more of that than you'd think. I was doing a little kind of office that was up on some stilts, for car places under. There was a building on the top of it for an insurance guy that I knew, he wanted a little building built. So the building was up on stilts called lolly columns. Little pipes. I had all the things drawn, but I didn't have the structural engineering work done. I transferred to San Francisco and said, "God, I got to get this structural thing done." I went to some friends of mine and they said, "Oh, we can do that fine." So I get some drawings back and they got these big diagonals. I said, "Geez, I got to park the cars in there. I can't do the diagonals." They were putting sheer walls in. I said, "What the hell's a sheer wall?" I don't know. "Well, you have to have a sheer wall to hold the building up." I said, "There are no earthquakes back in New York." "Oh, well, I don't care, but they got to put sheer walls. You got to put some diagonals in here." I said, "No, you don't do that back in New York. You just don't do that." They looked at me like, "Well, of course you do that." I finally just said, "Thank you very much for your help," and finally found somebody back there to do it.

There is this regionality—like air conditioning loads and humidity, factors that change how you do the insulation and all sorts of things. Those complexities, those are the top of the thing. The basic 80 percent will be pretty much national standards. It'll ultimately have to go that way so that we can all plug in. There's a whole industry of going to the building department and getting your permit, they're checking everything and all that, and they're going to just want to say, "Just show me that it's run through this code." There's a tape and you hand it to them and say, "See, it passes the thing." So there's going to have to be things like that that are going to happen, but there's no question that when you're dealing around the world, everybody's got a different code. Our people got to get in there and read it in Chinese and read it in Japanese and figure it out. We made our life very complicated being international, global. But it is just part of doing business, and that's what we're all going to learn.

We're lucky, and I think probably Americans are more successful in doing what we're doing because whether the world likes it or not, the world's language is English. I'm always fascinated. Like Nadal, who's Spanish, wins the French Open tennis tournament. But when he talked to the crowd after his

win, he's speaking in English. If you step back and think about that, here he is in France, here he's Spanish, and he's talking to a crowd of 20,000 people in a stadium, and he's talking to them in English. Just think of the implications of that. Because, unfortunately, most Americans don't speak a damn worth of foreign language, enough to get along. Where the rest of the world speaks their language and English. Makes it very lucky for us. They don't write it that way, and the codes aren't that way. One of the things that you find out, like in China, you may have written it in English. It gets translated and then somebody in Chinese reads it and says, "I don't see that part down in here." I can't tell that or we can't tell that. It's a little tricky to make sure you get those things right.

Audio File 14

14-00:00:00

Meeker:

This is Meeker interviewing Gensler, tape fourteen, session seven. Today is the 11th of June. I'm actually going to do my own jumping around right now and not following a sequence, actually just following a little bit up on what we were talking about as far as codes and the idea that hopefully from your vantage point there would be perhaps a movement toward more of a national coding system. This is actually more about the movement into the global marketplace, but I'm going to ask it now anyway since we're talking about that. I imagine the United States has much more extensive, hopefully science-based building codes than perhaps other places in the world, that their codes might be more rudimentary or their codes may not be enforced in the same way that they are in the United States. Have there been moments, as you expand into a global marketplace, perhaps more into developing economics, that you typically exceed the codes in those new places?

14-00:01:32

Gensler:

Let me talk about it a little differently. There are a couple of things you brought up. There are prescriptive codes and there are performance codes. Prescriptives tell you how to do something, and performance tells you what they want you to accomplish. In other words, if it's a four-hour wall, you got to have three layers of gyp board and you got to have this and this and selection of this and that. And if it's a two-hour wall, you got this and this. Or it says, "We want you to have a wall that stops a fire that'll be on that side of the wall for four hours. You figure out how you want to do it."

The codes around the world are quite different. Most of them are pretty significant. In many ways, China is more difficult code-wise than the U.S., they're more cautious. And Japan, with their earthquakes and all their problems, they're very cautious. There are countries where they shoot you, hang you if a building falls down. Now, the problem that those countries face is that the building techniques and construction capabilities are not the same thing. I might have told you, I think I did, about Wal-Mart. Every time I said,

“Well, they don’t do it that way in Argentina and Brazil,” and they said, “Well, yeah, but that’s the way we always do it.” From that point of view they were walking into trouble, because if you tell somebody you want it done one way because it’s always worked for you here, that’s fine. Buildings are really built by people in the field, and there is a very big movement. It hasn’t gone very far, but I think in the next fifty years it’ll go very far, where most buildings will be built in a factory under controlled conditions and then modules will just be brought on and stacked up.

There’s a guy in China right now who claims he’s going to build the tallest building in the world in two weeks or some ridiculous thing. But he built about a ten-story hotel in a day with these modular units that he just stacked up and plugged together. There’s a video if you want to watch it, it’s really kind of amazing. So there are things that are changing about codes. I’ll give you one example because it’s an interesting one. The Shanghai Tower, which is the second tallest building in the world building, 2032 feet—

14-00:04:14

Meeker:

Right behind you [there is photograph of the building behind Gensler, above his desk].

14-00:04:15

Gensler:

—is a big baby. The codes have never been really written for that size building. The Chinese, because of the shoddy construction, in my opinion, but they wouldn’t say that, over-design everything because they feel that they’ll never get all the stuff that they’ve asked you to do. In the field, they’ll leave out reinforcement, or the cement was supposed to be this strength and it isn’t, or whatever else. They say, “Well, if it should be this big a column, let’s make it a little bigger,” so it’ll take care for the shortfalls that they didn’t put in the darn thing. Well, a building of that size is an enormous commitment. It’s got to be done right or they’ve really got problems. So they had a hundred expert panels telling us what we couldn’t do, reviewing everything that we did. There were like eight or ten, professors usually, in the engineering and design schools, and they would all sit together.

Now, one of the things about China is nobody wants to make a decision that they could be blamed for. All decisions have to be collaborative. “Well, I guess we won’t say no. We don’t really say yes. But I guess it’s okay if you go ahead, if you really insist on it.” So you spend time lobbying to just get to that point. The structural engineer, a firm called Thornton Tomasetti, the lead structural engineer went to school in Shanghai. He’s a Chinese guy. His teachers were on the review panel, so he kept saying to them, “Hey, wait a second. I know what I’m doing. I know this. This is what we ought to do.” And they said, “Oh, no, no, no. You got to do it this way. You got to do it this way, this way.” He said, “No, I really don’t want to do it that way. I want to do it this way on the structure.”

Finally we ended up negotiating with them and with the city that we would build a thirty-five-foot-tall model of the three super buildings and do a wind tunnel test on it to prove that our system worked. These wind tunnel tests are really sophisticated. Normally the models are two feet tall. We did thirty-five-foot tall, this gigantic model of this thing, and proved to them that our system and approach worked, and saved fifty-five million dollars on the steel alone.

But for us it did two things. There was less space taken up in the building by just gigantic columns. We could make them smaller and tighter, so there was more usable space available and laid out better. For us as an architect, one thing I wanted was the usable space. Two, I wanted it to be effective in layout, and I didn't want to spend the client's money uselessly. Boy, it cost like \$600,000. But for \$600,000, build this model and wind tunnel test and everything, we got to save fifty-five million. That's not a bad trade-off. They didn't want to pay us for that 600,000, it was a hell of a long fight about it. Those are the kinds of things that are happening with codes and things around the world.

I wouldn't say that we let our standards slip. I'll give you another example. As green design has come along—and I was one of the early people on the U.S. Green Building Council, LEEDs and all that. We have taken a different attitude than most of the people. The LEED people are really committed to the environment, as they say. I'm committed to the environment, but in a different way. I believe that you can accomplish 80 percent of what LEED wants you to accomplish, and good stuff, for 20 percent of the effort and cost. The last 20 percent costs you 80 percent of the effort and cost, and I think it's a bad tradeoff. I'd rather widen the use of LEED and sustainability than to have these four great projects that are platinum that frankly nobody can make work anyway. After all the engineering stuff, you go back a couple of years later and say, "How's it working?" They say, "We've never gotten it to the performance that it's supposed to perform at," which is not a good thing. They keep wanting to make it even—some guy or gal gets an idea to make it even more difficult.

I just think working up here is kind of crazy. Let's widen the base. We've decided as a firm that we can do platinum or gold on almost every project. So whether a client says, "Let's go for LEED," or we say, "Let's go for LEED rating," we just do it. It's now in our DNA. We just do all those things, and then if there's special areas where there's a real option and there's going to be some significant costs or impact, we will go and work with the client. But we just say, "Look, we're going to build you a green building, and we're going to do it as a part of our work." That's whether we're here in the U.S. or in China or wherever we are. The Shanghai Tower will be an incredibly green building.

Now, I was talking to somebody yesterday in the hallway. We've got wind tunnel turbines on the top of the building; you can see them. I'm very disturbed about it because they didn't want to put any grilles over them. I'm

wanting to put some louvers so you don't see these things flickering up there. I think they're going to drive people crazy. Because we had vertical ones. They were one piece, and now they're three pieces, and they rotate so that they don't whip. There's one in the center that's going this way and then the others are countering. Anyway, they claim they're wonderful, but you're going to see something flickering up there and it's just going to drive me crazy. We were talking to a building in town. They're going to put wind towers, and they were asking our guy, "What do I think?" It's going to be buried down under the parapet so you won't even see them in their case. Ours are holes in the curtain wall up in the top. He said, "If I were you, I'd just go buy green energy and forget the wind turbine. I don't think they're going to do much." Now, ours, we're hoping to do the night lighting on the building and they will have lasers and night lighting that will be unbelievable.

14-00:11:27

Meeker:

On Shanghai Tower?

14-00:11:28

Gensler:

Shanghai Tower. It'll be unbelievable stuff. But everybody's infatuated with wind and power. It's like I go drive Altamont Pass. I never see a turbine turning. I say, "I thought that PG&E had to take the power. Why aren't they running?" Maybe there's three moving and 900 are standing there still. I don't get it. I ask a lot of people, "Why don't they turn?" "Well, they're fixing it." Well, they're not fixing all 900, I hope. I hope they all aren't broken. Seriously, it's one of the great mysteries. I go to Modesto to see my client, the Gallos, and I go up there and these turbines are just standing there. The wind is blowing. I don't get it.

Anyway, the whole crowd of people love wind turbines. That's fine. So we got them on our building, and I'm a little nervous about it. That's a long way to tell a story of things are going to get built into the codes and built into the systems. LEED has done us a great service in getting us all committed and excited about it, and I couldn't be more pleased. If we can stretch it and we can do it intelligently, and there are constantly new products and new techniques. I got a letter from a guy, a friend of Gerson's actually, he used to work for Gerson, who has gotten into thermal insulations and buildings. He's got some engineer with some super-duper deal that looks like they're going to be able to save a lot of energy from thermal transfer and get it approved by the codes. I got an email from him a couple of days ago, and I've got to sit down with our guys and see what makes sense. He wants us to invest in it, and I don't particularly want to. But it sounds like something that's going pretty good.

14-00:13:18

Meeker:

The next thing I wanted to talk about is the transformations, particularly in the seventies. Then expanding in the eighties, and obviously it is something that is still a big concern today, but maybe people have figured out how to deal with it a little better. And that is the expansion of technology in the workplace.

When you first start out, obviously there's lighting systems, there are HVAC systems, there are telephone systems. I imagine some workplaces you were dealing with had like central computing systems, as well. Thinking, say, in the first fifteen years or so of the work of Gensler, can you think of any sort of milestones in the introduction of new technologies into the workplace that made you and your colleagues need to really rethink office interiors?

14-00:14:32

Gensler:

Yeah. I think we talked yesterday. It used to be moving piles of paper and carbon paper, and making copies was a big deal. I can't remember, it would have to be in the mid-sixties to late sixties and early seventies, Xerox came out with the 914 machine. IBM came out with a thing called a Magcard machine. I can't even remember, was it disk or what it was that you put into a computer, and it had some memory for documents. Legal secretaries were the ones that were using it, where they had forms and it would type into the thing. It was the beginning of a rudimentary [computer]. We had to design workstations for the legal secretaries that were really big, bulky things that were right next to their desk. It was much bigger than a computer today. You'd have a whole console, like a two-drawer file cabinet or something. I think it was a little narrower. But those things started to come along.

Phone systems were very rudimentary then, and they had big rooms with phone switching and all sorts of boxes and stuff. Now we've got hundreds of stuff in a small little closet now. The other thing that happened was that we did have to have mainframe computers. They were a big deal, when the first IBM mainframe started coming out. We personally as a firm felt that at one moment in time we had to explore having our own CAD system. We really did a lot of research, and a firm called Intergraph was the one that we ended up with, although I invested in another system, a guy down in the Peninsula that never could quite get off the ground. Intergraph was a bunch of people in Huntsville, Alabama, part of the space program, and they were doing some stuff. They were really early into the thing. They built their own workstation and the software, and then you bought a 914, I think was the number of that IBM mainframe computer. They were big. Well, they're boxes. You had to have a raised floor and separate air conditioning. So we ended up buying two terminals and these computers. I think it cost us \$250,000.

And we started. I gave a commencement speech in New York last week, in the New York School of Interior Design. One of our guys didn't retire, but he left and became a teacher. He's the lead teacher there, and he introduced me. So as a counterbalance I said he did the first computer drawing we ever had produced. It was an 8.5 x 11 sheet, and it was like over cabinets, a countertop, over file cabinets. That was it. It probably took him all day to do the damn thing but, anyway, that's what he did. All that for \$250,000 in a room probably half the size of this room, but it had a glass wall so that we could walk our clients by and see we've got one of them things. We're really Mr. and Mrs. Technology in this business and firm.

My competitors, Skidmore, HOK, decided they were going to write their own CAD systems, develop their own CAD systems. I have a belief that architects shouldn't be writing software. We don't know a damn thing, and if we hire them we still—and they said, “Yeah, but we're going to have better ones than anybody else. Better than Intergraph.” Well, there's a little flaw in that whole thinking, which they kind of missed, is that what we really have got to integrate with is the contractor, the engineers, the cities who want to get our documents in electronic form. They spent millions on these things, and they were pretty good systems, but they weren't the best. Intergraph kept developing. They were really high-powered, complicated systems for the military, and they got more into piping in refineries. It became clear they were not going to be the system for the industry. This firm called Autodesk, which is AutoCAD and Revit products, became the de facto standard for our industry. Whether these other people had better systems or not, it didn't make any difference.

Now, Frank Gehry created his own system. Really he borrowed the Cativa system Boeing used to create the 777 airplane. I'm pretty sure that is the one that he did. He modeled it, because of the shapes and stuff that he was trying to do, and you couldn't do it. Even Autodesk couldn't handle that kind of complexity. Gehry's concept was—and he was right—that you'd go from that right to the manufacturer. It's an integrated process; it just goes, and that was what it was designed to, cutting shapes for Boeing wings and body and all that stuff. It allowed Frank to do the kind of stuff—he came to us maybe five or ten years ago and wanted to sell it. Get a group of us to buy it and be able to do all those fancy shapes. I said, “Frank, the rest of us don't do those kind of fancy shapes. I don't think we need that.” But, again, what I have to do is have a standardized system which is compatible with our structural engineer, mechanical engineer, electrical engineer, and the contractor and subcontractors. The cities and even companies were saying, “Hey, guys, we want you to standardize AutoCAD, release eight,” or something, and then that would be what we had to do. It was written in our contract. We had to deliver electronic documents in that format, so all these other people are left out in left field when you're doing as much universal stuff.

So electronics and that whole thing has become much more a part of everything we do. Now, there's some really interesting implications which still haven't been addressed. I'm supposed to, if I'm a registered architect signing drawings, the code requires us to personally, as they say, wet sign, which means a real pen, sign a drawing. Not a rubber stamp, not somebody else. But wet signing this drawing that I have reviewed and supervised the doing of that drawing. Well, that's great, except that we got guys drawing in Costa Rica and Bangalore. I'm not standing there overlooking what they're doing. But historically, that was the way. A guy would draw and you'd stand there and say, “Oh, that makes sense. We'll do this and that.” Well, it doesn't happen that way. They're doing an airport with a thousand drawings. Two thousand, three thousand. Shanghai Tower, I think there were 10,000

drawings. And I'm supposed to say—oh, like the tax return, I know everything and I'm personally signing because I supervised all of it.

Well, that isn't the way that the world's done anymore. Yet they have no even intention of changing that code requirement. So we're all basically lying that we're doing all this stuff. At one time I had to have forty-six rubber stamps in the back room that would stamp, and then I'd sign across my stamp. Be registered in each state. I was kind of the license carrier. Because The Gap would call. They'd say, "We're going to do a job in Illinois, and then tomorrow we're going to go in in Wisconsin, and then we're going to do one in Idaho." I didn't have anybody from those places with a license, so I had to go get it. There's a system called NCRB. I have my primary license and my secondary, New York and then California. Then from those they accept their exams, which we take. So I could, in most cases, although some wanted you to come and have a personal interview, which makes it awkward because you don't want to do that.

One of the funny examples was, I'm on the Cornell advisory board. I was in Ithaca, and then I was going to fly from Ithaca down to New York and then fly over to London and get my RIBA London license. I got to Cornell and I had my meetings. I'm heading for the airport and I go, "Oh, my God, I don't have my passport. How the hell am I going to get to—" I had a scheduled date and time to be in London. So I called my wife, and she went down to United and then they got it from the counter to the counter in those days. There wasn't overnight Federal Express or something. I got there in time.

The British system is so different than ours in terms of registration. I decided my tack was going to be—you're interviewed by a couple of people, and they were wondering why I was there. We were there to open an office, and I needed to get the license so we would be legal for Goldman Sachs. I decided instead of letting them get questions about the codes and all that, I knew they had about twenty minutes to talk to me, that I would just talk about what I was doing and why I was doing it and how they see the market and this. Then the twenty minutes was up and they never asked me one question, after I'd done all this studying and reading the books and the mock information exams and all that. But I desperately needed to get that license. I had to fly over there just to go through that, and I damn near didn't make it.

I do think that this whole technology is changing everything that we do, where we draw it, how we draw it. Now there's a thing called Revit, which is a process that when you put a line down it's not a line, it's a wall. The wall has a backup piece that says it's so long and so wide and so thick, and these are the building specifications. All of a sudden when you're done, you have a thing that prints out and gives you the specifications, gives you the quantities, gives you the characteristics of all the things. And, as I said before, it'll tell you, you can't do that. A lot of stuff in this Revit concept, and it's part of AutoCAD system. It's getting better every day, and it's getting more

expansive—mechanical, electrical, structural as well as architectural. The impact is just dramatic. I'm trying to think. It probably was thirty years ago when this all started happening, and the first ten were really rocky and not very productive.

14-00:27:15

Meeker: The first ten systems?

14-00:27:16

Gensler: Ten years of that. The toughest decision we ever had was to abandon the Intergraph and dump all their stuff, and then retrain people on the AutoCAD. We hired a guy named Kent Sanders, who's really one of the top people in the country, was then and still is, on that kind of technology. He really led the training transition, which was really—but the training from basic AutoCAD to Revit AutoCAD was also a huge leap. We'd get reports every month. Twenty-two percent of the staff is trained, but only 5 percent in this office, and 50 percent in this office. It was a real painful transition. Because if all aren't trained, then what happens as we switch people around? "Well, I can do AutoCAD but I can't do Revit," so that person is totally—it's like "I don't draw with pencils anymore." "Well, you got to draw with pencils." It's the same kind of thing. There's enough difference that you can't kind of sit down and intuitively do it. Of course, now the kids come out of college and know what the hell's going on, and even some cases high school.

14-00:28:42

Meeker: That cycle of adoption of new technology is something I was interested in. You told the story about the guy who sits in the special room and designed that first cabinet system that took him all day to do. How long did it take for that system to actually become a useful piece of the architectural design system in the office?

14-00:29:13

Gensler: Well, it probably took five to ten years. One of the big questions was—early on these were expensive—"Oh, you want drawings on CAD? That'll be an extra twenty-five dollars an hour." We were charging for CAD time to the client. The idea of charging to use a computer today would be ludicrous. "You want pencil drawings? Fine. Here's that. But, oh, you've heard about this CAD and you want them on that? Well, then, it's an extra thirty-five dollars an hour." Then we went down to fifteen, and then, oh, geez, "Some of my clients are resisting. Can't we give it to them, Art?" Where's that in the budget? So there was a big transition economically. Of course, now we buy fully loaded machines for \$2,000 or \$1,800 or something like that.

Now, believe it or not, we have licenses, and we rotate them around the world. So London starts in the morning using the licenses. It's all done automatically. It's all just keeping track of who's got their computer on and who's got it off. Then it moves to New York, and then it moves to San Francisco, and then it moves to Asia, and then it comes back to London. So for 4,000 people we

have maybe 2,500 licenses. We know that during the day only 2,500 will be turned on at one time, so we have to guess where the maximum number of licenses will be turned on at any one day. We're not going to buy 4,000 licenses and then never use them all at the same time. They're twenty-four-hour licenses, and they're designed. AutoCAD knows we're doing this. It's something that we finally convinced them they're going to have to do.

One of the things that I remember is that bootlegging of software in the beginning was a big deal. A lot of architects got one system and then bootlegged it onto other computers. We just said we can't do this; from the very beginning we were paying for it. Therefore, and in many ways, we were uncompetitive with the other guy who was bootlegging this stuff. They got really nasty, and all you needed is one of your employees pissed off and going to this—there was a group that went around. The fines were huge, but the publicity was worse. I haven't heard anybody talking about bootlegging software for a long time, but it was a big, big issue in the beginning. People were saying, "I'm not used to paying this. It's not built into my fees, and how am I going to do it and afford all these very expensive machines?"

The printers were wholly horrible. Getting it printed right. Now you look at these 3D models that we do. I'm going down to show them today in the meeting. They're just so photorealistic, you can't believe it. I was reading the art magazine last night, *Art Forum*, and there was a picture of the Shanghai waterfront. Somebody had rendered in our tower complete, and the whole waterfront. It was a CAD rendering. There was a ship floating in the river. It was called "Falling From Heaven," and it looked like Noah's Ark with all these animals falling out of the sky into this ship. It was bizarre. Done by a Chinese artist. I was thinking, "Man, our buildings are everywhere." They had this whole skyline of Pudong and there was our building. Chinese artists are rendering our buildings with animals falling out of the sky. I'm telling you, you never know where you're going to find your work.

14-00:33:37
Meeker:

Okay. The introduction of CAD into the architectural practice is one thing, and the initial disruptions and then subsequent abilities that come with that is one thing. But then the transformation of the workplaces that you're doing, whether you're—

14-00:34:03
Gensler:

Okay, let me talk about that.

14-00:34:04
Meeker:

I certainly want you to talk about it, but I do have one sort of visual aid here I think is pretty interesting and that is the—let's see. It's Apple's offices.

14-00:34:23
Gensler:

Yeah, offices.

14-00:34:24

Meeker:

Offices. You can actually see one of the innovations that was brought into it and requested was the need to have cables and wiring much more accessible than usual.

14-00:34:43

Gensler:

Yeah. The cable trays.

14-00:34:44

Meeker:

They have the cable trays above all of the places, so you wouldn't have to disrupt through the walls or the floors or anything like that. Obviously this is an entirely new innovation in a workplace.

14-00:35:08

Gensler:

It affected a number of things. I want to go back and just make one other observation on what we were talking before. The other thing that changed for us is that the computer systems allowed us to do our accounting and project management and financial modeling for projects like you could never do before. That was equally from paper, pencils, filling in spreadsheets to automatic spreadsheets. It has changed the way we can run a business and manage a business. Not just the manager, but the project people right into the field. So the computer has helped us both in the documentation of our drawings, but also to document and record our financial and business and the storage, making files and copying, reports and all that. It made an enormous change in the way people work. I'll come back to that in the workplace.

But let's talk about the cable trays and the raised floor. We all discovered there's fricking a lot of cable. There's cable everywhere. And in this building we got it all running in the ceiling, lying up over the ceiling stuff. At the time, there were two problems. The fire department is scared to death of all this stuff up there, sparks or whatever the heck it's going to do. But we just had no way to get it around and get access. The problem is, as we start to move people around, it isn't as if it's just happening once when you move in and then you never need to touch it. Putting it all in conduit, electrical stuff in the building is all in the conduit; the data stuff can lay in cable trays. That's the stuff that gets moved around. Whether it's Apple or anybody else, they knew the needs of those. There was no wifi. Nobody knew anything about it. Didn't exist. I can't remember the thing Xerox had. It was a circuit that somehow we could plug into it. I can't remember the name of it. Did you have this loop stuff in. We would put that into places. A couple of things happened. One was the cable tray, which is above, but it's still got to drop down to get to the table top where the computer is. That's one of the problems.

And then we discovered that these things produced a hell of a lot [of heat]. A lot more than they do now. They were cooking machines. They started to come out with raised floors. They were initially used in computer rooms to get the cables from mainframe to mainframe, and then finally they'd be just an

absolute spaghetti under the floors in the computer room. We were one of the first people that did a building down in—

14-00:38:33

Meeker: Torrance. The Epson Building.

14-00:38:35

Gensler: Epson Building. With a raised floor. We did two things. We were able to run the cabling in the floor—

14-00:38:43

Meeker: So let me interrupt real quickly just to show a photograph. Here is an office cubicle [showing a photograph of the raised floor in the Epson Building]. If you can see the raised floor and the electronics cabling down beneath.

14-00:38:59

Gensler: You had a situation where you had a raised floor, but also you ran the air under the floor. This had been done a couple of times in Europe, but we wanted to do it—the first time done here in the States. The thing that’s interesting about that is that the air comes up through the floor. It pushes the hot air and dirty air up rather than driving the dirty hot air down. So you can put the air coming up at a much higher temperature. You don’t have to cool it as much, because it isn’t being forced through hot air. When you put it down through the hot air which has been rising, it’s just got to start much colder, but by the time it gets to the human height it’s at a temperature of seventy-two or whatever you want. And it’s cleaner.

So we put it in there, and it was amazing. Not that anything was defective, but it worked and they could move cable around. It was a real breakthrough. We started thinking that just about every building would go to raised floor and move the air under it. In fact, in many ways they should, but there has always been a resistance for whatever reason. It’s maybe more money, I don’t know. The trick is that then you have to raise the floor in the bathrooms and the elevator lobbies, which aren’t on raised floors. Maybe they should be, too, just to make it uniform. But they’re usually down, and so you have depressions. The building gets a little more complicated.

We still do quite a bit of raised floors where they’re moving a lot of cable and stuff around. But it hasn’t taken off quite as I thought it would. There used to be what we call raceways in the floor, and then there were boxes, and they were poured in the concrete. They’d put metal decking that had these raceways in it, and then there were some that laid on top, just in the concrete topping slab. Over the years we’ve had a variety of approaches. Frankly, it’s usually just drill a hole in the floor and go in the ceiling or the space below. But there’s a lot of places that, “Well, I don’t want to go in the ceiling because I’m a different tenant than that. I got to go in in the weekends and at nights and work with the tenant. Get another tenant and they don’t like that, drilling holes in their ceiling.” It has always been a problem, and will be a problem.

But we were one of the firms that started trying to really address that issue, and we've gotten pretty good at it.

I think that the cabled telephone, for example, will go away. Everybody will just have their cellphone. Our people, I don't know how it works, but if their phone rings at their desk, I think if it rings three times or something and they don't answer it, then it flips it over automatically to their cellphone. Then you say, "Well, why don't you just get rid of the first one and do it all from your cellphone?" But that would require us to give everybody that joins the firm a cellphone, and we're probably not ready to do that, although that will be the next thing. Like everybody has a computer, and then that computer is not—they need a laptop, and then they need an iPad. The technology that we have. We used to lease everything. There was always a very interesting issue of how long were the leases, because in those days power was going up and up and up, so you'd have a three-year lease. By the end of the year, year and a half, they'd had a new computer. It was the same price but double the power, and you just needed to get it traded in. Now we mostly buy everything because the interest rates are so low that the leasing deals don't work very well anymore.

14-00:43:28
Meeker:

So these innovations, the raised floors, the cable trays, and undoubtedly there's dozens more, too, how to accommodate the increase in use of technology in the workplace. Were these mostly developed architecturally or were these client-led innovations?

14-00:43:52
Gensler:

I think mostly architecturally. Indirect lighting has become a very big thing. Reducing light levels and using task lighting. Again, we're all part of energy conservation, but also quality of life. We started designing light fixtures, and then we'd get royalties for them. Now the big breakthrough is LED lighting. We're trying to do the Shanghai Tower with LED lighting throughout the whole place, which has never been done before. The power consumption of those is way, way down. The other thing with LED lighting, the bulbs last ten years. So instead of climbing up in the ceiling and changing light bulbs or fluorescent tubes on a ladder every year, you got to go and take them once every ten years. The maintenance savings is enormous. So we're trying to get people to look at things a little differently. "Well, this first cost is twice as much." "Yeah, but eight times cheaper for maintenance than it would be the other way." Starting to make clients understand that lower expenses on the energy side and lower maintenance costs quickly offset the maybe slight premium you pay for the initial installation in a fixture.

So that's a hobby of mine. I shouldn't say a hobby, but I've been pushing the LED stuff. We hired a lighting guy who was a manufacturer and designer in the New York office. He's been really leading this for five years now. We got manufacturers all over the world using designs that we've done. There's some royalties and we make decent money out of it. I want to get it in the industry.

Again, I think once the marketplace sees that, we're going to see a lot less utilization of energy. Because the energy is less and the heat is less, then the air conditioning loads are less. In fact, with the under-air floor, it was better and healthier, but the big saving was in the size of the mechanical plant. You had so many tons of air conditioning if you used the old system, then you'd need two-thirds the number of tons if you used the new system. I said, "Well, geez, you mean I got a third less plant up there with the energy to run it and cooling and water and all the things that those big cooling towers take?" And the answer's yes.

14-00:46:40

Meeker:

Have you gotten to the point that you're starting to recommend to clients that the expansion of need for cables and all of those kinds of infrastructure to run the technological systems is maybe not going to be as essential in the future, and spaces can be more wide open, less need for cables because of the emergence of wifi?

14-00:47:05

Gensler:

Oh, well, there's a lot of discussion. It goes, and then all of a sudden hits. You find one or two start-ups that don't know what the hell they're doing and don't know where they're going, so they want as little initial construction investment as they can make. They just want to move into a place and work. So put a wifi system in and give everybody a cellphone and use laptops, with their own batteries versus everything plugged hardwired, you can save a lot of money going in. Now, there's disadvantages of that. You got to have some power to run the chargers for the batteries and stuff like that.

14-00:47:48

Meeker:

The foosball tables.

14-00:47:50

Gensler:

Yeah. And foosball tables. We work with our engineers, and our engineers are always feeding us information. These are evolutionary improvements. I think they're going to not stop for quite a while. There's a lot of advantages. It's all again about going back to this rate of change. That we as a group of people are changing what we do so quickly that I think pretty soon this cable that you've got here is just not going to happen. Even for the light, I think we're going to figure out another way. The efforts on batteries, whether it's getting anywhere or not—batteries seem to be, in many ways, the biggest holdback. Like I have a pacemaker, and they say it will work from five to seven to ten years. Then they got to take the whole damn thing out and put a new battery in. They have to do a major operation to get it out and put it back in. That's a pretty big breakthrough. I'm very pleased if they don't have to do it. I may not live that much longer.

One of the things that actually has been interesting in this discussion, I realized how much change, both in the physical workplace but also the process of how we work and our clients work—it's been a fascinating

journey. We're not seeing so much change in the basic buildings; we should be seeing more.

[short break in audio]

14-00:49:36

Meeker:

You just were talking about the rate of change.

14-00:49:42

Gensler:

As I look back over this fifty-year period, the way that you work and the way you do things is just dramatically different. There was an interesting article in the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday about why people are moving into buildings on the peninsula and why people are moving into buildings in San Francisco, the tech companies. I loved one of the lines. I think I may even have it here. "Tech guys don't like ceilings. They don't want any of that ceiling. They want exposed ducts and pipes running around in the ceiling. They don't want any of the ceiling stuff." And it's really true. They want raw columns, wood columns, raw. They're not, "Give me all this finished stuff." I've been working with some of my developer friends, saying, "Guys, you've got to understand." Probably the top twenty developers in the U.S. and some international have a quiet little group that meets twice a year. They asked me to speak in front of them. I was trying to explain to them: "Guys, the buildings that you're building, and unfortunately you own, are not the buildings that this generation, the millennium kids, want. You ought to be aware of that. That they don't want these big marble lobbies and all this. They want to feel comfortable bringing their dog into the office, sitting under their desk, no ceilings." They just want a different space. You've got all these center core buildings. They want it wide open. They don't want anything to interfere. They want to move desks. All the furniture's being manufactured now with wheels on it. They want this whole building to change; they don't know what they're going to do tomorrow. They don't even assign them a desk anymore. Can you imagine people ten years ago saying, "I don't have a desk? I don't have a job. If they don't give me a desk, I don't have a job."

With HP we were asked to cut the space in half, free address, and make it a better space. We ended up with two or three workstations for every ten people. They love the new space. It's wonderful. But we got break areas and teaming areas and collaboration areas and different things. The actual, where people work, if you go out and look out here, you'd think we only got twenty people working in there, [but there are] a hundred people. They're not here. You're not in your office, you're here. It's a whole different rate of change of things that we as a society have to just get comfortable with. A lot of people aren't. So the older folks—I'm still sitting in an office. My peers, for the newer Gensler office, they sit out in the open with everybody else.

14-00:52:44

Meeker:

That was another innovation from the Apple work, was the collaborative workspaces. In that project, which I think was the late eighties, was that one of the first times that you were asked to—

14-00:52:56

Gensler:

Yeah, probably. Yeah. To do some collaboration spaces. Again, I was attending a lot of conferences with a lot of things about that. Now it's pretty much standard, understood in the industry. We're still surveying. In fact, one of the Gensler workplace surveys this year said we've gone too far. The industry, everybody has gone too far. We've taken away too much ability to have some privacy. We've got to back off a little and provide more opportunities for private [space]. It may not be assigned to you, but if it isn't, you've got to have places that people can go and do concentrated work. They just really need it. This was the first time wasn't, "More open, more open, more open." Whoops, a little far. Back it up.

This is a survey we do globally, and it got all sorts of press all around the world. Research is becoming—the current team is the one that did it. I can't take any credit for the research the firm has done, direct research. I showed you that research book we put together. The research is really influencing and informing the work that the firm does and the industry is doing. That's healthy, because we're a part of a process in this country and around the world. Nobody wants to talk about it, but it's truly the reason that we have this unemployment problem. We have people that say, "My grandfather was a coal miner, my father was a coal miner. I wanted to be a coal miner." But we don't need coal miners. "Well, yeah, but my grandfather and my great-grandfather and my father were coal miners. I want to be a coal miner." And, "Sorry, guy, but the world's changed." That's happening to a lot of people who are not comfortable either relocating where they live or retraining themselves.

The whole issue for me right now in education is continuing education. How do we train people, and can you do some of that online, on a global basis. I heard a lecture over the weekend about these whole new balloons that Google's going to put around the globe up at 90,000 feet so they don't interfere with air traffic. Being able to have every person in the world have access to the internet. One of the other scary numbers I heard was 1-4-4-5. That's a billion people in the U.S. and Europe, four billion in Africa, four billion in the Middle East, and five billion in China. The Africa one was—just where did that come from. They think that thing is going to just take off. A guy did a really interesting lecture about where those people are coming from. Well, you start looking at those kind of numbers and those kind of things—so to get them access to the internet and stuff is incredible. So how does education change in the world, and how do we keep updating people so that they can respond and be productive in the rapidly changing world.

Interview #8: June 17, 2014
Audio File 15

15-00:00:09

Meeker: Today is the 17th of June, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler. This is tape number fifteen and I believe session eight. And we're here in his office in San Francisco.

We're going to start out today by talking about the visioning process. Going back to the first collection of Gensler leaders who created a vision about thirty years ago for the organization. What Art is going to do today is narrate the process by using two documents. One is a "Vision 2020" document, which is I think a broader overview. And then one is maybe a more colloquial, they call it a "Big Hairy Audacious Goals" document. That maybe gets into some more specifics. Here is the 2020 document, just to give a visual reference to it [showing the document for the camera]. And here is the BHAG's document, as they describe it [again, showing this document for the camera]. This actual writing up, is this Andy Cohen who did these?

15-00:01:25

Gensler: Yeah, this is Andy who had done that.

15-00:01:27

Meeker: Okay. All right. So why don't we start by talking about the first time that something like this was done? You said about thirty years ago in Connecticut.

15-00:01:34

Gensler: [Gensler is working off two documents, mentioned above] About thirty years ago we were having a session in Connecticut. I think we were at Margo's place. It was on the coast right next to Westerly, Rhode Island, but it was in Connecticut. She had a second home up there, so all of us met up there for a weekend. We'd meet every eight weeks or so. This one was a visioning session. "Where are we really going to go?" We started writing stuff down on boards and really focusing on it. There was a guy who had a system that developed. He was down in the Peninsula. He came and taught this to us, how to communicate in this way to each other. There's a lot of stuff put on boards, and we use it for meetings now a lot. We have a gentleman in the L.A. office who does this as almost a full-time job, going around with people and helping them organize and document meetings. This one was really to say who are we, how do we do it, and what do we do. It's interesting because it allowed us to step back and say is that what we really want to be? Is that what we really want to do? And how do we want to do it? That's an interesting way to look at yourself.

I'll pick out the key things under global design firm. That's what we wanted to be, and want to be now. This is one that we've just finished for 2020. We want to be a design thinking strategy. We want a platform, whole operating system that allows us to do it. We want a breadth of practice areas, market

sectors, and marketplace experts. We want the best talent. We want clients that are really leadership-type clients that we can really add value. And we want a point of view of diversity. That's who we are.

But how do we do it? Well, we were redefining what's possible, is the way we think of things. A lot of people think something, you can't do it, we redefine what is possible. So our design and delivery, multiple disciplines, integrated technology, strong approach, knowledge programs and research, building on research capability. An investment of \$200,000, for example, we said we'd spend on research each year. Practice area thought leaders. In other words, bundling our services, but having specific thought leaders in each practice area. That's experts in law firms and experts in retail and expert in hospitality. Really key people. And annually invest in this. Six hundred thousand bucks they're thinking of doing. Investment in connectivity. Meetings, retreats, collaborative meetings. The whole thing of community, and making our firm this "one firm firm" community. How do we do that? Make it inspirational? We want clients shared in the team. We believe a client's point of view is extremely important. So how do you get the client's point of view into the program? What we call client intimacy. Not client rejection, but intimacy. Strategy embedded in every project. Not just we do it. It's got a real strategy. That builds on our total core piece, which is the one firm culture that we have, this "one firm firm" culture that is entrepreneurial, it's collaborative, and it's personal and passionate.

Then we go to what do we do through the power of design. What is our impact on client, on global point of view? We've got learning ideas. Five thousand projects. We're already now at 6,000 projects. Eighty-three countries. We're already now at 105. This was 2020. Eighty-five percent repeat clients. That's been consistent for a long time. Leaders in sustainability. A thousand professionals, lead professionals. World class projects, like Shanghai Tower and those kinds of projects. Award-winning architectural business industrial process. It's not just in the architectural world we want to win awards. We want to be in like *Fast Company* and other great places where we could really make a "what we do" difference, like the book I'm writing on how to run a professional business. Not just an architectural firm, but all professional services firm. GDA is our Gensler Design excellence awards and the power of design, that whole philosophy, the fact that we put our own work up to awards with outside input.

Cover a couple more points. We want to have an impact on our clients. We really want to do that and help them. Driving client performance is the focal point of that. So we really got three things: global design, one firm culture, driving client performance. And that is the concept that this firm is organized and thinks about every day. It's a simple thing. You can put it up on the wall. People can see it, we can see it. It's very direct and says these are the things we believe in.

Then this one: The Big Hairy Audacious Goals is how are we going to get there. It's sort of living the vision. How do you live this vision that you have? It's based about the design industry's new paradigm. Game change innovation, from idea to reality, and then making a difference. I think those are really big concepts of how do you get there. Who are we going to be, how are we going to do it, and what are we going to do is really three concepts of how do you have a vision for 2020 that really is something that challenges us all and allows us to motivate ourselves, our people, our clients, that this is what we believe as an organization and we're trying to get there. I think that that's a worthy goal to set up something like this.

Now, I'll go just quickly again by 2020. We're a core business to the globe. We sell the Gensler experience. Feel like a family is a thing. We have a platform that has 6,000 people, sixty offices. It's a big deal. A billion and a half in revenue. We're well on our way to being there. We're closely connected to each other. The practices of work, community, lifestyle, and health, they're the keys to all the industries that we want to serve. We've got multicultural people. Fifty percent probably non-U.S. now. A new creative mix. Many professional people outside of the traditional base of what we do. Strategic partners to the global Fortune 500. And global knowledge resource for our clients. So we use the word we run a global rolodex, not just a U.S. rolodex. We're a non-U.S. centric viewpoint. That's really important, that we've shifted. That our future market is not just a U.S. market but it's a global market. We believe the global world is the market for us, and we can be significant players in it and have an impact.

How are we going to do it? Innovation funding. We're going to put our money where our mouth is and try to invest in the firm and the firm's knowledge. Create an environment where risk-taking is safe. Personnel involved with Skunk Works, experimentation, knowledge creation, innovation goals on each project. Really thinking about how do we perform better and provide a better value service. Energy experts beyond LEEDs, so that we're really leading in this whole sustainable energy issue. Gensler capital. Equity positions in things we believe in. In other words, we're really going to start accumulating capital, invest in things that we really truly believe. External collaboration. Devise a point of view, peer reviews, partnerships with other organizations. We can't do it alone, and we can't go around the world alone. We need partners that we can work with. Fast Company innovative award winner—we'd like to think that we could do that.

So those are the game-changing innovations that we think, from idea to reality. That's how we get to reality. And what are we going to do? We're going to have a global impact, which we talked about, triple bottom line, take client performance to another level. Environmental impact. Economic impact. *Business Week* awards. Physical impact, urban environments, and workplaces of tomorrow. The real top environmental places. Inspired place for people. As I was just walking, before I got you, somebody just handed me a new book on

master planning that the China office has put together. It's unbelievable. Just looking to see what we're doing. Really, really major planning projects in China. Social experimental impact. The way that people work and relate and interact, not just in an office but in hotels and restaurants and hospitals and conventions, all sorts of areas. Gensler is solving big hairy problems around the world and is considered the expert. The impact on everyday, by being exceptional. We believe in the power of design, and that's how we make a difference.

Those are the core basic concepts which we push. You can see there's just one little spot here about the number of people and the dollars. We think all these other things allow us to happen if we drive with those people and those ideas and those commitments. And that means, different than most firms, in the investment that we have to make back into research and knowledge and hiring the best people.

15-00:13:11
Meeker:

So this is interesting, the way in which you're presenting this as "Gensler is a vision-driven firm."

15-00:13:18
Gensler:

Yes.

15-00:13:18
Meeker:

Gensler is a vision-driven organization. Do you attribute this model beginning to, say, thirty years ago with that first meeting at Margo Grant's house?

15-00:13:26
Gensler:

Yeah, I really do. I think we finally realized we were a group of people that could really have an impact. We liked that capability, and we liked the fact that our meaning was more than about us. It wasn't about us. It was about the results that we were able to accomplish. The successes that our clients received because of the work that we did. I think all of us felt it was our way of giving back to our community and our country. We've grown, we've felt more and more of that, and we became confident that we could invest in hiring the best people, we could invest in quality offices, we could invest in—and we started in the last eight or nine years in this research, but the last few years have gotten really serious about the research. It's amazing, the level of stuff that is happening.

What we have now are innovation awards, which are mostly research but other things of innovation-driven. We're in this mode of ever-evolving. We're not stagnant. It's not, "God, we're there. We've made it to the top, and now we can coast." There is no coast in this firm. I think that's an important idea that everybody has bought into. And it challenges, because at times you'd like to get a breather. The firm is very, very hot right now. I was talking to the New York office this morning and they're just swamped. They don't know where they're going to put everybody. We've got a fairly new office in

Toronto. We just moved into new space and they're going to outgrow it in six months. They're going to go to thirty-five people in the next few weeks. That's practically a new office. A year and a half old or something. It's crazy, and it's just everywhere. The projects that we're doing in Asia, the scale and size of them. We've got a tower under construction that's 120 meters taller than the Shanghai tower. I think it's in Suzhou, but don't quote me on that one. There are Chinese names I don't even know and cities I don't have a clue where they are. But the level of our clients—they're asking a lot. And that's okay. We are positioning ourselves as the organization that can do it, and other people can't. Have the resources, the commitment, the belief in doing it.

15-00:16:16

Meeker:

So what I'd like you to think about for me is the way in which you presented, say, the first ten, fifteen, twenty years of the firm not necessarily as a vision-driven organization but as an opportunistic organization. I don't mean that kind of in a pejorative way.

15-00:16:37

Gensler:

No, I think it was.

15-00:16:38

Meeker:

And that, one, you wouldn't move into new markets unless your clients drove you there. It also seemed like by listening to your clients, you weren't one of these design-driven organizations where you were telling the clients what they should want. Rather you were listening to them.

15-00:16:56

Gensler:

Yeah, precisely.

15-00:16:58

Meeker:

Can these two things exist conterminously, or did a real transition happen in the firm, say, in the 1980s to be one that was more vision-driven, that you would lead the clients, that you would decide what direction you wanted to go to instead of simply following the clients?

15-00:17:20

Gensler:

I think we've never lost the culture of listening to the client. It truly is the core element of our firm. I've used an example before, I think I've talked about stretching with a rubber band. What we've tried to do, and put these goals out far enough that we can constantly stretch ourselves and our clients, not just leap places. So we're evolutionary, not revolutionary, although when you get to the end it's fairly revolutionary. But in the process from where you are to where you'd like to be, it's not giant steps, it's a hell of a lot of little steps that gets you there. And I think that that's—I was going to use the word safer. I don't want to use the word safer, because we're not looking for the safe way, but the more powerful, thoughtful way. Maybe a thoughtful way to get there. There are going to be things that don't work, and there are going to be things that you step back. There's external and internal economic situations that come up that are really problem factors.

The call that I had to break for is a guy who wants to buy a property. I happen to know the seller, and the seller is all of a sudden getting seller's remorse. He's trying to back out and make the deal as difficult as he can, and the guy would like to close, and could I convince him. I wasn't very successful in convincing him. My guess is he'll sell it anyway. But he's a game-player, so we'll see how it comes out.

The point being that we want to have clients, very important clients, who have the confidence to give us a call and say, "Can you help me?" on a lot of things besides drawing plans and creating spaces. We want to be their trusted advisor, somebody that they can go to. That goes through the whole philosophy of the firm. The idea that we're one big family. We had parties. Friday was bonus day around here, and it was amazing to think that in forty-six locations around the world, everybody basically at the same time was celebrating with parties and excitement and commitment to move forward. That's really something that other firms don't focus on. They may focus on their office, but this was a focus on all of us, and having worked together to get to some place rather than—there was certainly emphasis in each office on their own personal accomplishments, but it was also very important to recognize the total team accomplishments.

Let me grab a piece of paper, because it's so near and dear to my heart. I was working on it last night. We're trying to wrap up a book, and a friend of mine has been helping me, giving me feedback on the book. He said our big ideas haven't changed from the very beginning. The idea of a family. The importance of sharing between the people, all the members of the family. The idea of building trust with people. And then the idea of adding value more than they anticipated. Those kind of basic cultural tenets have been with us from the beginning. It was sort of like, if you remember, I said we charged more at the Alcoa Building than anybody had ever charged, but I said I was going to do it better. I didn't know what the hell I meant or even why I did it. That we didn't want to be the low-cost provider. We wanted to be the best provider, and we wanted to add value so that in the end they got more than they expected and felt, "Gee, that was a good investment. I'll go back for more." So when you talk about 85 percent repeat client, I wanted that from the very beginning.

The thing that's always fascinated me, and I don't get it, and I sound like I'm patting myself on the back and the firm is patting itself on the back. But what we do to us seems so obvious. Why don't other firms operate this way? It seems so logical, that these are things that are going to make you have more success with your clients, more financial success, more personal reward. They all seem very straightforward to us. We keep getting more knowledge, and the world keeps changing and we keep wanting to try—see more voids and opportunities and we want to go fill them. To me, it's not as if we're running roughshod over things. We're really committed to this trusted client relationship which needs—and if you'll notice in what I talked about, each

one of them has client as your partner, client integration into the project. I know Steve Jobs said, “Clients don’t have the vision that I do and don’t know the possibilities.” And that is true. But I do think that each client is not stupid. They have a point of view, and they can add. We’re trying to draw out of them what is their point of view and what are their goals and what are their issues. Each organization or community has a different series of issues. I don’t think our position, to just run over it roughshod for what we want.

15-00:23:37

Meeker:

But Steve Jobs was talking about consumers. You’re talking about clients, and there’s something different there, isn’t there?

15-00:23:43

Gensler:

There are some differences, but I don’t think that clients know what a great piece of real estate design can do. They’re beginning to learn, and we’re beginning to learn the impact and where to put the effort. I’m working with one client and he said, “I don’t care what the outside looks like. People look at it once, they go inside, and it’s got to be perfect inside.” This is a hotel. “I really want to put all the money on the inside of the hotel.” “Well, but you got to get in the front door, and you got to be a good neighbor to the community, so let’s make the outside really special and fun and appropriate, as well as the inside.”

I had a situation. My son has bought a house. He’d like to remodel it and do some things to it, and I was doing some plans. I was looking at the outside. He kept saying, “The outside is not the way I’m wanting it to look.” I’m working on the outside. And finally I realized, I said to him, “Wait a sec.” He can’t believe I’m redesigning his house for him. It’s crazy. I finally said, “I’m going to start on the inside, because there’s some rooms in this house I don’t know what the hell you can ever do with them.” They’re funny rooms in funny places that are actually quite large, but they have no functional use that I can figure out that you’d ever be in the darn thing. Maybe we’re going to rethink some things.

I started rethinking it from the inside out, like we always do on our projects, rather than saying, “Well, he wanted to change how it looks on the outside.” I went back to my core tenets, beliefs, that I can come up with something that’s really terrific from the inside. Do something great for the outside, if I do something great, and make it really work on the inside. And that’s with a building, it’s with an interior, it’s with a landplaning, how you use the land. It goes to everything that we touch and do. As we get into it, services that we provide, we’re just slowly, step by step, more and more services that clients are just asking for, and in many cases they don’t even know they’re asking for. We say, “Well, we can do this.”

I have a breakfast tomorrow morning with a young man who is a very good friend of my wife’s. He’s working on an occupancy sensor thing for buildings.

Got our guy who does insides of buildings and light controls, and he wants to understand how it would fit into the industry. Most people are going to think, “That’s not mine, that’s an engineer.” But I’ll go and spend the morning with him trying to figure out whether there’s a place that we can be a leader, take advantage of it, and move it forward. We’ve become a leader in LED lighting, and we’ve been designing fixtures in LED lighting which are really—enormous energy reduction in consumption. They need to be maintained once every ten years rather than once a year. Big operational savings. We take on these projects. The Shanghai Tower is going to be all LED-lit. No other building has ever done such a thing. Certainly not at the scale. We’re trying to stretch the envelope with our clients. In certain cases, the Chinese in this case, really want this building to be a great, green sustainable building. We’re going to pull it off. Those are the kinds of steps that you take, and then they reflect on other steps.

When you look back at where we started, certainly we never saw this coming. It wasn’t in the vision. But over a period of time we pushed the first thing. I think we were talking about 500 people. That was the real stretch, to 500 people. We’re going to go from 130 to 500. These guys, gals—because there were a bunch of women there, too—were crazy. “No, we can do it, Art.”

15-00:27:59

Meeker:

Was that the original vision?

15-00:28:01

Gensler:

Probably, yeah. And we were going to maybe go to fifty million dollars or something. Oh, my God, when do we get to that? Now, if we had said in forty years we’re going to be here, that would have been a waste of time. It would have been just ridiculous. But if we stretch ourselves, and stretch is a big word in this firm, it’s part of our culture. We want to stretch ourselves. What’s the fun of it, really, is to constantly stretch yourself.

My son said to me the other day, “Dad, you talk about going home at 6:00 and spending time with your family.” And I did that. But also then after work, and getting the kids to bed, I either came back and worked in the office or I’d sit down and—I was going to say work. But I said, “I really sit down and educate myself.” Every night I read or study or do something that may have an effect on the firm, but frankly, hopefully, just puts a little more between my ears. I have this stupid memory of things that I can pull out. I read that two months ago in this magazine or something, or saw something. I encourage our people to first take the breaks because you need the breaks, but also the world of continuing education is absolutely the way we have to go in this country, in the world. Because the rate of change of knowledge is so fast that there’s no way. The knowledge doesn’t even exist that’ll happen two years from now, so you can’t educate yourself on that, but you got to educate on something. And then you’re going to have to reeducate on what happens in two years from

now. For me, that's fun. That's because I have better short-term memory than long-term memory now. But that'll probably flip around at some point.

15-00:30:12

Meeker:

One of the things that I'm interested in, in general, of course, as a historian, is change over time. The story you're presenting is really an evolutionary tale. But I'm looking at this document, and it seems like there are maybe a few things in there that are less evolutionary and maybe even more revolutionary. Maybe not in the short run, but in the long run. So you take Art Gensler in 1980, whatever, when you started doing the visioning process, and I wonder what he would have thought of some of those specific points on there, maybe the broad things.

15-00:30:53

Gensler:

Well, I think the ideas I would have liked, and did like. I probably actually could dig it up. The first one, I'm sure Andy has a copy. But we certainly weren't thinking of being a global design firm. We were thinking of being a U.S. design firm, not just a [regional one]—

15-00:31:10

Meeker:

But London was already on the horizon then, so obviously there was a slow growth.

15-00:31:14

Gensler:

No, but London came really rapidly. As a matter of fact, came in a fluke, because we went over to help them pick somebody, not to open an office. When we finally interviewed, they said, "Oh, we don't like any of them, we want you to open." In two days we had a London office. I don't think any of us thought that we were going to have an international office. And Japan was interesting, because this guy came to us and said, "I have some clients, and they're similar to clients that you—I'd like to have a relationship." We started through him, and then realized that that wasn't going to work and got a joint kind of office. I'm sure it was the U.S. government. But they were trying to build more trade between—it was all coming from Japan to us, and nothing was going back. They were trying to find things that they could send back. And professional services seemed one they might be able to build up. So they got us to communicate with Shimuzu and then that tied in with Mori, which is the biggest builder in town, and we tied everything up.

So the international appeared on the scene. I don't think we were quite ready at the time, although there were some firms overseas. There were a bunch of people that went to the Middle East when the Middle East was booming. We weren't in that wave at all. The large firms, Skidmore and HOK and a bunch of others were in that wave. We, as I say, were not in that wave at all. There were a few firms. I think Swanke had an office in London. They may have been the only U.S. firm that had an office in London. They got a project over there. In Japan, I think we were one of the early, very early. There's a firm

called PAE, Pacific Architects and Engineers, that was over there really just doing military work.

It all of a sudden dawned on us as a group that this world is not going to be just the U.S., it's going to be larger than that. I think, going back to the very beginning where I spent two years in Jamaica, I really enjoyed the fact that I was working with a different culture and a different climate and a different capability. That was something to me that was a challenge. I'm always up for a challenge. When I say I, I shouldn't, because this is a real "we" firm. I suppose one of the big things, it's a "we" firm, not an "I" firm. I give myself credit for hiring great people and getting out of their way, letting them do their thing. We've all had the same kind of mission and commitment to ideas, and that comes from the family belief. So that's a little different.

15-00:34:29

Meeker:

So when you're engaged in this visioning process, whether it's this most recent iteration or in previous years, there's a lot that goes into this, a lot that ends up in it. Can you think of any instances whereby a particular idea or goal was decided to be beyond the vision or this process allowed you to say, "Actually, let's not go into that because that maybe conflicts with what we want to do."

15-00:35:02

Gensler:

Well, we always bring up three things. We don't want to do housing, mostly because single-family houses are very, very personal, and we're more in the bigger movement. Although we do lots of small things, they're not so much personal. Although in their process they seem personal, and we really get close to our clients. There's a difference between doing that and how do you want the divisions in the silverware drawer designed. We pick the fabrics and put them on the furniture. We don't tour the design centers with our clients looking at various things. We bring them in here if we want; they come and we have chairs brought in. So we've stayed away from single-family. We've stayed away from condominiums, even for rental, because we find that those get converted to condos, although it's hard to do in San Francisco. But the condo business is just a lawsuit nightmare, so we're not going to go there.

We're not interested in doing jails. We don't know anything about it, and we don't want to know anything about it.

We don't do industrial. We do some, and we're starting to do a little more. We had a discussion on the call yesterday, the Monday morning call, about some offices and some significant manufacturers' facilities, and maybe how they might set up their offices that are part of their manufacturing to better work. We've been doing quite a bit of work with GM over the years and their—

15-00:36:53

Meeker:

And you did some labs, too.

15-00:36:55

Gensler:

Oh, yeah, we've done labs. We do the lab stuff. So it's getting more and more into dealing with the manufacturers, the Procter & Gambles, and the General Motors and the Fords and other people. We've got 3M and some others that we're working with. Caterpillar and a whole bunch of others.

We come to these and we say, "Yeah, that's not for us." We never even put it on the table. But we're not into strip malls, and we're not into the low-end stuff. People say, "Well, what are you working with McDonald's for?" Well, I'd like to see McDonald's put a better product out there, better in terms of their facilities. I told the story about how we tried very hard to get them that way, and others like that. So we'll take some risks. But just cheap stuff, we're not interested in that. We're not good at it, don't know it.

The one area that's been the real tester is healthcare. Healthcare has historically been one of the largest billing areas for architects in the country. It's an area, if you get large, you probably want to be in healthcare. I just always felt that there are a lot of firms in it that are really specialized. That's almost all they do, and they really got it down. We're starting from ground zero. We got into health clubs a long time ago; we're doing a lot of clubs for people. We got pretty good at that and we liked that, we liked the healthy part. Then a number of our people on the staff, partners, too, wanted to get into what they called the wellness, which was part of the health club world but it was more spas, more recovery places maybe. One of the things we've looked at, haven't moved into much at all, is elder care, which is an interesting issue. But we always kept staying away from hospital, because it's just so regulated. Projects take forever. They're long, they're complicated, and they're very detailed if you don't know what you're doing.

Over the years the firm has crawled under the door and is starting to get in that other side. We've just hired a very, very leading woman to help build that in Chicago. Now, I don't think we're going to jump into hospitals, but I think we're going to get close. That this whole change of the medical world, and I believe it's going to happen—as you know, I'm on the board of the Buck Institute on Aging. What we're going to try to do in this country, and I hope the world, is keep people healthy rather than cure them after they get sick. Historically, nobody talks about keeping people healthy. There's some talk about overweight and exercise and all that stuff. But really working on keeping people healthy rather than putting all our effort into once you get something, how to cure it. It's really hard to cure it. It's a lot easier to keep you healthy.

15-00:40:33

Meeker:

And less expensive.

15-00:40:34

Gensler:

Fiercely less expensive. We can extend life, but not the quality of life. So we're talking about the quality of people's lives. You want them to live as

long as they have a quality experience, and you want them to die before the experience becomes they're drooling in the corner of the room. That's badly put, but it's probably the truth. That's the way I feel about myself. I don't want to go through that. There is a new paradigm of what a healthcare facility is. We're searching for that and picking our niche, how we can fit into it, if we can make a breakthrough. I have a concierge doctor arrangement with my wife and myself with a doctor who literally comes to your house. There's a firm here in the Bay Area, they have an office right around the corner from us here, that for a thousand dollars a year will provide a concierge service to you. They'll go and check you and talk to you and sit down. Not twelve minutes and in and out. They take insurance. They don't take Medicare patients, but they take insurance. I don't know anything about it, but I thought it was interesting because they're promoting that as a facility. I have never gotten an ad for something like that. There's going to be a need for that kind of service that the country really is not currently organized for.

15-00:42:26
Meeker:

Gosh, that brings up a whole interesting area around legislation and regulation, the federal government and how, when you're engaged in these visioning documents, how much are you paying attention to what's happening in the firm and what the firm's capabilities are, and then what's happening in the broader world? How much does the broader context, whether it's geopolitical, from the global scale, or the local regulatory and political environment in the United States. How much do those larger contextual issues get brought in?

15-00:43:06
Gensler:

I read every morning. I get in here before you got in here. I rip the *Wall Street Journal* apart. These are pages that I tore out. I'll read those sometime today, probably at ten o'clock tonight, but I'll get through them all. I don't like to leave anything undone. I'll somehow stay awake to get them done. That's my education time. When I've got a break in ten minutes I'll maybe read a page, or I'll take it to lunch and read it if I'm not having lunch with somebody.

I watch, and I think all of us have learned to watch, the geopolitical issues. For example, this year my son David, who's one of the three people leading the firm, had gotten to meet some senior Russian bankers. He was going to bring them over to spend some time over here. He finally called them and said, "I don't think this is the right time to come. Please don't come." Now, this is potentially some large work in Russia. Our London office seems to be more excited about working in Russia than certainly the people in the U.S., and I think maybe there is a better feeling between the Brits and the Russians. Every day I get madder at Putin, so I'm not thrilled the Brits are doing it. But I do think somehow we got to encourage them to raise their aggression outside of Russia and worry about taking care of the people inside rather than just gobbling up and starting wars and fighting, and depending only on fossil fuels for their exports, that is keeping the country alive.

I have mixed emotions about not trying to interact with people that I don't necessarily think they're the greatest. But we've got to look outside, and we've got to decide where can we go and add value. I heard a talk the other day, I maybe mentioned this before. Like four to five billion people are going to be in Africa. It's got a billion now. That's where the growth is. The biggest growth is going to be in Africa. Well, we've done some work in Egypt and a little work in South Africa. One of our guys wanted to go back to Libya and I kept saying, "No, we're not going." Then Gaddafi got ousted and killed. He said, "Well, let's go back to Libya," but then make the government work. He had spent some time in Libya. I just said, "We ain't going to Libya." Now, again, I say I'm saying that but, again, I'm not running the place anymore. So they may wake up some day and tell me we're in Libya. I don't know. That's not my call anymore. But I do think that we do look and constantly—the political thing.

Now, there are code situations and there are other situations. I tried to do a little lobbying to get these things together, because it's just a nightmare the way it is now. For example, if I were in the housing business, there was a thing in the paper this morning which was we want 30 percent of all housing to be low-income housing. Well, that's a really nice idea, but they're saying if it's not 30 percent, you're going to have to build low-income housing and everything else gets stopped. Well, we have a need for housing in this city. We understand the gentrification in communities. We understand that people need housing. We understand all those things. But you have to balance, and you have to think about the fact that you're taking an industry and just all of a sudden shutting it down because you won't let anything happen.

San Francisco got that way with office buildings for a while; they just shut us down. Too many office buildings. We don't want any more. Well, now they're seeing they let people in. People come because people want to work and live in San Francisco. Good jobs and high-paying jobs. The problem they don't understand is that the high-paying jobs generate good medium-paying jobs. They think that these people—what we're trying to do, get them out of having to live in low-income housing. We'd like to get them up to middle-income housing, and we'd like to give those people access to jobs. Just by raising the minimum wage and saying these people are going to have enough money now to do that isn't the thing. This is an old fight, and it's so difficult. Rent control versus non-rent control. The problem is people live in buildings for a hundred years at ridiculously low rates and refuse to move. "Gee, I got this thing. If I move I'll have to pay real rent." If it was just the fair market, everything would balance down. But when you make things scarce, the prices go up. They don't quite get that.

But we watch that, and I think we have to because we, again, do more work with the government. One of the things that go in cycles. I think two years ago our largest client was actually the U.S. government. It was amazing, the government-related stuff. We, for the first fifteen, twenty years, didn't do

anything with the government, and then we started getting specialty projects with them. We have the Baltimore office, my God, they do all this confidential, high-secret work. The Pentagon and other places, they've got security clearances and all this stuff, and do buildings. They do special buildings for the CIA and all these other people that nobody knows what they're doing. They're just a little room. Part of our office is all sealed off and does all this stuff. Very nice stuff. But we don't know what it is.

We're into places and things that people wouldn't realize that we're doing now. I think I told you, for example, when the new General Motors came, we had a contract to rebrand the entire 4,000 dealerships. One firm, take the whole country, in two years rebranded all of them. Now, in my wildest dreams I couldn't have even conceived that that was a project available. They just came to us and said, "Do it." "Where do we sign?" "Do it." Those are the kind of new things you have to be aware of and look for those opportunities. The trick for us is friends tell friends. When we talk about the biggest global Fortune 500, we are now—I've forgotten. Somebody did this. But we've got like forty or fifty on the global 500 list outside of the U.S., but we'd like to get 150 of them. Who's going to manage each one of those clients, and how are they going to do it? How are they going to speak the language? Language is getting to be a bigger and bigger issue for us. Again, I love the challenge, and they love the challenge. The big thing, hard I think for Americans, is we don't have all the answers, and we don't have all the right answers. Or maybe even be fairer, there are other answers. There's not just one way to solve a problem. I think we'll be a better firm, and I'll be a better person, if I look at things from not just one telescope but a very broad telescope.

Audio File 16

Meeker: Today is the 17th of June. This is tape number sixteen, session eight. This is Meeker interviewing Gensler.

We just talked in broad strokes about the visioning process and turning Gensler into a vision-oriented firm. What I'd like to do now is spend some time talking about what I see to be the major set evolutions of the 1980s for the firm. I see it in two ways. One is the expansion of architectural practice from really focusing on architectural office interiors to full buildings to redesigning airport terminals, many other practice areas, as well. And then the second is actually moving out of strict architectural practice into things such as facilities planning, graphic design, and so forth. Maybe we should first talk about the expansion of the architectural practice. I know that in 1980 you were awarded your first airport terminal, which was the redesign of the San Francisco central terminal into what became at that point in time the SFO International terminal. I don't know if that's a good example for how it expands out.

16-00:01:41

Gensler:

No, it is. I think it's a very good example. Yeah.

16-00:01:42

Meeker:

Okay. Can you tell me how you got this particular job?

16-00:01:46

Gensler:

Sure.

16-00:01:47

Meeker:

And the implications of getting that job for the larger architectural practice of the firm.

16-00:01:51

Gensler:

Well, I had been doing a lot of consulting work, which I didn't call consulting. I was working with people like Cushman & Wakefield, which we've talked about, analyzing other people's buildings and analyzing how the core would work and how things would work. I was doing the interiors and analyzing. Finally people starting looking at us and saying, "Gee, maybe you could do the whole building." I had done a few buildings, and I was really proud of them. There's some very nice buildings. But we were just dipping our feet and toes in the water.

The central terminal building was an interesting process, because we were interviewed for that and won it. I can't remember how I was on the list, but I think because a gentleman named Howard Friedman—Howard's a prominent Cal guy and an architect. He was a professor, and he was married to one of the Haas's. Howard was very close to a number of the board members of this airport. He came to me and said, "Well, you understand how groups of people move and work and do things. We want to do an airport that's different than an airport for airplanes. We want to do an airport for people, and you do great people spaces." An airport, by and large, in some cases is a very great looking space on the outside, but the real emphasis in most airports is on the inside, and rightly so, because you can't see the airport much when you're looking through a window that big. So we made a presentation and we actually won it. I remember sitting in Moscone [Convention Center]. They had the meetings in Moscone in one of their conference rooms. I was a big presenter. I liked to present. I said, "I met all your criteria, and [this is] a chance to do something really special." We got the job, which was to everybody in town's amazement, but I was pretty pleased. Howard had been a friend. He had an architectural firm. He was a friend, and then he was an advisor to that panel that finally selected us.

That job was an interesting one because as we got into the building, it's a rickety old earthquake problem. We'd had some real problems. It was domestic terminal, and internationally—you have all the customs and passport control and things in an international terminal which you don't have in a domestic terminal. We've come up with an idea of what would make a nice

terminal. People in international flights fly for long periods of time, and in those days small tube airplanes. Seven forty-sevens were just maybe coming in. But they were mostly small tube airplanes, flying a long time and very uncomfortable. What could we do? One of the things that I've always felt in traveling internationally is that you come off a plane, you go into a tunnel, and then you walk forever, it seems, to get to your bag claim and go through passport control. It's an awful experience getting there.

So we said, "Well, what if you came down through a garden? You actually went down and there was a nice garden, and you walked along it and there was fountains and things? Wouldn't that be kind of a relief and a break?" And, "Oh, that would be intriguing. Could we do that?" The way it worked out, we could do that. We had a big triangle with a big triangular hole in the middle of it. You walked by that, and then you went into a baggage claim hall. Normally that's a one-story-high oppressive space, not very nice. Ours was not under the main terminal building but out, so we had a big skylight. People who were "meeters and greeters" could look down and see you from above.

Now, the big problem with that is, and the customs went crazy about this, they said, "Well, they could direct them to some—Buddy Joe is in aisle three, so go to aisle three and he'll let you through without checking your bags," kind of thing. That was the fear. So we figured out how to make it so that they couldn't signal and see where the people were in the customs. We finally convinced the customs that we could have this place where meeters and greeters could see the people collect their bags. The other thing is we actually put seats and benches and things in that space so that people, while they're waiting for half an hour till the bags got off the plane, would show up. We made it a nice place. It was airy, and it had palm trees. I know we had fern palms in the main ticketing hall.

We tried to change the experience of an airport because we hadn't done one before. One of my self-pitches at the time was, "Look, I have been in forty-seven or 120 or some crazy number of airports. I know what an airport is, and I know how it works and what doesn't work. I know how we can make it so it isn't just for the airplane but it's for people." We emphasized people, people, people, people. We really believed that, and it's been a tenet of the firm anyway. So it was a very successful project and it got us the—then the next big one was one for Delta down in LAX.

16-00:07:58
Meeker:

Western Airlines?

16-00:07:59
Gensler:

Western Airlines.

16-00:07:59
Meeker:

In LAX.

16-00:08:00

Gensler:

Down in L.A. That was the next one. We got that one, and that was a very nice terminal and really appeared—L.A. It became Worldport. They promoted the hell out of it as the new terminal in the industry.

16-00:08:19

Meeker:

What were the innovations in the Western terminal?

16-00:08:21

Gensler:

Well, again, because there was a terminal there and a pier there, we used some of that. We had some level changes. We built some gardens, and all the restaurants and food service around these gardens, instead of this, again, barren hall. Really opened it up; it was airy and light and beautiful. Nice ceiling and a big open volume space. Again, remember, this is all before TSA ever happened. You could just walk out there. I could go in and walk out there to the gate. It was a very fresh, nice-feeling space. Everything else was dark and gray and just dingy and just eck.

16-00:09:07

Meeker:

Like a bus terminal.

16-00:09:08

Gensler:

Yeah, it was. It was a glorified bus terminal in L.A. LAX is a terrible airport by and large anyway. It's just the way it is and set up. It's a tough place to get around. It's a huge loop and a lot of concrete. So to try and soften it, we really did, and we created a kind of significant front, an entrance that connected to the parking garages across the roadway and bridges. So it was, again, a breakthrough for L.A. because they had nothing they could be proud of. It started us getting into airport work around the country, in which we're now very large.

16-00:09:49

Meeker:

So think about these two projects. What actual material changes or personnel changes within the firm did you have to do in order to allow you to actually successfully pull it off?

16-00:10:02

Gensler:

Well, again, one of the things we did, when we got those, we were doing them with just people here that didn't know a lot about airports. But they learned, they really worked and studied and looked at things. And then realized in the airport world that you really needed people that went to airport conferences, knew the people, the airport directors, followed up all the trends. Ron Steiner joined us. He came in from Bechtel, and he headed up our airport group. We started having more practice areas and started divvying off, saying, "Okay, you guys are responsible for building the airport practice." Airports, if you get three a year or two a year, that's a big hit. The problem with airports is—if you want to practice office interiors, there's a lot of office interiors in San Francisco.

San Francisco's kind of unique because there's Oakland and there's San Jose and San Francisco, regional airports. But most cities have one airport. If you live in Fort Worth, there's one airport. Well, Dallas, Fort Worth, you don't even have an airport. So you got to get that one or there isn't one. Some airports use multiple architects and other things. But those guys are always on the road and they're working. We're pitching Newark right now, and LaGuardia and Mexico City and all these various places. They're traveling. We just got something in Manchester, England. International stuff. We're doing the expansion of the airport in Korea, and we do work in Singapore, the airport terminal five there. We have a lot of really great airport projects around the world. In Houston and Denver and Salt Lake—not Salt Lake City, which we did a big study for and never got built. Oh, God. I'll think of it in a minute. The ski resort. National awards on the airport.

16-00:12:26

Meeker: Aspen or Vail?

16-00:12:29

Gensler: No, it's the other. Down at Yellowstone, right out of Yellowstone.

16-00:12:39

Meeker: Jackson Hole?

16-00:12:39

Gensler: Jackson Hole? Yeah, Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Yeah, it's gorgeous. It's just a gorgeous airport and wonderful. It's all heavy timber; it sort of looks like a big mountain lodge, and it's wonderful.

16-00:12:54

Meeker: Not to mention a redo of terminal two at SFO—

16-00:12:56

Gensler: Yeah, just now, and terminal three, which we're doing now. One of the things we're good at making, when people get off the plane they know where the hell they are without having to read a sign. Where am I? I just was in Las Vegas last weekend, Thursday, but it's like the flavor of the space. There it's [the fact that] the gambling starts at the gate practically. You can't get even off the gate before there's a slot machine in your face. But at least you know you've arrived. You came here to gamble, you came here for the entertainment, it's all right in your face there. That's one way of doing it.

We don't, and historically, have not made the arrival experience the thing. We've always made the departure experience the thing. We're now breaking all the rules and are encouraging people to turn the airport upside down. That means that the departure is on the lower level and the arrivals is on the upper level, which is different; so that when you get off the plane you walk level, you don't go down into the basement. The baggage claim is up where the ticketing hall would be now, and the ticketing hall is a non-experience because everybody has an e-ticket and walks right through it. They check their

bag at the curb. They're going to do self-checking in pretty darn soon and there will be no reason for these big voluminous ticketing halls. So we're turning the airports upside down and putting the baggage claim up on the upper level, making it a wonderful stroll from the jetway through the concourse into the baggage claim area, which is the worst wait that you have in an airport. It used to be in the ticketing hall, but now people are going to go through those ticketing halls. TSA's getting bigger and smoother, so it doesn't usually get hung up there. Anyway, try to make that area better also, make that a more interesting area, the security area. We're working on all these things now.

I made a presentation the other day for Mexico City and said, "Do you guys want the twentieth-century airport or twenty-first-century airport? If you want the twenty-first century airport, you better do our scheme because nobody else is doing what we're proposing." We all agree. I've talked at airport conferences and everybody's, "Oh, that's a really good idea." The problem in most places is their roadways are already in, where in this case it's a greenfield site. There's nothing there, so it gets us to do what we want in terms of the roadways.

16-00:15:26
Meeker:

When you redid terminal two, the international terminal at SFO the first time, was it already two levels—

16-00:15:40
Gensler:

Yes, it was already two levels. We tore down everything from the back of the main building out because it was falling down. Structurally, it was a nightmare. We created an area that went straight out and then fanned into a big triangle. We parked the planes around that whole thing, and got more parking for more planes and bigger planes. We left the main structure, and put a control tower up on the top, which was a little shaky and still is a little shaky because we didn't do all the earthquake work that we'd like to do. We didn't have the money. We had the main ticketing hall, but we fixed up the existing floors and did a lot of reshaping the ceilings and things, but left a lot of it there, and then put a new front in. This time we went in and, again, kept the same volume but took the pier down and built this wonderful, different pier because of not needing this big baggage claim area. The planes came much closer in to the main building. Now they're putting up a new control tower, which one of our designers helped the design build people do.

The kind of experience that I had there, when we had our first visioning session—one of the things that we do is these visioning sessions. We'll do sketches and things, very much like what I showed you before, the firm's vision. We did a visioning session for the airport and we kept saying, "Well, what do we want this airport to be?" The director was there, and a lot of the people in marketing, and some of the people from the airlines. We said, "Don't we want to make it so that when you get off the plane, 'God, I'm glad

I'm in San Francisco.” Certainly when they get on the plane we want them to say, “God, wasn't it terrific to be in San Francisco? I was not sitting in a dumpy awful waiting area.” But we wanted them to come off and say, “Isn't it great?” All of a sudden it became the hospitality feel, so that our model was not other airports; our model was what would you do in a five-star hotel lobby. The idea was how would you deal with food, how would you deal with the bar, and technology. Everybody's sitting there with a laptop or iPhone. What kind of technology do we have, and how do we treat people? Do we just put rows of benches, or do we get comfortable lounge chairs where you can really sit and swivel? These big ones with sort of almost like a hood that give you a sense of privacy for half an hour, an hour if you're stuck that way.

16-00:18:29
Meeker:

And this is the most recent edition, yes?

16-00:18:30
Gensler:

Most recent, yes, the edition that we just finished a couple of years ago. Now we're doing that in terminal three; we're moving that all the way along in terminal three. We finally got everybody who said, “Oh, we can't spend that kind of money,” and the director was saying, “We got enough money. Let's do it right. Let's do it right.” A credit to the city, John Martin, the airport director, has really pushed and allowed us to do the right thing. It wasn't that expensive, but it was more than maybe they had wanted—we didn't exceed our budget. We had eight alternates that we hoped we could get in if the pricing came in right where we thought it would, and we got all eight of them. So the building is really what we wanted and hoped for. The same way with the building we just finished called T3.

I think we really helped the city and the airport, which are one, and we helped the passenger. It was interesting. I came in from Las Vegas, got in about nine o'clock, and said, “I haven't eaten dinner. By the time I get home, I'll be ready to go to bed. I'd really like to have some dinner.” There are a couple of very lovely restaurants there. I sat down and had a lovely meal, got in my car and came home. Now, when do you think you're going to stop in an airport and have a meal? I didn't want a McDonald's, I didn't want a Burger King, I didn't want Dunkin Donuts. I wanted something nice.

16-00:20:02
Meeker:

Well, and the new terminal two, all of the food vendors are local.

16-00:20:08
Gensler:

Local. Yeah. And they're really good. They're putting out good product, and the airport's insisting on it. They're generating enormous amount of additional money, revenue, and the airport shares in that. The airport revenue at T2 has gone up 50 percent from all the other terminals.

16-00:20:32

Meeker:

There is something to be said for that. Usually people want to arrive only as late as they have to in order to catch their flight. But I've noticed myself, and I fly Virgin when I can, and I don't mind getting there a little bit early.

16-00:20:49

Gensler:

No, we realize that. Also, because of TSA, you're never sure how long it's going to take you to get through it; you got to get there so that you can get through the darn thing. I got caught the other day in a place and I almost missed my flight because I couldn't get through it fast enough. But sometimes you just zip through and have extra time. We wanted to have both comfortable places so you could work your computer, food, whatever kind of thing, magazines, whatever you want. It is amazing, the shopping, and the successes. These shops are just doing wonderfully, and the airport benefits by that. The investment in doing it right is great for the passenger, but it's really great for the city because it's improving revenue. To attract the airlines and to keep the number of flights that they want to service our city, we've got to keep our landing fees down. So you offset landing fees by retail revenue, that's great.

The biggest offset is parking, believe it or not. That's where they get the most money from. And retail revenue and landing fees. Landing fees are big. Then they charge them rent for the gates and stuff like that. But it's to keep the landing fees down to a reasonable price. We sit there in meetings and the airline goes, "Oh, you can't spend money on that, you can't spend money on that." When we had the dedication of the new United Continental piece, the American Airline CEO turned and said to his guys, "I want every one of our new terminals to be at least to this level. It's unbelievable. Have them do this kind of work." That's both money and enjoyment to my ears because it's raising the bar, and everybody's got to jump over that one.

16-00:22:56

Meeker:

Now, if all of the airlines will do that inside the plane.

Another expansion of architectural practice, almost about the same time, was really the start, designing and building—or not building but doing the full architecture for full buildings.

16-00:23:16

Gensler:

That actually happened in an interesting way. For example, we made a pitch to KPIX with Gerson Bakar to do a new studio for them. He lost, but they liked me, so they hired me to do the job, which I did. Then KGO came along and we made a pitch with Gerson, and we both got KGO. One was a remodel and one was a new building. We started doing a lot of remodel work. It sort of went from new building—but a lot of remodeling. If you go down and you put a sticker on a map of Union Square, about three-quarters of the buildings around Union Square, in that whole area, we've remodeled at one time or another. Then we did a whole bunch of them down in Fisherman's Wharf area, buildings and remodelings, and then Levi's came along. We got that and

there were some things I won't go into. I shouldn't go into it. But we made Levi's happen.

16-00:24:33

Meeker: Do you mean Levi's Plaza area?

16-00:24:35

Gensler: Plaza, yeah. Why don't I go into it a little bit?

Gerson had access to this piece of property and so he tied it up. He asked me to do an idea. It was originally called Greenwich Square, which I thought was a neat name because Greenwich Street runs right through the middle of it. Versus Greenwich Village, it was Greenwich Square. I'd come up with some ideas. Gerson was on a vacation with the Haass, talking to Wally Haas, and Gerson said, "Gee, would you ever move out of Embarcadero Center?" Wally says, "I've hated it since the day we went in it. They've got me up on the twentieth floor and the staff is down on five and six. It's different elevator banks. I never see anybody. It just doesn't work. I want to see our people. I want to interact with our people." Wally Haas was one wonderful, super man. Peter, his brother, was there; they really ran the company. So Gerson said, "Well, I've got this thing called Greenwich Square and it'd be a great deal." So we started looking at things. Then another architect came in and said, "I'm big time; you don't want this little guy." I think the beginning of it was Mel Swig. Mel stepped in and was saying, "You got to have your big-time architects."

16-00:26:06

Meeker: Like a brand name architect?

16-00:26:08

Gensler: Yeah. And then HOK came in, Gyo Obata from HOK. He had just finished Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. Oh, the biggest airport and the biggest thing and, "I do great work." He's a very charismatic guy. So we had a competition, and we won. We were selected. Our scheme was selected and then Gyo goes, "Oh, that wasn't right." So Gerson said, "Why don't you two guys get together and do it jointly?"

16-00:26:45

Meeker: Who, you and this other architect?

16-00:26:46

Gensler: Yes, HOK. So we started. We were trying to put a fee together, and Gyo went behind my back and said, "The charge for you would be X if both of us do it, but I'll do it for less than that." Gerson took it, and pissed me off something terrible. But it turned out I did the interiors, and then we were given a couple of the buildings. The remodeling of the Italian Swiss Colony building, and we built a data center and they built the three main buildings. We, as I said, did all the interiors for the whole thing. We were there most of the way. Gerson would ask us, "What are you thinking?" So I kept my relationship with

Gerson, and I've still kept it. It's a great project and I'm glad to be associated with it. I should have done the whole thing, but life is that way.

16-00:27:47

Meeker: That must have been sort of a difficult thing because you had already had—

16-00:27:49

Gensler: Oh, it was horrible.

16-00:27:49

Meeker: —a long relationship with him at this point.

16-00:27:53

Gensler: He was still, and to this day, is an apartment guy. He's never been totally comfortable with offices. Then he brought in some partners, and then he brought the insurance company in.

16-00:28:09

Meeker: Because the insurance company financed it?

16-00:28:10

Gensler: Yes.

16-00:28:12

Meeker: And then there were also, of course, the grounds were pretty well-known with Lawrence Halprin.

16-00:28:18

Gensler: Yeah, Halprin. Larry did the grounds. Gerson had dealt with Larry before, because Larry had the offices in the same building as Wurster, Bernardi & Emmons, where I had started. His office was just upstairs. Gerson had used Wurster for Northpoint Apartments and Oak Creek and Wood Lake; they had been closely involved together. Larry's a great guy, was a great guy. Just an amazing landscaper.

16-00:28:42

Meeker: Did you work at all with him on this particular project?

16-00:28:46

Gensler: A little bit, but that was HOK's bailiwick. I was in all the meetings. I was clearly a part of the team and saw what was happening and certainly expressed my opinion, but they were not working for me.

16-00:29:00

Meeker: These local projects are certainly showing a move into the full building design.

16-00:29:06

Gensler: Well, that's the thing. As I say, there's always bumps in the road. This was a bump in the road, that we were really going and we got a chance. If we had lost the competition I would have said, "Well, we lost." But we won the

competition and then, “Well, to be nice we’ll merge two firms,” and then to have your partner backdoor you was not a happy moment. But I’ve recovered, and now Gerson and I are as good friends as you can have. So those are—

16-00:29:40

Meeker: And you work with HOK now, too?

16-00:29:41

Gensler: Oh, I work with them all. Bill Valentine, who ran it for years, is a close friend and a good guy. Bill would never do a thing like that. I don’t know, Gyo was a really aggressive guy at the time. I think he’s mellowed; he’s an older guy now. He’s ninety or something. I don’t know. Maybe eighty-five or ninety. But still marrying young women. He keeps marrying younger women. I think his fourth wife or something. But the big thing is that you get those things. I guess he brought me to tears, because it certainly welled up in my eyes, when Mel Swig said, “You’re not good enough to do these projects.” That really hurt, because I felt I was. And yet, five years, ten years later, I did all Mel’s work. He was going to use some firm out of Chicago who does—

16-00:30:44

Meeker: What, for hotels or—

16-00:30:45

Gensler: Oh, no. Offices and stuff. We didn’t do the hotel stuff. Mel was doing all the office side; he wasn’t much into hotels at all. That was his brother.

16-00:30:57

Meeker: One of the really big full buildings that I understand, at least, that you did was the Wilshire Palisades. And it’s right on PCH—

16-00:31:11

Gensler: Right on PCH, yeah, the highway, yeah.

16-00:31:11

Meeker: —above Santa Monica beach, right?

16-00:31:13

Gensler: Yes. When we went to L.A. we got to know a firm called Ketchum, Peck and Tooley. They were a development group. Clare Peck had Peck Construction, or CL Peck Construction, which was a great construction company. Then there was Stu Ketchum and Bill Tooley, both developers. They had this Ketchum, Peck and Tooley. When we went down there, we went down because it was Ernst & Ernst doing the Bank of America building. Cushman & Wakefield had taken us to L.A., and we formed this firm called Group Three with Selig, Bond & Stewart, Gensler, and JFN, a joint venture company. When we finally realized that wasn’t making it and we got work on our own, we started talking to people. Peck, Tooley and Stu Ketchum said, “You got to hire this guy Marv Taft.” So we hired Marv. Then Ed Friedrichs kept commuting back and forth to L.A. and finally said, “This is crazy. I’ll just move to L.A. and open an office.” Marv and Ed got the office open. It’s

become an unbelievably successful office for the firm. They decided to develop the Wilshire Palisades building.

The best part of the story is it was the first building, high-rise of any kind that the Coastal Commission had ever approved. That was a hell of a plus. The groundbreaking ceremony will never be forgotten, because Lawrence Welk was the owner of the building.

16-00:33:13
Meeker:

No kidding?

16-00:33:15
Gensler:

We were sitting there, and there was a bubble machine with bubbles going up. You're probably too young to remember Lawrence Welk and the bubble machine, but that was—

16-00:33:26
Meeker:

I used to watch this with my grandparents.

16-00:33:29
Gensler:

I'm sitting here looking, "Oh, my God."

16-00:33:34
Meeker:

Did he bring his orchestra for the groundbreaking?

16-00:33:34
Gensler:

No, he didn't bring his orchestra. But he was a very nice gentleman. Very nice gentleman. I think brother or cousin or something, they were the developer. They bought properties, so there's a Lawrence Welk retirement community and a bunch of things. That building has been incredibly successful. It was a real beautiful elegant lovely building, and that got us to a lot of buildings in L.A.

16-00:34:05
Meeker:

Did this really seem like a transition moment, to where you move from interiors and re-dos to—

16-00:34:10
Gensler:

Yeah, I think it did. I think it was probably one of the projects that—people just screamed at me, "When are we going to do real architecture? When are we going to do real architecture, Art?" I always felt everything we did was architecture. Everything was design. And that it would come in time. We started out with a few new buildings, but we also did all these remodelings and renovations and interiors. I think we may have gotten the first Moscone Center around that time, we did that expansion. Maybe that was a little later. But we were doing a variety of buildings, and all of a sudden it started expanding and expanding. Denver started doing quite a few buildings; they did some beautiful really interesting buildings. And Houston got a few. They never got a lot of them, but they got a few. Tony was always trying to, and he

was always not quite there in doing it. But he was a genius. He and Margo are geniuses in interiors.

Now we own the town in terms of new buildings. We build building after building. Multiple high-rise buildings. Seems to be always going on in Houston and the Houston market. It's starting in New York now. New York has a few, and then we went to London and then they got a whole bunch of things, and we got stuff in the Middle East. We struggle with big projects in London. We've got four or five really nice buildings in London, but we have dozens and dozens in the Middle East. Then we went to Chicago, and they're starting to get a whole bunch of buildings up there. And then the China thing—ten high-rises under construction over fifty stories, and there are ten more in design over fifty stories. Airports all over the world, and other major projects. Casinos that are billions of dollars worth of construction.

So we've transformed over a series of steps and stages. Each office has transformed at a different rate and a different time. But we decided, and certainly San Francisco is the original office and would help. Then they didn't need help, and then the next office would come and maybe we'd help, maybe we wouldn't. I'd go down, did a lot of traveling, worked with them on some stuff. As each office matured and developed, they became their own skills in terms of—and they would market the skills they had. Then all of a sudden the client would say, "Well, can you do the whole thing?" and we'd say, "Of course we can," and we'd start taking it on. So people now look at us as—in almost every office but not really every one—being able to do everything. Dallas does all sorts of buildings, San Diego does. Austin does. Boston, my son is doing up there some fabulous buildings in Boston and Pittsburgh, which he covers for some reason. D.C. has a huge architecture portfolio. Each one was developed by some really key people in each office and used the family. Explained to them that they got the whole family. Although they're there, the whole family's going to help them build this. You got a project? I could do that here and bring it back to my office. How can I help you build a portfolio?

16-00:37:57

Meeker:

When we start talking about these larger full architectural buildings, right, in addition to doing the interiors, the exteriors, as well, it sounds to me like most of the first ones are actually starting in the branch offices, L.A., in Denver.

16-00:38:14

Gensler:

In some ways they were.

16-00:38:15

Meeker:

Is that because those particular areas were growing in a way maybe that San Francisco wasn't at that time?

16-00:38:22

Gensler:

Yeah. I think certainly Houston was, certainly Denver was. Denver at that time was so hot. It was sort of Houston, Dallas, Denver, Calgary.

16-00:38:31

Meeker: Yeah. Well, there was oil there, too.

16-00:38:33

Gensler: Oil boom. We got in, and we were involved in some significant projects. Denver west is like Silicon Valley. It's medium-rise and lower-rise buildings. We did dozens of buildings out there, and some medium high-rise. And then things downtown. We did unusual buildings. There's a fantastic, gorgeous—like a clock tower in Venice that's on the main drag. It was just one office on each floor. That was one of these big oil baron kind of guys who have one floor for himself and his office. He'd have rigs out in the boonies, but his office was right in the tower looking up Seventeenth Street.

We've done a lot of unusual buildings that are not just office buildings. Now the whole world is shifting to mixed use, which is making it more interesting and more challenging. But it also plays into our experience, especially in retail or hospitality. So they have a hotel, a retail and an office in it. Now, we also do some with residential, which is a problem for us, but we just do it and the insurance carrier gets carried away. We have very careful rules on what and how much as a percentage of our total revenue we do with residential.

It's this bundling of services. We talked earlier about graphics and starting that. A gentleman named John Bricker was just putting signs on buildings. I don't remember where John went to school, but he came in and started putting signs on buildings. Door names and exit signs, directions.

16-00:40:29

Meeker: Well, that happens as early as 1980 when John Bricker joined the firm. Then from what I can tell, it looks like the graphic design practice—it says was first established in the Denver office by Walter Hunt and John Godreau.

16-00:40:43

Gensler: Yeah. John Godreau. John Bricker was doing it, but we didn't think of it as a practice. And then Walter, who was in the Denver office, got John Godreau. John started saying, "I want to sell it to a lot of things." He was going into some print graphics and some other things. John was very talented. Ultimately became a minister. He got out of the field. But John Bricker just took it off. Then he moved to New York and he's exploded it. He became more in the branding, not so much the signage part anymore. But the whole environment, experience architecture, working closely with our retail people and hospitality people, making really interesting environments for people to do whatever they do in that space. He's the one that forced the name change to Gensler from Gensler & Associates Architects. I shouldn't use the word forced. He enlightened all of us, and it was a good enlightenment that we had.

16-00:41:58

Meeker: I'm interested in the process by which these offices, these new practice areas get established.

16-00:42:06

Gensler: The Skunk Works is probably—I mentioned that.

16-00:42:09

Meeker: What is Skunk Works?

16-00:42:09

Gensler: Skunk Works to us is where somebody like Walter sitting out in Denver says, “Gee, I met this guy and he says that. He might be interesting.” So they start doing it, and all of a sudden the rest of us hear it. Right now in some of the offices there’s two or three landscape architects. We don’t say we do landscape architect, but probably by next year we’ll be!

16-00:42:35

Meeker: How do you determine the viability of those practice areas?

16-00:42:39

Gensler: If there’s one person, we’ve got enough work we could sort of keep that person busy. But when we can see that they could be a leader, that they can generate business, that they can add to our list of services and that we find it compatible, then we’ll decide do we want it in two offices, three offices, four offices, all offices. And other offices say, “Oh, if you can do it, maybe I can do it.” We went two or three false starts in Houston. We have some good people there now, on the graphics and branding side. You had guys and gals who may work and may not, especially in new areas. We’re not afraid to fail; failing may not be the work is bad, just that they can’t make a profit or they can’t run a group or whatever.

I think the work that we’ve been turning out has been consistently solid all the way along, but sometimes you can’t make a profit at that. John was right—actually people get more money for the graphics sometimes. It’s amazing. We get more money for the interiors than we do the architecture in buildings. The interiors we put in our buildings generate more fee revenue than the basic architecture per square foot. Sort of take a building, do the whole building, and then take all of the interior. I can make more money on the interiors of the building than I can on the architecture of the building. You make quite a bit of money on branding and graphics. It’s thought of as a separate package, thank God. They don’t force you to wrap it into the basic fee. And clients like it, because we can integrate it. Like Shanghai Tower, there must be 150 pages of signs in English and Chinese in that building. I think they’re just doing it in two languages. It’s a very interesting field.

But we have other fields that we kind of sneak into, and you get more and more. Some client you have wants you to do it. You start doing it, and then you say, “Well, maybe I got to get some people that have some experience.” You go out and find some people, you bring them in, and then they say, “Well, I can build this.” That’s what sort of happened in the sports team. We got some guys, we had done some sports work, but not very much. A couple

of guys who were with a firm, and they, for whatever reason—I'm never sure what the reason is—they left that firm and went to another place. That didn't go. Somehow they said, "All right, well, we got it now." They came over to us, and they've been very successful since they've been here. I haven't sat down yet with them and said, "Why couldn't you make it in the other two places? You made it here." We supported them in a different way.

16-00:45:38

Meeker:

When you say sports team, are you talking about designing facilities or are you talking about branding of teams?

16-00:45:41

Gensler:

No, sports teams and designing facilities. That's probably our newest, with a group of guys coming in and starting it, it was three guys that came in. They had done Staples, and they had done football stadiums and a lot of stuff, and now were doing all sorts of football stadiums. We designed the stadium. If an NFL team comes to L.A., we've got the stadium all designed for Phil Anschutz. He's just got to get a team and work out the deal with the NFL. It's crazy. We're remodeling the Philadelphia stadium. We're doing four or five of them around the country right now.

At first you think of the professional teams, but all these colleges need facilities—training facilities and spring training baseball facilities—everything from arenas to gymnasiums. We've done a lot of gyms at universities. So all of a sudden we've got a group of people that really are experts at that and they'll say, "Well, geez, I'm tired of running to the East Coast. Let's get some people to work with and we'll put them in the East Coast," and they started building them. That's why the airport group keeps getting expanded. Somebody said, "We got to do an airport group," so we got one in Washington, D.C., with a branch up in New York that works for the Washington group. Why, I still don't know. If it works, it's fine and not, "Well, you can't do that." These people come up with ideas.

One of them that's been successful, not as successful as maybe we'd like but it's been successful, is product design.

16-00:47:29

Meeker:

Could I actually ask you to pause for a second? I want you to talk about the product design. But I guess maybe disabuse me of this notion, if it is incorrect, but it seems to me that the idea of expanding from office interiors to building buildings and then different kinds of buildings is a very logical step for an architecture firm to make. But then starting a design and branding practice, starting a facilities planning process. Then these other areas that are not a logical step for an architecture firm to make, is sort of a different decision making business planning process.

16-00:48:11

Gensler:

We never thought of ourselves as a typical architecture firm. One of the things that I've maybe said on this tape before, but I'm very upset with the U.S., and pretty much the world, where they think of architects as gods. And they did. In other countries, if an architect says, "This is what it's going to be," that's what it is. You're a developer, a client, you have no practical say. It's unbelievable. They are treated like gods. Most of them are professors and do the architecture on the side.

16-00:48:52

Meeker:

They're theorists.

16-00:48:53

Gensler:

They're theorists. We have this registration requirement to be a registered architect; each state registers you. There's also a registration arrangement with the firms. In New York State it is required that every owner must be a registered architect. Well, that's insane. We now have lawyers and accountants and interior designers and all sorts of people that aren't registered architects but are owners. Why should the ownership restrict you? It's all about liability, making sure that you do a good job. But that's ancient history. It doesn't work that way anymore. And I never believed it in the beginning, let alone now, which is so complex. We have corporations that I've owned singly and then contract with the main company and all sorts of stuff just to get around these regulations, a legal way to do it. They're not illegal, but they're just cumbersome and stupid. It's a lack of acceptance of our industry, of what an architect does and should do. Architecture training is much bigger than just doing buildings. They don't even teach interiors. Maybe you have a little side course and you open your Knoll catalogue. That's about it [for] interiors. Now half of the revenue in most architecture firms is in interiors, but they don't give us any training in it in schools. I never bought the theory that this is what architects do.

So I think, What does the client need, and then is there somebody providing that service? In the early days I was competing with furniture dealers. They would have a little design department and would lay out the office for free and then sell them the furniture. The furniture industry is a ridiculous industry, the office furniture world. Where it's all been designed for the decorator. You walk in and that sofa is a thousand dollars, but you can buy it for \$500, and then the decorator buys it for \$500 and sells it to the people for a thousand bucks. It's a stupid system. You can't get an honest price for anything. Prices move all over the lot. I just said, "I'm not doing it." We never sold furniture.

So when we got in, we saw that there was a desperate need in the beginning for facilities management. How do you manage all of this and work this stuff? We got some people that we saw, we'd run into, maybe were working for a furniture dealer and were pretty good, actually did try to do a good job and add value. A client would say, "What do I do here?" and we'd say, "Well, don't go to a furniture dealer. We'll take care of it for you." Each thing came

along as an opportunity and, as you can tell, we're opportunists. We were going out and paying somebody else to do the signs on the building. Well, for crying out loud, let's hire somebody to come in and put signs on our buildings, and if they want, go out and sell it to other people. At times when things were slow, some of our people were going out, for example, in signage and dealing with other firms around the city. Right now they're so busy they can't do that. And it's probably fine. But we did want to keep it together as one group. We didn't want to spin it off.

The one that's probably the most interesting is David [Gensler] found this guy who measures space. He was measuring space for schools in La Crosse, Wisconsin. In Wisconsin, the reimbursement for schools is not always just on pupil count, it's on how many square feet of classroom do you have, and how many square feet of auditorium do you have, and how many square feet of library, and all this. They had to have pretty accurate stuff. Tom Houlihan, a guy, had to start a business of measuring all this stuff for these people so they could fill out their reports. There was another guy up in Westport, Connecticut, who had a business. He figured out the same thing: that nobody knew how much space they had or where they had it. So he started measuring. We tried to merge with him, to buy him.

David, it was when he was very new at the firm. He thought that would be a very interesting thing, because it was more a financial deal and a technical deal than an aesthetic deal. So he went after those guys. Finally he found Tom and has built an enormous business—not so much in revenue, although it's pretty big revenue. But it's a different business for us. When people pay annual fees, we keep all their records. We have major corporations, Bank of America and CitiCorp. There are hundreds of very large corporations that have all their real estate on our system up in La Crosse, Wisconsin. We tell them where their vacant space is, when the leases are due, how they use the space, how to measure it, how to pay for it. Because they didn't know, they didn't have any way of finding out and keeping it. There are a lot of companies that came in with these complicated systems that didn't work. Tom figured out a very simple way. He found something called 411-ware, and he sells a bunch of other services, just like a software service company. We gather all the data. They were trying to keep it themselves, and we finally convinced them, "Let us hold the data." It also gives us the data on 90 percent of the major buildings in the country.

It's a hell of a business. "What the hell are you in that business for?" Well, it helps us, frankly. It gives us information, and it is the power of data, which is the thing that everybody's talking about today. We in the real estate world have the data. We haven't mined it yet very well. We've talked about how we are going to mine it and take advantage of it. It's opportunistic, when we see a client needs something that nobody else seems to be doing, either very well or at all. So program management, we're doing it. Product design have in-house designers but they also use outside companies. Who knows better what the

client wants than us? They would come to us and say, “What does your client want that we don’t make? We’ll make it. You design it and we’ll make it.”

The carpet people came to us first, and we started doing carpet designs. We invented this whole striped carpet tile concept, and then others, all sorts of patterns. Before it was always just to make it look like you couldn’t see the joints. We said, “Well, maybe you want to see the joints, want to read the pattern.” We came up with a lot of stuff and kept expanding, expanding, expanding. I mentioned earlier the LED lighting we have. That light fixture right up there is one of our fixtures. Indirect lighting became much more popular than direct lighting, much softer, and less energy use. A lot of things. We came in with the early designs of pendent lighting fixtures. Now we’re doing LED lighting fixtures. Some of this stuff is kind of useless, door handles and a bunch of other stuff that nobody buys enough of. But we get nice royalties.

We know where good products are. Some of them we’ve designed, and some of them we haven’t. So we’ve taken this word ‘design’ and stretched it to cover an awful lot of stuff. Now we’re talking about real program management and facilities management, which is a whole different thing. Management of the whole program, starting to do more of that for clients who just don’t know how to manage all their multiple projects. We’ll take on the responsibility. We learned that from running MGM, the City Center project. Each project informed us about new opportunities. I think that’s pretty exciting.

Interview #9: June 19, 2014
Audio File 17

17-00:01:15

Meeker: Today is the 19th of June, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler. This is tape number seventeen, session number nine. We are here in his office in San Francisco.

For the two hours today, I think that I'd like to break it up by, in the first hour, following up on a few things about projects, particularly that happened in the 1980s. Some that I'd like to get your feedback on. And depending upon how that goes, but certainly aim for moving into the 1990s and some global expansion questions in the second hour today.

The first question I have is throughout all of your materials, the expansion to do work in Washington, D.C., with the law firm of Covington & Burling is mentioned as a significant turning point. I'm wondering why that is, because you had already done plenty of law firms.

17-00:02:24

Gensler: Well, we'd done a lot of law firms. It's an ironic story, actually. Another law firm, Arnold & Porter, had interviewed us and wanted us to do work in Washington. I'd flown back and we made a presentation. They came out and interviewed us out here, and to see some of our projects. They didn't hire us, they hired somebody else, which was kind of a little shocker. But we got Covington & Burling, which is a really, really prestigious law firm and wonderful people. Just terrific people. We still do all their work for them. They are right on Pennsylvania Avenue, and had a balcony overlooking the road up to the Capitol. It was really a special job. We had a lot of influence in shaping the building and setting it up. They hired us, people kept running back and forth from New York. A gentleman named Chris Murray was the project manager at the time.

One day, Chris finally said, "This is crazy. I'm running back and forth, and we got a whole bunch of other law firms there." They are just really big powerhouse law firms in Washington, and it really set us up in a good way. I think it was also timed a little bit to work with the Mobil Oil job, although I can't really put the dates exactly together. Mobil Oil is more at the end of that process, I think, than the beginning of it. So that was happening in Washington, and we were running that out of New York. But nice to have somebody down there.

The people at Covington were very generous in getting our name around town, recommending us and supporting us. I've always been very grateful. If you're a global company, you want to be in Washington. It's turned out to be great. Chris ran the office for a while, and Margo was back and forth from New York supporting it. It's gone through a series of leaders; Diane Hoskins

now runs it with Jordan Goldstein, who's now the day-to-day manager. Diane is one of the executive directors but also runs the region. Chris Barber is helping Jordan Goldstein.

So it's been a really good office, and they have moved quite aggressively into both architecture and interiors. They're one of our largest offices, and they do work with clients really all over the world. They're doing a campus for Duke University in Shanghai, a whole campus for them. The Duke people got us to do the campus for CP Group down in Bangkok, Thailand. They're very outreaching. They helped us get our connections with the government. We really didn't have much of a connection with the government before. We've ultimately become very close to GSA [General Services Administration], which turned out to be a good thing. We did their headquarters; we've done a lot of work with them, projects all over the country. They've been good supporters and they've used us as part of their research arm.

One of the things it's important to realize is that the GSA really does care about space, and they do care about how people work. They are really the landlord and rent the space, but the tenants are responsible for the way they use and plan it. They really tried hard to work with the various agencies that take the space and that they represent, and do their work in a more contemporary way and use modern techniques and things that we've learned in the private sector. So for once, the federal government is actually doing it right. Unfortunately, they only funded half the project; now it's been held up. They're in a building which is half remodeled and wonderful, and half a building that's big rows of offices, corridors, and everybody hiding behind doors off these corridors. But it's been a great relationship, and I got to know Bob Peck, who was the director of GSA. He got unfairly fired by Obama, horrible situation, where one of the guys worked for him running the western region kept taking his wife and kids to Las Vegas to set up a conference. They went down about four times and spent a lot of time and charged it all to GSA, and I guess Bob didn't catch that. I have since spoken to many GSA guys. Now, Bob, I've asked him to join us; he works for us now. He's head of real estate consulting back in the D.C. office but handles the East Coast. It's great to have Bob on board. I just wish he'd been fairly treated, for his sake, although I think he makes a lot more money working for Gensler than he did for the government.

17-00:07:50
Meeker:

I don't doubt that.

17-00:07:51
Gensler:

He was a senior guy. But it's been a very good part of our network and an important one. Then the thing that's interesting, we had an office in Virginia across the Potomac. That was fine for a while; there was a lot of work going on there. That's a big market.

17-00:08:12

Meeker: Like Fairfax?

17-00:08:14

Gensler: Fairfax and that area. Finally we did it all, and it was a lot easier just to do it all in D.C. But we did open an office in Baltimore. Diane was actually living in Baltimore. Her husband was very active in the state government.

17-00:08:30

Meeker: Was that Diane Hoskins?

17-00:08:32

Gensler: Hoskins, yes. She was living there, had a home there, and commuting down to D.C. every day. Finally I convinced her to buy a place in D.C. and get settled there. Victor, her husband, he's now very active in the D.C. government, and a brilliant real estate guy. Development for the state and promoting development in the city. He's a good guy; the two of them are great friends of mine and my wife.

In the process of opening the Baltimore office, we got a lot of business, and were doing some stuff in Baltimore. We had this unbelievably interesting relationship with a group that does security buildings for the CIA. We have a whole group there that has high level classifications and can do these special buildings that are all isolated from people being able to eavesdrop on them. It's a really wonderful market niche. They are now overseeing, fairly recently, the Philadelphia office. So the Philadelphia and the Baltimore office, they're teaming together. It's interesting how one kicks off the other and then in the other direction.

We were doing work in Atlanta. We got some big banks and law firms in Atlanta, so we opened an office there. They are managed out of Washington. Then one of our guys was in Houston and his family was in Charlotte. He said, "I really want to move to Charlotte," so he went and worked in Charlotte for a while. Then when the B of A, that big client, was bought by NationsBank, we needed to have a Charlotte office, so he came back to work for us in Charlotte. Then recently we got some guys from Raleigh. They got some work in Miami and Tampa, so they opened in Tampa, and now they opened in Miami.

All these things have happened because of Covington & Burling. I talked earlier in the tape about the roots. One of the key roots was the Covington & Burling relationship, which got us to King & Spalding and all these other— King & Spalding's a very prominent firm in Atlanta. We did their headquarters. Again, it's interesting that, for example, King & Spalding went in the Hines Building. We had the same relations, the developers that did the Pennzoil Building. The world keeps circling. And Bank of America, Charlotte and each one of these things has a connection back to some other place.

Luckily, because our people stayed together and we've stayed together a long time, we keep that going.

17-00:11:27

Meeker:

That's interesting. I think a lot of people don't quite understand that law firms do a lot more than litigation. That's especially true in D.C. because a lot of the people working in law firms are also registered lobbyists, so they have close connections to government officials. And a lot of them are former elected officials, as well.

17-00:11:43

Gensler:

They really are. It's interesting to be inside that and see how those connections really work. Covington & Burling and King & Spalding represent foreign countries, negotiating, lobbying with. It's an interesting group of people to spend time with. I found them fascinating and wonderful people.

17-00:12:06

Meeker:

Another one I wanted to ask you about was a few years after that. We've touched on this a little bit, but I'd like to maybe dig down a little deeper because there's some interesting things that happened in the process, and that's the buildout of the new Goldman Sachs headquarters in New York at 85 Broad Street?

17-00:12:28

Gensler:

Yes, 85 Broad.

17-00:12:30

Meeker:

On Broad Street. And it was a massive hulking building. They took over at the time the entire building. Massive job. In reading about it, I understand that Gensler got involved before the final architectural drawings were done.

17-00:12:49

Gensler:

Very much so, very much so.

17-00:12:52

Meeker:

What impact did your company, in doing interiors, have on the overall structure of the building itself? Do you recall?

17-00:13:02

Gensler:

Well, we set the interior standards that were being used in the building. We worked on the lobbies. We worked in one of the spaces, which we had a lot of influence and a lot of changes. There was a major cafeteria in the lower level; that was required before the building started. You get that right. We worked on the core of the building. I've talked about this many times before. We're really good at making the cores. We had a guy named Yee Leung, and Yee was the sort of hidden genius that we had in the back room. He started with Margo in Houston and then transferred up to New York. He was the guy that everybody trusted and understood that he could make things that were like a jigsaw puzzle all come together. He could take the data and say, "We want to put this group here, and this group here, and this group here, and this group

here. Then the elevators should be this way.” He was amazing, how he could rework a building or work a building to make a company’s—and we should have this for expansion, and then we’ll move this to here and this to there. He really was and is—he’s retired now—but really one of the key minds. I mean that in the best way. He was from Taiwan, and he talked with a very Chinese accent. Sometimes it was very hard to understand him. But he was brilliant, absolute brilliant guy, a wonderful guy. A wonderful family and kids and wife, Monica. I’ve been surrounded. It’s an example. I haven’t thought about Yee for a few years, because he’s probably been retired for ten years now. Haven’t thought about him for a long time. It’s nice that you got me to think about him again, because he was an important part. The people at Goldman really respected him and respected the team led by Margo.

I talked earlier, when I used to have breakfast meetings with Margo, and we’d have these meetings with John Whitehead and John Weinburg and the building committee. They were like eight, maybe six people, and they were the brightest people I had met in a long time. They really were thoughtful about each decision that was made. We would show them stuff, and they would think about it carefully. It was a wonderful relationship with them. Skidmore was the architect. We had a very, very successful, compatible relationship. It was nice when Goldman asked us to help them go to London and do work. We still do all sorts of work for them all over the world now, and in New York, and in New Jersey where they’ve got a big facility. We’re always working on something. We really made great strides in these trading floors. It was a time that trading floors were starting to get very active. A trading floor is a very complicated technical space. In those days it was really even worse in that the computers threw off an enormous amount of heat.

17-00:16:26

Meeker:

And you had these massive monitors, right? No flat screens and—

17-00:16:29

Gensler:

Well, they had massive monitors. Many of them, they were little ones, but they had two, three, or four of the little ones. They were just boiling. So you’d have to air condition the space directly to the computers to keep them cool, not either burn up the people or burn up the computers. The wiring. And we put raised floors in. I think we put them throughout the whole building, although I can’t remember whether we just did the trading floors. But, again, so you don’t have ramps, you’ve got to either raise or lower the elevator and the exit stairs. They have to be on the same level, and you got a twelve-inch, fourteen-, fifteen-inch raised floor where you got all this cabling underneath it, and pipes and stuff and air ducts for cooling the equipment. All the air conditioning for those are underneath the floor.

It was a good thing, and then we went on to other very, very major banks, like Morgan Bank, which was an elite, elite, elite bank in New York. I remember Davis Polk was the lawyers for Morgan Bank. Morgan Bank was staying

downtown; they had always been downtown. They had been the lawyers for a hundred-plus years for Morgan Bank. They were deciding to move to midtown, whether they would do it or not. And there was, “How can we leave our major client and be in midtown when they’re downtown?” I remember Margo and I sat in the meeting one Sunday. I flew into New York and they—I’ve forgotten where we had the meeting, maybe their conference room—had all the partners there. It was a vicious vote of should they move to midtown and leave Morgan Bank. When we ultimately did Morgan Bank’s headquarters, again, a wonderful amazing opportunity.

17-00:18:40

Meeker:

Were you called to testify in some way in that meeting?

17-00:18:43

Gensler:

Well, yeah. They wanted us to explain the advantages and disadvantages, the advantage of the space that we could get. It was a unique building. Again, a Hines Building. It was under plan. In that case we were able to put interconnecting stairs, build them into the main building, big, connecting, about six floors high, I think, each one. So they were stacked up all the way through the building. They didn’t take the whole building, but they’d take a good portion of it. Again, we had to create a separate lobby for them on the ground floor so when you go in it’s a separate Davis Polk lobby. They’re, again, another absolute powerhouse law firm in the country, one of the top law firms you ever seen. It’s really important. They’re involved. It turned out the managing partner was the brother of my best man in my wedding, and I happened to know him. But we got the job before we ever put that connection together.

Those people led to other people and led to other people. Again, the building for Morgan Bank had a side piece that was just for trading. It was like 2,000 traders or something, unbelievable. It was just this massive, massive air conditioned box. Just unbelievable thing. All the wiring had to be pre-done and stuff like that. And, of course, the New York electricians union wouldn’t permit—a lot of them wanted to pre-fab in factories and then ship out. Said, “No, no, no. We got to assemble it all on the site.” All these fiber optics. You see these “electricians” sitting there looking through microscopes getting the wire and the connections done, sitting in a totally empty building, an under-construction building. It was bizarre times, but it was exciting and really interesting. The executive floors were magnificent spaces. We’ve had some unbelievable clients that in those days set us up for future successes.

17-00:21:00

Meeker:

How do you manage those tricky situations when you’re brought into a boardroom situation, there’s pivotal decisions being made, it’s clear that there are people on the board of opposing viewpoints and you’re the—

17-00:21:17
Gensler:

Well, I guess it's like being an expert witness. We've got this phrase we use a lot, which is a trusted advisor, and we really believe that. But that requires that we know a lot more than just the aesthetics. We understand the real estate implications, the functional implications, the business implications, the effect on their people. We really work that side. I'm writing this book. It's the emotional side versus the technical side; you've got to understand both sides. You can't just understand the technical, be a great designer and all that stuff. You have to understand the emotional side and the impact of everything. And we do. The technical side for us is understanding the real estate deal, and is this a good deal and is it going to work for you flexibly and a lot of other things. Of course, the group of people that lived up in Westchester, which a lot of them do, the train comes to Grand Central Station, they don't want to get on the subway. They're tired of getting on the subway and going down to Wall Street. Wall Street is great, except it's hard to get to. If you're in Jersey you go from the PATH and in, but the PATH in Jersey is still not an easy train. So a lot of guys and gals wanted to get uptown because the subway was getting grungier and grungier and grungier and literally—

Maybe I've told this story. If I have, don't let it be repeated. But we were hired by Mobil. They were leaving New York, they were just leaving. It was a terrible place to be. The subways, graffiti all over them, they never cleaned them. It was just disgusting. And here are all these multimillionaires having to ride it, because the only way you could get down there without spending another hour getting from midtown to downtown is to get on the damn subway, which gets you down there in ten minutes. So people would do it rather than getting—they could afford a limo to pick them up, but the traffic in New York is such that that's an hour ride at times.

But it's understanding all the factors, and learning how to present those factors to them, not saying, "This is what you ought to do." But, rather, "These are the things you ought to consider," the time and the wear and tear on people of commuting. Sure, the people need to be next to Morgan Bank, but then they're going down during the day, not morning and not in the evening. It's during the day or lunch or something, so they can get down and back. They were seeing that a lot of their clients were finding the same thing and moving to midtown. So there was a period of time when a lot of companies were leaving, and the World Trade Center and all that got going. There were other buildings down there, Chase was down there. It started to pick up a little again. It was a tough time in New York, and people were consolidating in midtown.

17-00:24:27
Meeker:

Another thing about the Goldman Sachs project is that—and I've read this in a few places—in addition to the building committee of the dozen people or so, 250 of the partners and other employees were interviewed about the specifics of what they wanted in their offices.

17-00:24:51
Gensler:

Goldman, at the time we did the first building, was a private company. It was like a big partnership. Really unique partnership. I love this story, experience, because I can remember with these guys that were making—in those days a million dollars was really a million dollars. It was a lot of money. They would pay them maybe \$200,000, and \$800,000 would go into their account as capital in Goldman Sachs. “Gee, but my wife wants a house out at the Hamptons, and we’d like to have a new car. I need a few more.” “Oh, you can live the way you are. You just keep leaving your money and it’ll be much more valuable.” Well, today they’re publicly traded and it’s a whole different animal. So they would go begging on their hands and knees to these guys to get a few extra bucks, even though they were worth on paper all this extra money.

In those days it was very collegial, like a big law firm kind of a thing, an attitude. Everything was spending their money. It wasn’t spending the company’s money, it wasn’t doing things. So they wanted us to talk a lot to their people to really understand what they wanted and what they needed. If I remember correctly, we were taking them out of private offices with solid fronts on them to put them in glass-fronted offices, which was shocking that people could look and see what you were doing. It was a whole different kind of a thing, putting a lot of people out of private offices and into workstations. “Oh, my God, how can I do it? I make a million dollars, and you got me in a damn workstation.” We were trying to build community and collaboration, a lot of things that were starting at that time. They wanted us to go and not just have six people say, “This is what we want and this is it,” but at least give people a chance to learn and talk.

We still to this day like to talk to some of the staff, not just a couple of the senior people who maybe have not been in a back office for a long time, or even the middle offices. See how they work and what they’ve learned and seen. You’ll see. People travel around and go visit their friends in another company. “Oh, gee, I was over there and I saw that. That was really pretty good and he really likes it. We ought to try to include it in our building.” That happens all the time, where we learn about something that somebody on the staff saw someplace else they just happened to be visiting. Especially in the financial world. If you look at a stock that goes public, there are twenty different brokerage firms and investment firms and banks putting the money together. It’s just not one. They’re in each other’s facilities all the time.

17-00:28:15
Meeker:

It sounds like you then sort of played a role, to a certain extent, as the mediator between this very high-level building committee and then, not necessarily the rank and file, but the management level of the company.

17-00:28:29
Gensler:

I think it would be a different word than mediator. We were a communicator of what we learned. We would make recommendations and they would say, “I

agree with that,” or “I don’t agree with that. That’s not the way we see the firm from a leadership position,” and we’d probably go with them. Sometimes we’d say, “I don’t think you’re right,” but sometimes they’d say, “That’s what we’re going to do anyway.” I’m speaking more general, not just Goldman Sachs. Our role is to provide quality information for people in which they have to make a decision. It gets down to fabrics or art work or things like that. You get a select group and you do it, because if you try to get everybody’s opinion you get nobody. You get mush. Especially when you want to do something really, really well.

We work in a world where most people don’t know what they don’t know. So they make their opinions based on what they do know, and there’s a lot of things that have changed since the last time they were involved in something. They may be involved in decorating their house, but they don’t know anything much more than that. So we’re trying to take them to a new level, but not stretch them so far that we break them. That’s a phrase we use around here a lot. The point is that at some point the head guys says, “I don’t like blue but I really like green.” I can go blue, I can go green. Doesn’t make any difference to me personally, because I’m not going to live in it. But if he’s going to live in it and he doesn’t like blue, then you’d be a damn fool to put it all blue. Sometimes it’s a company color, or sometimes it’s just the building, or sometimes the designer is just on a kick that he likes blue and not red. To get that palette of what you want is an art form in itself, of what colors and materials are appropriate for that client. They want to project an image of who they are. Goldman clearly wanted to project a fresh image, but an image that they’d been around for a hundred years and they’re the big dog and the smartest guys. And they are. But they have changed dramatically as a company in the way they deal with people. They are tough, tough, tough people, but in those days they were very polite being tough. Currently they’re not so polite, they’re just tough, but that’s part of business and you accept it. When I first started with them, they were a private company. Now they went public and act like a public company.

17-00:31:24

Meeker:

Another company that you did work with that holds even perhaps a bigger role in American culture than Goldman is Apple. We did talk a little about their technology, and the cable trays and how that was integrated into the workplace. But I’d like you to talk more about doing the buildings down in Cupertino with them in the context of start-up culture, in the context of the concerns that a company like that has. I read that they came to you with all of these sorts of ideas: “Reinforce our corporate culture,” “Give us an informal working environment,” “Give us spaces that users can define,” “Give us a collaborative workplace that sparks creativity and speeds time to market.” That’s a really kind of abstract, wonky list of things to do.

17-00:32:26

Gensler:

It's funny. When you mention those phrases, they resonate with me in ideas. I think that's the way we think. I don't know why we think that way, but that's what we're trained to do. So the built-in flexibility, the collaboration: How can we get people together? In the old days, literally, there would be a department with a wall around it and a door, and it would say 'accounting' or 'sales'. There'd be a corridor, and you'd go down the corridor and say, "Oh, I'm going to go into sales," or go down the corridor into accounting. We've just killed all that. That doesn't exist. I don't think I've seen a sign in anything we've done. I see it in other certain places. But anything we've done that says accounting or something. There may be on the elevator lobby floor, branch accounting or something like that. People are now working this way. They're working together, intermixed with ideas and teams, from teams made up of people from various departments and groups.

I'll go back a little, because it's part of the same story. Went up and met with Gates and the people at Microsoft, and they had made a commitment. Everybody got a private office. It had a glass front, but it was a private office. It came up later that Bill Gates would go to Harvard or MIT and recruit software guys and gals. He would say, "We'll give you a private office when you come to work." Well, it was a time when private offices were going away, so he was hiring using the office as a perk. They had oak doors. I can remember an oak desk and oak frame that held the glass front of the office and all. But miles of damn corridor. Just miles of corridor. Then they'd have a bridge to another building up on their campus outside of Seattle. You never saw another person, and there was no place for everybody to get together. They had no break areas. It just was corridors and private offices. We were doing Oracle down in the Peninsula here.

17-00:35:19

Meeker:

Their major campus right down—

17-00:35:20

Gensler:

Yeah, the campus right here in Redwood Shores. We're doing all open plan. That's the way they had been. They started, and apparently Larry Ellison went to Harvard and MIT, and he said, "Geez, come to work for Oracle, what a great company. We're going to build a new campus," and people were saying, "Do I get a private office?" So all of a sudden the call came. "Oop, whoop, whoop, whoop, big time-out. Change! Everybody change, stop everything." We had to convert a whole bunch of open planning to private office so he could say, "I can compete directly with Microsoft." Now, Apple was never quite—

17-00:36:03

Meeker:

This was in the eighties, yeah.

17-00:36:04
Gensler:

Yeah. Apple was a little different. Apple was always open-plan, but pretty high work station panels. Six-foot panels. They were interesting in that they were interested in space, how it functioned and worked. They were in what are called the Bandley buildings, which are little one-story tilt-ups down in Cupertino. God, it was awful. They had just sent the Lisa off to Texas to be manufactured. When it got there, there were all sorts of problems. Steve kept saying, “We got to have prototype manufacturing on our campus. I can’t hire people because the housing cost is too much, so we got to have housing on the campus. I want to have housing and manufacturing and all the research office space together.” I can remember a day that I chartered a bus and took him a whole bunch of places seeing things, mostly sites that they could put a campus. One of them was the site where Oracle is. Steve said, “I don’t want to move that far up the Peninsula. I want to stay in Cupertino or south.”

They actually bought a piece of property down near Morgan Hill. It was just before you got to Morgan Hill. IBM had put a software center there. They bought a big piece of property, but they never moved there. I don’t know whether they still own it or sold it or what. Steve said, “I want the parking lot here, and I want our people to walk right through the manufacturing and see what’s going on and understand that what they design has to get built.” Apparently there was a great disconnect between what they wanted built and the design and the integration of the whole thing. The box was just something over here, and the software was over here, and the two of them weren’t meshing at all. Steve was so obsessed about aesthetics. We did some sketches and studies. I remember working with him to try to get—so you’d walk through manufacturing. He said, “Now we got to have housing.” I said, “Geez, Steve, I don’t know where we can find a site that’s zoned for housing and manufacturing and office.”

17-00:39:00
Meeker:

In Cupertino.

17-00:39:01
Gensler:

In Cupertino. There’s not a lot of those available. Then he got some buildings and we started doing some stuff. They got the manufacturing sorted out, so it was working. Then Sabrato I think built that campus for them, and we did a lot of the interiors.

17-00:39:24
Meeker:

The one on De Anza Boulevard?

17-00:39:25
Gensler:

Yes. We did a lot of work for them on that, and then Steve got fired. But the early stuff was color, open spaces, collaboration spaces, flexibility to change and modification and—

17-00:39:44

Meeker:

When you're given those general directions, how did you and your people turn that into lived reality and Euclidean space?

17-00:39:54

Gensler:

One of the things that has always fascinated me and one of the things that I'm convinced we should provide, but we don't and nobody does, is a manual of how to work in the space that we design.

17-00:40:07

Meeker:

Oh, interesting.

17-00:40:08

Gensler:

I've always thought it was a really good idea, but I've never gotten anybody to actually make it happen. When a designer is sitting there and is drawing and, "Well, over here I'm going to put a cluster of flexible collaboration things and that's the way we would use it, and they could roll that chair over to that table, and then this table could combine into these three tables, into this kind of configuration." So a user's manual about why the interiors have been designed. I think we've all come to the conclusion, it's sort of like the user's manual in a car. It's this thick and nobody ever looks at the darn thing. People do what they do.

17-00:40:51

Meeker:

Intuitively.

17-00:40:53

Gensler:

And move things around and change things, and technology's changed. We do think about all these things. In our minds, when we're drawing and planning, we'll put this block here, and then people will move by and see these people. The old days, all the decisions are made at the water cooler. Now it's the coffeepot. But it's this interaction that we were trying very hard to create. Unanticipated opportunities is my favorite phrase. Meeting people and bumping into them, and trying to see if you could come up with something that had—in the case of Apple, really low-cost fit-outs. They were pretty basic stuff. They weren't like a Goldman where they were using fine woods and plush carpets. It was pretty much minimalist design work, but it was using color in a very bright way, and furniture—contemporary, very contemporary. Very contemporary furniture and accents. We were trying to reflect what we saw in their ads. That was the days when the Apple logo was a rainbow of color. We'd take those colors and use them in various ways. Our designers hit something that they felt comfortable with; they had some good facilities people. We kept cranking out facilities for them. They would use other people, and we'd kind of push each other.

17-00:42:41

Meeker:

For instance, these collaborative spaces, did you get feedback eventually that they were being used as they were intended to be used?

17-00:42:46

Gensler:

When you work with a client again and again and again, you go and visit the space. You look and see, you watch. The first one, you do some stuff, and then you got the next one coming up. Before you go back to start the next one, you go back and look what happened to the first one. If you see they've moved things all around and rearranged them, you go talk to the people and you say, "Well, how are you using it?" They say, "What are you talking about? We don't do that." "Have you ever thought of doing that?" "Oh, gee, no. Maybe we ought to try it." It's that way at times where you've worked on something and you've figured out this drawer is here for this purpose. Then you find out that nobody's using this drawer for that purpose at all. It gets down to that level of thinking. In that drawer versus those are big file cabinets, and this is a series of drawers and another file cabinet. Whoever designed this piece thought that I would be using it that way. Well, I'm using it because that's the way it is, but if I didn't I'd have more file cabinets and less drawers. That's the way life is. You also try to see that. Then the next job you do this. The advantage of doing ten or fifteen or twenty projects for somebody like Apple, each one is built on the last. You learn, and the facilities people get feedback. "Well, who the hell came up with this stupid idea?" So the next time we don't try that stupid idea, we try some other stupid idea.

The trick for companies, they used to want to bid everything, just go with every different person. What they found out is that they were reeducating a firm starting from ground zero with every new person they brought in. The fact that they got a cheaper fee [didn't turn out to be cheaper], because it took so much of their time to reeducate the person. Where with us, we said, "We know what you need and what it costs us to do it, so we need this much. The other guy doesn't know what it costs, so he's going to get it out of you some way. You might as well stick with us." So people stick with us because it's not about us, it's about the client. We're not just trying to do our little thing different every time. We build a kit of parts for a company and a set of standards for a company. We do a lot of that work, where we set up corporate standards for them, and then we modify it and adjust it and adapt it. In many cases, it's really interesting, some of them go national and some of them go global.

They're quite different overseas than what we do here. Davis Polk, we did their offices overseas. They said, "Well, we want this acoustical tile ceiling." I said, "They don't have that in London." And they said, "But that's what we want." I said, "But they don't do that in UK." "You didn't hear me. That's what we want." So we had to ship stuff over. It arrived there and then, "What do we do with this stuff?" So we want to be consistent. Then the other guys, Goldman's guys, Margo went over, and that was an interesting example of the other thing. "We don't want to be like New York. We're international. We're much more up and hip, and we want this hip stuff. I don't give a damn what they did over in New York. We're the international headquarters for Goldman

and we're different. If you guys are just going to rubberstamp the New York stuff, get out of here. We don't want you."

17-00:46:50

Meeker: Interesting.

17-00:46:51

Gensler: We're stuck between the two of them, trying to understand where's our loyalty and how to maneuver that. We had a good enough relationship with the people in New York to say, "Hey, wait a minute. They may have some points here. We know you are the ones that recommended us, brought us over and all that, but these people are telling us some things different." So they helped modulate and moderate how we addressed it, some of the things that they felt needed to be the same and those that didn't need to be the same.

17-00:47:28

Meeker: I'm curious. One last Apple question: Did you notice a difference in the culture of Apple when you were working with Apple under Jobs versus Apple under Sculley?

17-00:47:37

Gensler: We never worked with Sculley. Sculley never did one thing on facilities. When Jobs left, they just stayed in their space. To my knowledge, they didn't hire anybody. They didn't change anything or do anything different. They just sat. It went like it was in limbo from the facilities point of view. I never talked to anybody from the time Steve left until the time he came back. I don't think anybody did, to my knowledge.

17-00:48:05

Meeker: That actually says a lot of itself, I think. There are a couple of transformations that are happening in the 1980s. One is actually the suburbanization of workplaces. Obviously the Apple campuses may be an example of it, but maybe a more extreme example would be something like the Prudential building in Westlake, where you're not doing an urban infill project where there's limitations.

17-00:48:40

Gensler: Yeah. You're out there in the middle of nowhere.

17-00:48:41

Meeker: You're kind of out there in the middle of nowhere. It's a striking building. The interior looks like a shopping mall. Lots of open spaces.

17-00:48:52

Gensler: It was a wonderful project.

17-00:48:53

Meeker: Yeah. It's beautiful. Open, flexible. You were even developing new desk systems. This is the one produced by Knoll, the Hannah system, I guess. I wonder if there's anything that you have to say about the difference of

projects where there's no physical boundaries per se and perhaps zoning is not as strict.

17-00:49:21

Gensler: Well, it's not even that. I had an interesting discussion yesterday, but I'm going on the exact topic.

17-00:49:30

Meeker: Sure, go for it.

17-00:49:31

Gensler: Some people came in from the Research Triangle down in North Carolina. They have seven thousand acres, and they have a series of large campuses by major companies. Each one sits in a big grassy area. It's all beautiful, and you drive by it, boy, this is the most idyllic lovely place to be. My guess and my belief is that most corporations have found that it is not a very creative place to have your people.

17-00:50:07

Meeker: What, these sort of university-like campuses?

17-00:50:11

Gensler: Well, because on a university campus there's a lot more stuff that supports the campus. There's a college town right around it. Literally in seven thousand acres there's not one restaurant, not one gas station. Laundry. There's not a Starbucks, there's nothing. They came to me and said, "What do the kids today want?" I'll come back to that.

So when we did these facilities out by themselves, they became kind of all-encompassed. They had their own everything, and some of them had certainly major cafeterias rather than having the people go out and use the community's facilities. They had stores, company stores and all sorts of stuff. Even some had little hospital health things; larger ones, we did Mobil's, had the whole health facility. Couple thousand people, so they gave them physicals and did blood draws and all that right there on the campus. So you didn't have to leave for any reason. You drove your car. Literally, in the seven thousand acres in North Carolina there's not one house, one living place. Everybody has to commute from Raleigh or Durham or Charlotte to get there. It's very successful. Very successful. They're thinking what do they do next, and urbanization of it is increasing so they're asking me how do we go about doing that.

I think what we're finding right now, and I will tell you this story of Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley started. There were start-ups, and then they grow. HP was down there, and Bill and Hewlett Packard sat in the open—they didn't have a personal office. They sat in an open workplace. We literally redid the first building recently. I'm going to go down and see it tomorrow. The first building that actually had offices for the executives.

17-00:52:22

Meeker: For HP?

17-00:52:23

Gensler: Yeah. They had none. For HP. So it started down there. Oracle was down there, and then you had Intel and all those guys, they were all there. They wanted to be near Stanford, that was no question. Because they were getting their research from the Stanford people and some Cal people, too. But now all of a sudden this generation, the millennial kids, want to live in San Francisco. They want to be where the action is, and this is where the action is. The problem is those places are you go to them, you work, and you go home. These kids don't have a home. Five of them live in a house. It's like fraternities and sororities all over. And they want to ride their bikes. They want to take their dog, which is a little bit easier in the Peninsula than bringing a dog into San Francisco and having him up on the thirty-third floor of a building. That doesn't work out real well. But today they want to figure out how to do that in the city, and I think that there's a dramatic shift happening. Google's in this complex. Facebook's looking for space in town.

17-00:53:55

Meeker: Salesforce is building that huge—

17-00:53:56

Gensler: Salesforce, yeah. I'm actually surprised they're doing that. Because although we do all their work and so I'm delighted, I think to put them on 25,000-foot floors and 20,000-foot floors is not going to turn out to be the smartest thing they ever did. But that's a decision they made, and they didn't ask me.

17-00:54:17

Meeker: Why do you think that is?

17-00:54:18

Gensler: Because people communicate better horizontally than vertically. I'll keep walking. I walk around, I do a loop around this office two or three times a day. Manage by walking around. But it's not manage, it's observation and interaction and bump into people and, "Oh, God, I was looking for you." I like to talk face-to-face, so that's why I walk around. Ideas get created and generated that way. So I think bigger floors are going to be better. The young kids today don't want marble lobbies or granite floors and sleek this and sleek that, and some modern art piece on the wall. There was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* last week that said this is the open-ceiling, no-ceilings generation. They want to see ducts and pipes and sprinkler heads. That's what they are comfortable with. Concrete floors are just fine with them. Scatter around a few rugs like we got here. We were too cheap to put carpet in, and we found out that we were really hip because if you go around you'll find there's no carpet in a third of it. Our people want it that way, and our people are part of the technology world.

So the company's now in the places like Apple and others set up, and they were trying to figure out, "How do we get together?" Now Apple is a little more, but all the tech companies do have a sense of security that is really quite high. They don't want anybody knowing what the heck they're doing. So that is the counterpoint to being in the city and being open and having people wandering around, having lunch with competitors and talk. "Oh, what are you working on?" "Well, I got this switch that I'm working on." "Oh, wow." And then go back and say, "Those guys are working on a switch. We don't have a switch like that. We need to have that," and all of a sudden—and that's what happens.

Steve was very much about security, and the whole concept of the donut that Apple is building right now is all internal-focused. It's not outward-focused; it's focused on that hole in the middle. Now, that hole in the middle is something you can drop Candlestick Park in the middle of it, believe it or not. It's a huge goddamn building. I don't think the communication between groups is going to be worth a damn, but we'll see. A lot of us think it's the stupidest design. Beautiful building, but stupid design for what you want to try to accomplish. We're doing a building with giant floors, 300,000-foot floor plans basically, broken up. But a thousand people can keep moving around.

17-00:57:25
Meeker:

What client is that for?

17-00:57:29
Gensler:

Nvidia. It's just a different attitude. Clearly these kids want, and brilliant people, they just have a different mindset. If you're a lawyer or you're an accountant with Ernst & Young, they think about their space and how they use it. They work. "Techies" come in at noon and work till 2:00 in the morning. And if you're on an isolated campus and there are three of you there, that's not real good. Who left the door open and broke the security and all that. The lights are all turned down at certain time of the day. The air conditioning goes off. You were just talking about the air conditioning in your own place, it shuts off at 5:00. But in the city, heck, they'll go down and sit in Starbucks and work if that's what has to happen. Or they can get out and go down to do things and see friends, and I'll meet you at 10:00 and have a beer. They're hardworking. This millennial group is a very hardworking group, very bright, very committed to doing a good job, but they don't like the idea that they're not interacting with other people. They want to get right to the health club and meet girls, and girls want to meet guys and all those kind of nice things that happen.

A university campus has the athletic facilities and other things. So there's a lot more of that opportunity if you just take the strict office space and things that you need in a remote campus. I think it all started because first it was a lot less expensive. People could live fairly nearby, so the rents and the building space, the rents in the space for housing was much less. So everyone went there. But

I think now, as you can see, the whole fight in the city, by the city getting gentrified and pushing people out, because those people are making decent salaries and they're saying, "I want to live here. What's it cost? Okay, I'll pay it." There's a war going on in San Francisco housing because of it. But they'll come here. They're going to come here because the action for them—after work, there's stuff on the streets going on.

Audio File 18

18-00:00:00

Meeker:

This is Meeker interviewing Gensler, this is tape eighteen, session nine, the 19th of June, 2014.

You wrote an introduction to an exhibit at the National Building Museum. Right now there's this kind of appreciation for speed. You think about the title of the magazine *Fast Company*, and it's a recognition that things are changing and that people have to keep up. So the conversation is mostly about how do you keep up and how do you then even surpass the current wave, right? But you in this article wrote about your concern about fatigue around too much change, what you described as "churn." I wonder if you can describe what you meant by this and how it's impacted the work of the firm. Did I get it right, first of all?

18-00:01:07

Gensler:

Yes, you did. No, you did fine. I think it's an interesting topic, because projects are very short. What you're going to do next is maybe unknown, and the organization you're with or whatever you're working on may not be there tomorrow. So we were seeing companies that were hire and fire, hire and fire. We were seeing people that didn't know where to sit in their desk. They didn't know. They're not assigned seats. We were seeing people that, "Where do I hang my kid's picture? Where do I do this?" The technology in those days was not in a position to keep up with what we are today. A cellphone—I'm not even sure the cellphone existed at that time, but certainly if it was it was a big damn thing that nobody had—a few people had, military. Obviously today you don't need a landline phone. You can live off a cellphone. I think probably landline phones will be dinosaurs pretty quickly, and we'll all just live off of our cellphone. We couldn't transfer, move around and stuff. So if I move from this desk to over there, somebody had to come in and pull my wires and move that. They couldn't just press a button. I right now can punch in five codes and get anybody in the world that's worked for Gensler. Those things didn't happen.

[paragraph deleted: repetition]

We were trying to figure out how we could create what we called universal planning, that would be flexible enough that people could adapt to churn without all the physical movement that churn created. We were

recommending to companies that they have a series of preset things that were designed not just for Suzy who was a secretary, but they could add another analyst in that space, or they could have a researcher in that space, or they could have other work. So there wasn't the secretary's office that was designed five-by-seven, and somebody else that had eight by twelve, and each one's setup. We were trying to get people to have more uniformity and flexibility in each one.

I worked with the furniture manufacturers so that if I have more files, I could come in and clip on to the wall more files. If you had more need for bookcases, I would come and clip on bookcases. There was a basic framework and then these add-on parts that would change the way your space that you were working in worked. That was to adapt for this churn that was going on, where people were moving and changing and shifting. The teams were small. We were doing all sorts of things where you'd have a team of people in the center core hub, there were tables and chairs, or they'd roll all their chairs from their workstations into this central hub. It was an interesting time when the Steelcases, the Haworth, the Herman Miller's, the Knoll's, they were trying to figure out where was this going. There were conferences and conferences and meetings and meetings about where is this all going to settle in.

It's interesting that in the last probably two or three years, literally all the walls have come down. Now people are working at big long benches, and it's shocking to me. If you go in one of these other companies, people used to need a whole table for drawings and all sorts of stuff. Now they need a place for probably two screens and a keyboard. They don't need storage, they don't need things. Maybe a little barrier that separates you from the guy sitting across from you looking at you, and there's no barrier between the guy down here because maybe your guy that needs two stools—you get two spots, or maybe three becomes four. You each give up a little or expand a little depending on how it is. But it's universal design, because what we were finding is by the time you plan it all out, you get it built and they move in, maybe at the best six months and sometimes a year in large projects, the people that you planned for don't even work for the company anymore. The departments and groups that you thought, they're not in that business anymore. So you're all of a sudden moving people into space that was really customized for that particular group. The rework. Half of our job was reworking what we had already done. We'd done a good job, it was just for the wrong purpose, because it wasn't current.

So we've kind of opted for this new universal approach. For example, in a totally different but very similar way, the evolution of law firms. The senior partner got fifteen by twenty [feet]. The partner got fifteen by fifteen [feet]. The associate got ten by fifteen [feet]. The paralegal got eight by eight [feet]. And the secretary got five by eight [feet] or something like that, let's say that.

There was one secretary for every partner and one secretary for every three associates.

Well, the secretaries are almost gone in law firms now. The partners and all the people just type it themselves. They go and pull a standard form and modify it and that's it. If they have something, then they've got a secretarial pool or something. But the secretaries don't get you coffee anymore. I don't mean that flibly, but that was a different era and different time. The biggest thing took space, and we had to spend a fortune putting in steel beams to support the libraries. The weight of the libraries was such that it was more than the dead load that you should put in a building. So before they moved in you had to put big steel beams and things in. Put in the library. Now the library's like, "Here's some old books that makes it look like a law firm." Nobody uses the damn things. Every book is online for them. The old guys like me still want to look at a book and see what is there. But 90 percent of the people now, they're much more comfortable just opening it up on the internet. The world has changed in those standard things.

Now we find everybody's in the same sized office. There are not partners' offices and associates' offices. There's a row of desks here. Even some lawyers are in the open-plan now, and the secretaries and the paralegals, there's a series of places for them to sit. Suzy is this guy's secretary, so she's got to be here so he can see her and wave to her to come in. This relationship I have with Belinda [Presser], you've seen where I wave to her and we communicate back and forth. She listens to what I do, so she has an idea of what I'm doing is old-school thinking. But I'm still part of it. There are a few of us dinosaurs around. So you have to respond to this. We've tried to come up with universal planning, and can be tweaked when they get there, but it's not the way it was. I had to have everybody and their name and I could literally say, "Suzy's going to sit there and Joan is going to sit there, and Ted and Tom are going to sit in these two offices." We spent hours on that in the old days.

18-00:11:21

Meeker:

It's interesting. The solution to churn then is the simplest solution possible, which is in some ways—not to say “no solution” in a glib way, but not one of these complex academic solutions like what the Germans tried to come up with.

18-00:11:37

Gensler:

Yeah. For me it's a fascinating evolution of our industry. I think we've been leaders at it, and we've made a difference. I think that's why we're so respected by the industry and why we have so many clients coming back. For us, the challenge is always to keep ahead and thinking of new ideas. That's one of the reasons I like doing small projects, because you do lots of small projects. You say, "Well, I just do a large project." Because the small projects turn around fast. You do them, they move in, you find it doesn't work or it

works. Rather than taking a very large project, doing something, and finding out it doesn't work. But if you're going to fail, fail quickly. Maybe I told you, but I heard a lecture from Google guy the other day. He's head of Google X, and his mission is to fail quickly. Occasionally they can't make it fail, because they keep finding better and better solutions and they keep moving. But he said, "If you're going to fail, fail quickly. Get that idea out of the way. Let's go on to the next one."

It all goes back to the rate of change. It goes back to the time that is available. In the old days, people would plan a year, year and a half in advance. "We're going to do this." We'd lay it all out and plan, and they'd build a building, and then they'd move into the building. It would be two years, something like that. Now they want space immediately. We now do, for many office buildings, predesigned offices. We kind of know who the tenants are going to be in the building, and we design space for them to just move in, where they don't have to do any thinking, they just move in. The furniture may be there, furniture may not be there. They rent it or they don't. Whatever they do. But they want it tomorrow. It's a different world. It's been fun, it's just a different challenge. To me, I'd be bored to death if I was doing the crap that I was doing forty years ago. It wasn't crap. Then it was real damn good. But if I look back on it I'd say, "Why would I ever have done that?" Because I didn't know any better. That was the best that was being done at the time. We've been a major part of moving it from step to step to step, and God knows where it'll go now.

18-00:14:09
Meeker:

Well, let's then move on to maybe the biggest story of the last twenty, twenty-five years for the firm and that is the global orientation. London office opens 1988, Tokyo and Hong Kong '93, Amsterdam 2001. Shanghai 2002. Dubai 2007. Beijing 2008. Abu Dhabi and Singapore 2009. Bangalore 2012. Sydney 2014. I probably left out a few of them. That's pretty amazing over the course of twenty, twenty-five years.

18-00:14:39
Gensler:

To open the London office, I think sixteen or eighteen people were transferred there from all around the firm. We hired a few local people, but all the decision-makers were Gensler people. We really struggled finding people that wanted to work the way we worked. We probably struggled trying to understand in London how the Brits work. They do have a different system and a different approach, which I knew about and tried to explain to our people. But they kept saying, "But why would you do it that way? This is the way you do it."

18-00:15:30
Meeker:

So there's a culture clash. There's also sort of a methodology clash.

18-00:15:32
Gensler:

Yeah. They're a little more laid back, little longer lunches, and the clubs and the things. They would say, "I'm a contact guy. I don't really do anything, but

I go to the clubs and have lunch and then I bring a person in.” We do work for them. It’s all very chummy and friendly. We like to be friendly and we like to be chummy, but we’re let’s get on with the business. It still was a dilettante thing. London was interesting also, because right at the time that we went over there, there was a rash of architecture firms going public. Everyone since has gone bankrupt as a public company.

18-00:16:25

Meeker:

U.S. architecture firms?

18-00:16:26

Gensler:

No, no. London. London architecture firms were going public on the British stock exchange, and partners were getting big money to sell their company to the public. The economy and our industry is like this, and they tanked. So we were asked to team with a local firm for a while to do the Goldman stuff, which we did. They were all right, but they at least taught us, when our guys and gals worked with them, how to work in the British systems and things. We were in feet and inches and they were in metric, just for openers. Anyway, it started to work, and we got other clients. We got a few buildings, and it just started snowballing. Some of the original people left. Quite a few of them, actually, and we brought a lot of the people—they went over on two- and three-year engagements and enjoyed it, had a wonderful time, and then came back to the States. Most of them came back, rejoined us. Some of them stayed in London and have done their own thing. I suppose twelve or fifteen, sixteen are back with the firm somewhere.

It required us to figure out how to work in an international mode. Margo got the office started, but she was still in New York. I’m trying to think who was actually running the office at the time. Then Tony Harbour, he was a Brit and he was running the Houston office. Houston was not doing well, and I think he just wanted to get out. Houston was in one of its downturns. He kept saying, “The people that are here are really in great shape. They’re going to run it well,” which wasn’t the case. They were great people, but they didn’t know how to run an office or generate business or lead a team. So we had to make a major, major shift in that.

18-00:18:43

Meeker:

Did you close the Houston office?

18-00:18:43

Gensler:

No, no, no, we didn’t close, but we had some real tough times. I finally went down and said to all the people in the industry, “Who’s the best guy in town?” and they said, “Well, Jim Furr. He sold his company to CLS.” No, not CLS, another company. Neuhaus & Taylor. But he would be the perfect guy. So I called him up and said, “Let’s have dinner.” We did, and made a deal. He left his own company, which he sold. They were a big engineering and architecture company. He was the interiors group for them. Jim has done a phenomenal job of getting us to where we are. He’s just about to retire. Not

right now, but in a little while. He stepped off the board and the management committee and other things. This was his last meeting, the last meeting that we had. But he'll be still around. He's moved regional leadership to other people and the local individual offices to other people. So it's a good transition. The same thing happened in London, that they started seeing things slowing down.

Chris Johnson, and I to this day don't know how, he got some connections in the Middle East. He may have gotten them through people he met when he was at Skidmore before he joined us. He kept those connections, and he started going out to Dubai when it got really hot. He made a connection with a few really key players out there and got quite a bit of work for us. He's a very good designer. He's an okay manager. He's not the best manager. His strength is design. Then David went over, my son, and helped him and Tony. Tony came in one day and said, "I'm retiring." I guess he was sixty. Yeah, I guess it was sixty years. It shocked me because he was one of the three, four board members. Tony Harbour, very involved. His parents had died fairly late in life. He had a brother who died early, and he was worried about his health and a bunch of things. He had made some money, so he all of a sudden retired. He had been working over there and running it and doing a good job. And then, as I said, David went over and helped the business side of it and got involved and spent three years there. Chris and David had started building it up.

Then they decided that there were opportunities on the continent of Europe. We did a lot of research and found out that it was better to go to Amsterdam than any other place. The problem with the continent, because of customs and everything else, you can't leave in the morning and come back at night. You got to go and spend the day and spend a night and then come back. You have to go really the night before, get up in the morning, have your business all day, and fly back the next day. But you can't do these—

18-00:22:11
Meeker:

From London to the continent?

18-00:22:12
Gensler:

From London to the other places. It just doesn't work. Going to Germany or France or other things. We have one young lady who was interested in Paris, Debbi Baron. She had done a good job for us and she said, "I'm moving to Paris, I want to live there." We were doing some work for Disney on the Disney Park Paris for the offices and all that, some buildings there. So Tony spent all of this time trying to get us into Paris. We spent a fortune with a legal firm trying to understand Paris. The French are just totally different, the way they work. They have a Bureau D'Tous and a bureau something or other and architects. It's just broken up totally different. It's complicated as hell, and expensive, and they make it impossible to try to open up and run a business there. But we finally did. We never had an official office in there, but we had people there, a couple, two or three. They were run out of London.

Then we said, “Well, Amsterdam, you can get anywhere. If you have an office, you can get anywhere in London, get back in Amsterdam, take a train there quickly. It’s all kind of central.” It’s a lot easier with their employment laws. Well, that was maybe the best place, but when we decided to shut it down, it became a nightmare for us. You can’t just lay off people in Europe or in London. It’s incredible what you have to pay them to go away. It may be a year’s salary. Break you financially.

18-00:24:02

Meeker:

So it’s against the law to lay off?

18-00:24:06

Gensler:

Just lay off people, yeah. And close an office. You have to give them a year’s notice or something like that. We got to the point where we want to close it, because we were going nowhere. We had one client, I can’t remember who it was, but finally we ran out of opportunities with that client. It was a big insurance company, if I remember correctly, and doing a lot of work. We were doing some other minor things. There was a potential there. There was a lady running it, and she got really squirrely. We had to struggle with her to let her go. We were trying to be very fair, but fair is fair. In hindsight, London ain’t much better. If you lay off more than like 10 percent of the staff, you have to have an employee counsel and then they go through this whole process of interviewing all the employees and determining, with the help of the employees, who you can lay off. Well, that doesn’t work.

18-00:25:13

Meeker:

Presented with this, my guess would be that you would decide that let’s just stick to the United States, there’s plenty of work. We don’t need to be that big.

18-00:25:23

Gensler:

Geez, it’s fun to work internationally. It is. It’s fun. One of the things that’s interesting, we really were able to do some fabulous work. Really great projects and really interesting projects.

18-00:25:34

Meeker:

How was that different than the United States? The clients have a stronger sense of design or—

18-00:25:37

Gensler:

Yeah. The clients are a little more conservative here—[in Europe] they’re much more aesthetically interested in experimentation and trying things. They stretch your mind, they really do. They don’t take just an ordinary solution. They want something very special and unique.

18-00:26:05

Meeker:

What are some of the examples of clients that you worked with who took that more aggressive attitude?

18-00:26:11
Gensler:

Well, as I said to you earlier about Goldman Sachs. The Goldman Sachs people said, “That’s just old stodgy stuff. We want something quite different, and we want our place to be really—we’re forward-moving. We’re not looking back, we’re looking forward.” There was a lot of that. It takes forever to build things; they have workmen that are craftsmen still. They still have craftsmen. The thing that’s interesting is energy is a big expense over there. It costs so much more for energy than it does here, that we would do things in design and sustainability before anybody ever talked about the green movement in the U.S. Germany especially, but in England even, as well. They were really leading the way in testing it. We had raised floors on everything, and underfloor air, and chilled beams, and all sorts of things which were totally new to us. We had done one raised floor job here, which was the first one in the U.S., down in L.A.

It’s a wonderful place to work, and we’ve really done some pretty amazing buildings. There’s a building they call the Gate Building, which is the key building in Dubai. It’s a small building. Not small, it’s actually quite large, but it’s like the Arc de Triomphe. It’s a square. So you got arches on all four sides and it’s hollow underneath, and then there’s a big office space up above. It’s where the top dogs in Dubai hang out. When we came up with the idea that the king and his son—one has a building here and here. And this building is here, and you can see both directions, see both buildings. It was a really clever design idea. Anyway, it’s on the coin of Dubai. It’s really the building.

We really liked the opportunity. I’ve always thought that giving people opportunity, all the people that went overseas and enjoyed it, growing and making money and doing some decent—really not just decent work, some really great work. We struggled with office space over there. It’s very expensive. I believe strongly it should be downtown. When we first went there, real estate was so ridiculous. We were trying to get an office and we ended up at Piccadilly Circus practically, just a block up from it. This building, un-air conditioned. They said, “Oh, you don’t need air conditioning in London. Nobody has that.” Oh, God. And then the Hari Krishnas. They had the windows open all summer, and the Hari Krishnas, they’re playing right below our windows, were banging on it all day. It would just drive you crazy. And there were robberies. Broke into our space. It was just a pain in the ass.

Then we found another space, but it was right near the London Wall, in Barbican. That was a nice space, but we kept growing and growing and growing. We were on one floor, two when we started, and we ended up on five or six floors. The building, they were talking about tearing it down and building a new building there. It was just an inefficient thing. It was two wings with a center core, so you had a studio here and a studio here and a studio there, and people were walking up and down staircases. They were an open staircase, but it just didn’t work for us and didn’t present the kind of

image that we wanted, although they were very nice offices for a London architecture firm.

Now we've been in a very, very beautiful space, and it's still not quite the right location. It's a good location, but it's not quite right. The price you pay in London, you can't—a hundred dollars a foot is just sort of a getting-started rate. It's ridiculous. It's expensive for people. In London you got to be on a Tube line and you got to be this and that. The Tube stops right practically in the basement of our building, next door. They built a really beautiful, beautiful office and it's worked really well. But they've had some ups and downs. What happened to us, as Europe went crashing down, the only thing that was really booming was Middle East. We got into Kuwait after. When Dubai went down, we moved office up to Abu Dhabi. We had some things to finish up, and in Abu Dhabi we were getting work. They insisted we have an office in the country. So we pulled out of Dubai. Have a couple people there. But in the Middle East, the office is in Abu Dhabi because that's where the real heads of [the Emirates], in Abu Dhabi.

18-00:31:57

Meeker:

That's where the oil money is.

18-00:31:58

Gensler:

Dubai itself doesn't have any oil, but Abu Dhabi does. Although Mohammed is an amazing guy. He's the president of Dubai. He's a visionary, because he realizes he doesn't have any oil. When he got bailed out, he got bailed out by his brother or cousin or whatever he is. They have lots of money. He said, "I got to get into entertainment, I got to get into retail, I got to get into tourism, I got to get into a lot of other things. I want to make this country so that it can stand on its own. At some point we're all going to run out of oil, and we have to have something to fall back on." You'll literally see him. He's got a driver, but you'll see him jump out of his Land Rover. He'll go to his guy and say, "Let's do a sweep in the streets, and this is the one. You sweep the streets. If I ever catch you sweeping the way I saw you before, you'll be out of this country," because of course all of them are guest workers. The only people that work are the guest workers. The locals don't work at all. But he's out there showing people how to sweep the streets. He's a very involved guy.

One of the funniest experiences I had there was his palace is right almost in the middle of Dubai, developing area, and they wanted to develop it. So he came to our guys. I wasn't in the meeting, but I saw the models. He wanted us to build his new palace outside of town a little ways. On his current palace he has a racetrack for his horses, because he's one of the great horsemen of Thoroughbred racing horses in the world. He wanted a track that was like Epsom Derby and the Kentucky Derby. I think there were three or maybe four tracks. He wanted to simulate the hill and the whole thing. He said, "Could we air condition one of the tracks? Because it's really hot here." Can you imagine air conditioning a racetrack a mile and a quarter long? A racetrack? I don't

know. Anyway, the things that you run into. But that's the way they think there. I don't remember what actually happened. We didn't do any more work on it for some reason. But you get into experiences like that, where we're designing a covered racetrack and a palace for a guy.

18-00:34:36

Meeker:

When you're doing international work, there's at least two main questions you have to deal with. One is the different regulatory and legal environment, the different standards of building and design. And then there's also cultural differences, which include language.

18-00:35:00

Gensler:

Well, there's a big issue going around now where the architecture profession is looking at whether we should be doing buildings there because the people in Dubai and Abu Dhabi abuse workers.

18-00:35:20

Meeker:

There's a big scandal around World Cup building in—

18-00:35:25

Gensler:

In Qatar. People just don't understand what goes on in this world. That's why it's helpful to be in a global world. These people are there. It may be a standard of living that we don't think is what they ought to be doing. There are people abused, and it's hotter than hell, and they don't maybe get enough breaks. But I can tell you where they came from is not a hell of a lot better, and what they're able to do is to work. They work hard, and then they send the money home. It's like the people that work in the fields in the Valley, San Joaquin Valley. They work hoes, bent over and picking tomatoes or lettuce or whatever the hell they're doing, and they're sending all the money down to Mexico. Their families in Mexico are building something up.

Well, it's the same in the Middle East. They bring them in from India and Pakistan and God knows where, some parts of the Philippines, Sri Lanka and places. They house them in big dorms. It's just like China where they bring them from the western provinces into Shanghai and Beijing. Most Shanghai. Although to us it's horrible, and they should have something better and they work them too many hours, and they shouldn't work—I've never seen any kids in the Middle East. In China I've been in factories and seen pretty young kids. But in the Middle East it's not kids. They come in and they work them pretty damn hard, and they're probably not very nice to them. The Arab culture is not to be nice to anybody. They really can be really nasty. I shouldn't say that, but that's my experience.

There's this whole thing about somebody died. This is a terrible thing, and I probably should never say it on tape, but I feel terrible about the thirteen people that died in the GM ignition switch problem. That's a lot of people. But I think thirteen people die in a week from gunshots in Detroit. Now, which is more? That's thirteen mostly minority people that got killed, they're

killing each other and everybody else, and nobody talks about that. They're going to fine you a billion dollars because thirteen people died in a car because of the ignition. That's not in any way to condone putting out products that aren't safe. But we get our heads all screwed up. A couple of people die from heat stroke in Abu Dhabi, and they should have been watched and that's terrible. But for architects to say, "Well, I'm not going to work in that country because that happens," I think our engagement—the fact that we're providing work with jobs, they are able to earn money. If we stop working, there aren't any jobs and there are people that are totally out of work, thrown out of the country, and go off to live in mud huts and starve to death. It doesn't make any sense to me. Sorry, that's my personal feelings about these things.

But it is culture. It is culture. We have to learn that they are different. We're having a terrible time with a client who says, "Well, everybody's ripped me off so I'm going to rip my consultants off." And they probably were ripped off. We say, "Are we ripping you off?" "No, no, no, you're doing a wonderful job. Why don't you keep working." We said, "You're not paying us properly, we're not going to work. Why would we work for you? There are plenty of other people we could work for." "Yeah, but you're doing a great job." "Yeah, but you're not paying us adequately. You take our bill and take 30 percent off of it. We don't make 30 percent profit." "You got plenty of money." "We're not working to make you rich. We're trying to help ourselves get rich." I don't know. "I got to at least make a living." It's those kinds of things that are different in that culture. It's crazy.

You get on an airplane, and the women are all in black and their burka over their face. You get on the plane and everybody sits down. The minute it's off the ground, not when we're up at 10,000 feet, now you can get around and walk around, it's two feet off the ground and there are women walking up. All of a sudden they go in the bathroom, and about two minutes later they come out and where'd she come from? And you realize it's some woman who's been dressed to the nines underneath this black burka. She just wanted to get it off. "I'm going to Paris, I'm going to London. I'm gone, baby. Here I am." Such a phony, phony deal, but in the country they got to treat them one way. When they get out of the country with their wives, their girlfriends or whoever they are, man, I'm telling you, they don't do all that stuff. It's a really crazy double standard. It's hard to understand. I spend a lot of time studying and reading what's going on in Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan. My wife is in D.C. today. She brings Afghan women to train them to get them to go back to Afghanistan and help change the country, something that she's passionately—put a lot of money into bringing girls to colleges here in the U.S. and sending them back. It's a strange place, but I love the challenge of seeing if I can make a difference.

18-00:41:35

Meeker:

How do you train or prepare Gensler employees who haven't spent a lot of time overseas perhaps?

18-00:41:42
Gensler:

Actually, luckily the Brits, believe it or not, have an ability to adapt. Most of the people that we've sent down there have been Brits. They seem to understand the way the game is played much better than most of our people do. Especially the ones on the ground, but even the ones working back in the office have got some experience in how to deal and work in that kind of culture, in that kind of atmosphere. I'm always amazed how people adapt pretty quickly. One of the things that's interesting about architects and designers, so many of them have actually worked out of the country. So many of them, after college they've maybe taken a year off and traveled the world, or lived in a bunch of places. They seem to be pretty adaptable to that kind of lifestyle rather than leaving college and going to work for General Motors or IBM and never experiencing it. Architects especially want to go see all these famous buildings. They want to interact with them, see what they're like. I'm always amazed how culturally exposed some of our people are, although I think I told you the story about the poor guy, I put my arm around him and said, "How would you like to go to Bangkok?" He said, "Well, I've never been out of the country. I don't have a passport." I said, "We'll get one for you tomorrow and you'll be gone the next day." First time he ever landed anywhere in the world outside of the U.S. was Bangkok, Thailand, which at the time, thirty years ago, it was a third world place. But people, for whatever reason, trusted me enough that it would be a real positive experience for them.

We've been very fortunate that people have adapted and helped us. We have a Kuwaiti who is running the office in Abu Dhabi at the moment. He's anxious to get an office in Kuwait. He's a very good guy. He's worked in our London office and then went back. Like even here, the China offices are interesting in that, again, we only have four or five Americans over there now. All the rest are locals. The guy who really leads it was born and raised there, and then came and got educated at Boulder.

18-00:44:37
Meeker:

Who is that?

18-00:44:39
Gensler:

Jun Xia. Unbelievable guy. We got there because his buddies in the government kept calling and saying, "We're trying to move these pieces of parcel." The government owned all the land. A developer would come in and say, "I'd like that piece," and they'd say, "What are you going to put on it?" He'd come in with some ugly looking thing. He wondered, "Why can't you have something decent? Why don't you hire Gensler? They could do it." Or, "Xia. Hire Xia." That was what it was. So Xia was running back and forth to Shanghai. Finally he said, "This is crazy." He was going from Shanghai to Denver, Shanghai to Denver, Shanghai to Denver, and we were trying to do drawings in Denver. We did a whole enormous campus. Did all the drawings in Denver. They have a system called an LDI, local design institutes. They become the architect of record. It's the law over there. They have to do it. We don't. So we only take it through design development, and there's a big

argument where design development stops and the local guy picks it up. They want more and more information, and then they basically put a stamp on our drawings and use them. They don't do diddly at times. Sometimes they do. Some stuff. It's a sham.

But that's the way they keep people busy over there. There are some very good LDIs, don't get me wrong, but they basically use our drawings. We would call them advanced working drawings, advanced design development drawings only because of legality. We ended up probably going a little further than we'd normally go. Again, it's all about culture. There you have to have a story about your building. It flows with the flow of the Pudong River, and it's this, and the inner tracing. There's a lot of this stuff going on in the designs. They like the story and they like the relationship, and Xia is very good at that. He has a real sense of how to capture the client's imagination. There, each project has a story, and we're starting to do that a lot here. We name projects with an idea. We've got what's called a pearl we're doing for one client. It's a very unique shaped building. And there's a phoenix. Each one of these buildings has a story. This is in the casino world. It's a different type of thing.

One of the things that I've found, and the firm has found, is that although we've been able to share and teach them a lot, they've been able to share and teach us stuff. The reason we go international is because, again, when things slow down here, maybe they don't slow down quite so much in those countries and vice versa. Certain countries, Japan being the most prominent, American clients are very uncomfortable trying to work in Japan. It's just the communication, the process, everything is very difficult. They really would rather relate to an American who is there who can—than have people that can relate to the locals.

In London we've got a lot of American clients that are just comfortable with the fact that we're there. And now, because we're there, we're all over Europe. I think there were 115 countries we worked in this year, something like that, up from ninety. This year we worked in 105 countries. Most of those are driven by a client that we've got someplace who says, "Can you help us in this place?" whether it's Chase or JP Morgan or PNC Bank or God knows what, who's got offices in various places in the world. We're now doing all the General Motors dealerships in China and Europe and Asia and Africa. Not all of them, but we're taking on more and more and more. That supports our relationship with GM here, but it also supports this firm.

18-00:49:16

Meeker:

It sounds to me that given the cultural differences being so profound from country to country, that Gensler doesn't really put together a package that is repeatable for employees going from U.S. to Tokyo or U.S. to Abu Dhabi.

18-00:49:34
Gensler:

No, it's very different. One of the problems for our concept that is tough, but we work really hard at trying to avoid that, is this family. We're all in this together. So, for example, as an employee stock ownership company, ESOP, except for the U.S. I can't do that. We can't do that and they can't do that, because it isn't a valid tax deduction. The money goes to an ESOP is tax-deductible to the company and deferred to the individual. They don't have that kind of a vehicle. In London they put it in for two years and then said, "Oh, I don't like this." Then they stop, undo it and give the money to the people that it was being accumulated there for. Even in the profit sharing, we have managed funds here. There, their money has to go into a thing, and then at the end of three years they can take it and walk away with it. Here you have five year vesting I think now.

But there are a lot of [different] things in each country. There are medical benefits and vacations. One of the things that's astronomically different, and nobody ever thinks about it, is that in some of these countries every other day is a holiday. I'm telling you, you wonder how anyplace in the world gets any work done because they're always on holiday. The Chinese are no better. They got Golden Week, and they got this week and then that week. The whole country shuts down. It's crazy. So when we may give eleven days or something like that, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July and Labor Day, they got twenty-five holidays on top of vacation. London, you walk in London, three weeks starting vacation. Here you start with two. They start with three. For a kid out of college, he gets three weeks' vacation.

So how do you balance all that is a real complicated problem, to make us all feel the same. It's especially important because we move people around. Somebody will say, "Can you go over there for six months and help them out? Can you go here and work for that, and help the Australian office getting started, tell them how to do things for three months?" People are moving all over the place right now. Yet we've got to have the same systems. All our technology has got to be universal, and everybody's got to plug into and get the kind of same reports. So they have to work. English is our language. In China you have to have most of that stuff translated, but they also put everything in English. The worst part is the translating. You did all the drawings in Chinese and none of us would know what the hell the drawings said. You have to have English and Chinese, so we can read what it is and hope to tell the guy that translated that work into Chinese knows what [he is doing]. It gets complicated, it gets difficult. Life has never been meant to be easy. The challenge is to figure out ways to make things work, keep your people happy and do great work. If you do that, you got a great opportunity to make a real impact. I think we're doing that. But it's not easy. It's really not easy.

We talked earlier, where there's still states like New York and others that only want architects to be owners of a company. How can you have a company that way? It just can't possibly happen anymore.

I guess a last point about globalization. I believe this country, probably more than anybody, has to understand what that means. There is a whole thing about we're the last superpower. But we don't want to say we are when we go in and take over this and help this and help that. The mess that's going in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan and all. It's a mess. But whether we like it or not, if you look back fifty years ago, we're just beginning the process of making this one globe. There were oceans between us and communication was what it is. But when Google puts balloons all around the globe, which they're going to do, and they're going to be able to have somebody in their mud hut in Africa with his little internet access, the world is going to be one world, whether we like it or not. And how we're going to live together, whether it's religious beliefs or dictatorial beliefs or socialist beliefs or democratic beliefs or whatever, we're going to have to figure out how to get along.

I wish I felt more positive about the U.N. It's been interesting. Nobody's talked about the U.N. in about the last two years. The U.N. has gone almost silent. We used to hear a lot about the U.N.'s doing this and the U.N.'s doing that, it's over here and helping here. I don't know whether the person who's running it—because I don't even know who it is, which I normally would know. But you never hear the name. They're never in the press. You don't see anything about it. I think we're not going to have a world government. The U.N.'s not going to be the government. One person's not going to be able to control the world.

We're going to have to figure out how to—each area with their own cultures and their own thing, but also we're going to have one economic system. Not one currency but one economy—it is probably that way right now, even. Money can be moved by the banks to almost any place in the world. I was talking to our people yesterday, our chief financial officer. The pound is moving up, yuan is moving down. I was asking him, "Do we get paid in dollars or do we get paid in local currencies?" What do we get paid in? I just have not been paying attention around that. We've got a whole bunch of money sitting in China right now. We're getting a lot better interest rate in China than we get here, so it's probably not a bad idea. I'm an architect. I don't know. Hardly ever think about this. But those are the things that people are going to have to learn, because you're not going to be able to make a living by just doing what you do in this little place. Everybody's going to have an international connection. I think that's an exciting time for the world, for people that get up in the morning and want to do something, make a difference, it's a very exciting time. But not easy. And sometimes not even fun. But most of the time it's fun.

Interview #10: September 24, 2014
Audio File 19

19-00:00:42

Meeker:

Today is September 24, 2014, at Art Gensler's home, Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler. This is tape number nineteen, session number ten.

Let's start by going back in time a little bit. You had mentioned there was a particularly interesting story about your work on BART that we hadn't yet covered. So tell me about BART.

19-00:01:12

Gensler:

One of my favorite stories is that I had really gotten to be heading up the standard for BART. The general manager for engineering for BART, who was a grandfather of one of my son's best friends, used to ride on the Tiburon ferry, as I did. One day he and I had had a real battle over what were the restroom requirements for a station. His comment was that restrooms are the biggest problems that transit systems have. They are dirty, they are hard to maintain, there are perverts hanging around. It's too much of a problem, so we're not going to have any. And I'm this, I guess, twenty-seven-year-old kid saying, "You got to have restrooms. What if a thousand people are on a train and arrive at a station? Somebody certainly is either going to pee in the corner or is going to pee someplace if he's hung up on a train that's stopped in the tunnel for an hour. We got to have restrooms." "No, no, we're just not going to have restrooms. We're just not going to have them, Art. They're just too much of a problem." The end of the story is they ended up with a one-holer that was controlled by the station attendant to give you access to it. There weren't public open restrooms, which I think is insane. I understand the problem, but the solution was insane.

Anyway, that night I was rushing to the boat. It left at 5:30. I was running down the gangplank and I noticed there was a guy in front of me running down the gangplank to get on the boat in time. The boat left right next to the Ferry Building. He ran, was going a little fast. All of a sudden I realized it was the chief engineer. The boat was configured so that under the stair on the port side were three men's restrooms, little one-holers, and on the other side were three women's restrooms. Three for both, a hundred people at the max. He runs up and grabs the first door, and it's locked. He grabs the second door and it's locked. He grabs the third door and it's locked. He turns around and he goes, "Oh, my God," and I'm standing right in his face. "Oh, my God." You tell me you got a place with a thousand people on a train and you're not going to have a restroom. Finally somebody came out, and he went in and relieved himself. But he still never changed his mind. I always thought, "God, the irony of that." The day that I'd had this big fight with him, and even he got caught, but he said, "I'm not changing, Art." I just think how decisions are made like in an entire transit system is really kind of bizarre, and how sometimes the wrong answer for maybe the right reasons happens.

19-00:04:17

Meeker:

Did you ever think about ways in which to solve the very real problems that existed with restrooms and transit systems?

19-00:04:23

Gensler:

Well, the answer is no. I've thought about it a lot, because public access to restrooms is a problem in a lot of places. In a lot of buildings they lock the door and they give you a code number to use.

[break in recording]

19-00:04:58

Gensler:

The director of the San Francisco Airport, John Martin, really has a vision for what he wants a terminal to be. We worked with him. He said, "Five-star hotels have quality restrooms and people take care of them and treat them well." If you use the restrooms at San Francisco Airport, you'll see they're just like a five-star hotel. I think that, one, you have to do really careful use of materials. But, two, you don't make them look like a prison cell. You make them look like something to be respected. Now, some people do and some people don't. But if you really try to make it something that is very quality and high-end, I think we've taken the traditional airport restroom facility and upgraded it to something of real quality. We've tried to do that in a lot of places. Even typical office buildings, they're much more pleasant places to be in rather than sort of a place you hose down.

19-00:06:10

Meeker:

What are some of the things that are done, then? What are some of the strategies?

19-00:06:12

Gensler:

Well, everything from the quality of the counters and the places to put your purse or your bag, the way the hand dryers work, the way the stalls and the size of them are bigger and more comfortable and nicer materials. It's got some texture. Like it's a design, rather than just cover the floor with ceramic tile, cover the wall with ceramic tile and call it a day. It's trying to make it so that it looks like a place you'd respect rather than a place that you'd destroy, get your spray can out and try to carve your initials in the mirror or something, which happens in these other places. That's really not respectful of the [other] 98 percent of people that use them nicely. It's hopefully getting the two percent, if they start doing something, there'll be somebody else in there that will say, "Wait a second. This is a place that you ought to respect and keep clean." Make it so that they can keep it clean, so that it is a place that is comfortable to go. It doesn't smell bad. It's a body function, it's going to happen, so why not make it a nice place, just like where you sit in the lounge is a nice place.

19-00:07:32

Meeker:

Well, since 9/11 they've closed down all of the subway bathrooms anyway in BART.

19-00:07:40

Gensler: Is that what they've done?

19-00:07:41

Meeker: Yeah. It's almost like they've been looking for an excuse to finally shut them all down, and they used 9/11 and terror threats in essence to lock all of them.

19-00:07:54

Gensler: That was the way they were originally designed, so they must have opened them up to at least access the people. But it was ridiculous. I haven't been to any of the newer stations. These are the original twenty-seven stations. I haven't been in any of the newer ones to see what they've done with that.

19-00:08:13

Meeker: I don't know what that is either. Well, that's interesting. These are kind of core architectural design problems that probably aren't talked about all that much, right?

19-00:08:24

Gensler: I'm writing a book with Michael Lindenmayer. Michael is a philanthropist, and his goal in life is to provide toilets to a million people in the third world. They don't have toilets. They just use slit trenches. His idea is to make something that's really nice for these people. It's obviously got to be very inexpensive. One of his ideas is that we will attach to this building, whatever it is, a little sundry shop. They got to sell the basic things. Be a teeny 7-Eleven kind of a place. But that one of the responsibilities, you wouldn't charge rent, one of the things is that the person would get to have a space, to use it and run a business, but their responsibility is to make sure that the restrooms are kept clean. It's a huge problem for women. Michael, to his credit, has now gotten the International Girl Scouts to be his partner in this thing, raising money. Young girls have such a personal situation using restrooms out in the middle of a field. He's raising money and building these facilities around the world right now. He's an amazing guy.

19-00:09:54

Meeker: Fascinating.

One of the things that I wanted to follow up on that falls a little bit out of the chronology based on what we've done so far is another practice area I guess that comes into being with Gensler, and that is historic preservation.

19-00:10:10

Gensler: Sure.

19-00:10:13

Meeker: It looks like one of the first ones that you guys worked on was 901 Market Street, the former Sears building in San Francisco.

19-00:10:25
Gensler:

No, it was J.C. Penney. Penney's pulled out and it was sitting there vacant. It was owned by the Lurie Company, if I remember correctly. We went in and converted it to an office and retail space. Multi-tenanted retail space rather than a single user. The problem with the upper floors were—in those days, it would have been different today—but there was no light in the middle. It was a very big department store with very deep space and no light coming, and there was no windows in the backs. There were windows on one side and windows on the Market Street side and the Fifth Street side, but were no windows in the back and on the side. So we punched an atrium down through the middle of it, where you came in and went up through that atrium. Then we did some stuff on the ground floor.

Then we rehabilitated the exterior. One of the things that I remember clearly was that we said, "This canopy is really ugly." It was too small and it was out of scale with everything. We said, "We're going to make it a little bigger and shade the windows and treat it nicely." The historical people just said, "No, no, no, no. That's the way it is. That was the way this was." I always argued with them. I said, "Everything that was built a long time ago wasn't good. Some of it was bad. We ought to change it if it's bad, not just keep it as an example of bad architecture. That doesn't make any sense."

Over the years we've done a lot of historical buildings, some of them more so than others. We probably have thirty or forty buildings, maybe more than that, that are the old brick buildings, unreinforced masonry, that we've reinforced and rebuilt and repurposed from warehousing to office buildings and other things. A lot in the north waterfront, but all through the city. Again, some of them were considered historical because they were old, and some of them weren't. We tried to keep the context of what they had, but also make them usable and habitable. I feel very strongly about that.

I remember being asked to be in a conference back at Yale. Bob Stern put on the conference. It was asked to be put on by GSA [General Services Administration]. GSA was facing, and is still, I'm sure, a horrible problem in that after the Second World War, the government threw up a whole lot of office buildings for government employees. There weren't any built during the war. Government was expanding. And they put up really crummy buildings. They built them because they were cheap, and we didn't know any better. This is maybe ten or fifteen years ago. Maybe more than that probably, but let's say fifteen years ago. Those buildings really ought to be just torn down and abandoned. But everybody says, "Well, they're over fifty years old so they're historic. You can't tear them down."

Well, the structural systems are inadequate, especially with California and the earthquake problem, but all over the country they're just inadequate. The air conditioning systems are useless and got to be ripped out. The electrical systems got to be ripped out. The curtain wall has no insulation, single-pane

glass. It's got to be taken out. There's nothing left of the building if you want to make it a habitable building. "Yeah, but it's old, it ought to be [preserved]." We have a project right now for GSA in Hawaii. You could rebuild a brand-new courthouse and office building for the government for, let's say, \$400 a square foot, and we're spending \$600 a square foot to rehabilitate a bad building. Now, that is just stupid.

I truly believe in historical preservation. There are a number of types of that. Some are what we call today adaptive reuse, and some are real historical. We've taken some train stations and brought them back to life, made restaurants and other things because the train doesn't go there anymore. One of the great projects that we did was the Geary Theater, which had the earthquake. Luckily nobody was in the building at the time. The whole proscenium fell, and it was a real mess. We were able to go in there and, again, rehabilitate the building, get the slope of the floor better and the seating was better. One of the things that it had, as the Curran [Theater] does, are terrible restrooms, impossible restrooms. And no decent bar for intermission or before or after. We were able to put in whole complete restrooms and of a decent size, with stairs that you could actually get to them, and elevators, you could get to them. We had a loft behind the balcony that we could put a bar up there and make it a nice place to go and have events even. I'm really proud of that restoration. Yet we kept the integrity of the building, the design and the outside, and brought it back. That's a really great opportunity to do something really special.

So I think there are opportunities to do things well, and there are opportunities to do things adaptively, reuse a building when it's appropriate. But I put that when it's appropriate, because I truly believe there are times when it isn't appropriate. We should not be wasting the public's money if it's a government building, and certainly a private developer's not going to do it if it doesn't make any economic sense. It's how do things fit together. It's not an adaptive reuse at all; this isn't a historic building at all. When we were commissioned by [George] Lucas to do a design for the Presidio competition, we're into the more contemporary look. But a contemporary building would not fit in the Presidio, and that campus is a million feet, if I remember correctly. Is a big impact on the Presidio.

So we did buildings using wood and stucco and red tile roofs as is used in the Presidio, and scaled them to a series of buildings much bigger than anything else, but in the scale and the context. Then we buried all the parking. There's like 1,500 cars underground there, under the park and under the building. There was a hole in the ground where the basement of the original hospital was, and we expanded that. At least there was a partial hole dug, so we didn't have to dig the entire thing. We tried really hard to be compatible and appropriate, to not fight with the balance of the aesthetics and architecture and the history of the Presidio. I probably get more compliments for that project than I do for almost any other project we've done. Yet it's a project that, from

an architectural point of view, is not going to be on the cover of any architectural magazine. It should, in one sense, if you're talking about context. Context for us in part of our design work is really the most important thing we can do.

19-00:18:43

Meeker:

A lot of people date the beginning of the preservation movement to the loss of Penn Station in New York and Jacqueline Kennedy's movement to try to preserve that.

19-00:19:03

Gensler:

There are some really interesting issues. I knew Penn Station well as a kid; I used to travel a lot and be in Penn Station. But the complexity of Penn Station is that hundreds and thousands of people go through that building a day. So the workings of how those people, and trying to move the tracks is, for all intents and purposes, impossible. What is above ground has to respond to the functional needs of it. It was clearly a mistake to tear down the buildings. I think it was clearly a mistake. One of the other parts of that is there are mixed feelings and instructions that you get from the historical people. When you do an addition to a historical building, they want it clearly different so that everybody knows that's the old and this is the new. In most cases, that's a reasonable approach. But sometimes I think you can be very smart if you just work with what was there, try to maybe extend it a little and incorporate all the things that there were. Sort of copying what was there. In most cases, you can't copy it exactly anyway. But not get so hung up on this is the old and this is the new. I've had times, remember, where we've been almost forced to make things that frankly, in my opinion, were jarringly—didn't need to be. They could have just been there and background, whereas putting another floor on a building and making it subtle rather than, oh, this is all glass and that's all brick. You can tell which is old and which is new. Well, you could have told the story in other ways without being quite so black and white.

19-00:21:14

Meeker:

So there's kind of a mandate among preservationists who want there to be a visual distinction between what is an addition?

19-00:21:24

Gensler:

Oh, absolutely.

19-00:21:24

Meeker:

Why do you suppose that is?

19-00:21:29

Gensler:

Well, because it's this idea, like I was saying about the canopy at the J.C. Penney building, 901 Market Street. They want you to see what was the old, even if it wasn't good, and they want you to see what is the new and not in any way distract from what were the old. I don't know whether we've talked about this before, but there are "look at me" buildings and there are background buildings. I love some of the new exciting architecture and

designs that are being done. But frankly, that's probably 5 percent of the buildings around the world. The other 95 percent—

19-00:22:21

Meeker:

The “look at me” buildings?

19-00:22:22

Gensler:

Yeah, new building. They're the ones in all the architecture magazines and the press and get all the publicity. But 95 percent of the buildings built are background buildings. They fit in or they don't fit in to the landscape. We'll come back to that maybe, when we talk about some of the retail rollout and the auto and some of the others. But there's an appropriateness for the design that is contextual; it fits in in the context of the community. Doesn't mimic it, it doesn't just copy it. It's appropriate. Maybe use the same materials, the same scale, but do it in a contemporary, fresh way, in a twenty-first-century way rather than something that was built in the 1950s or 1910s.

I believe that these background buildings are equally important to the environment. You can have so many buildings, “Look at me, look at me, aren't I terrific?” and have no context with anything. “I'm doing a piece of sculpture and I don't give a shit what's around me, pardon me.” That's the way a lot of architects and designers and even some clients want. “I want to stand out. I want to be the big dog.” Well, fine, but you got buildings on either side of you and across the street. If you got six buildings screaming at each other, none of them is going to win. If there's one, maybe you can get away with it, or two, but you got to have some calm and some context. That really makes a community and makes a town and makes an area. I think that those buildings are equally as important.

I used to have this battle in our firm with our people, like “When are we going to do real architecture?” We had done a lot of work in the north waterfront [of San Francisco], rehabbing older buildings and building some very contextual buildings out on the waterfront that were all concrete, some interesting things which we did in those days. They weren't real aggressive “look at me” cover-of-magazine buildings. But you drive out in the north waterfront and they're pretty nice. You probably would never have noticed any of them. But as a whole, you take note of the area and it looks pretty good. You have to come up with this balance. My staff finally doesn't yell at me. In those days they did, but since I'm not there to yell at now they don't do it. What real architecture?

We're now doing some casino buildings around the world that are real “look at me” buildings. That's their purpose. They're in-your-face buildings. They're amazing designs, but they're in your face, and that's what the client wants and what the community wants. Wants an icon. I have a client that keeps telling me, “I want an icon. Give me ten icons. I want ten icons.” Well, God, one in your lifetime is a lot. That's my Shanghai Tower. How many

icons can you design? I don't care who you are, Frank Lloyd Wright or whoever, you do a whole bunch of prairie homes or you do the block homes or you do some other things. But you build maybe one Marin County government center, things like that. He didn't build a lot that was really an iconic building. He designed a bunch of them: Mile High Tower, office tower and a bunch of other things. Residential tower.

There's this interesting balance that is important to design, and I think historical preservation weaves itself in through that. We aren't trying to create [Colonial] Williamsburg, but we're trying to save some of the buildings that were nice. Certainly Penn Station was an iconic building and therefore should probably not have been taken down. But these are buildings in the north waterfront, old big warehouses and stuff, and I think that area where Levi's Plaza is, is a pretty special area and fun to walk around and go in. Yet there are some new fresh buildings that are great. It's a balance. If they were all brand new buildings and all looked shiny and new—that's one of the problems we have, is trying to make something that's livable.

19-00:27:12
Meeker:

Do you recall if there are any preservation projects that the historical preservation requirements were so outlandish that your firm walked away from?

19-00:27:31
Gensler:

No. As a firm we're adaptable, let's put it that way. We're not trying to sell the Gensler design solution. We're trying to solve problems for our client. If a client owns a building and he wants to do something in it, we're—I was going to use the word obligated, but maybe that's not the right word. We have a responsibility to try to work through the issues intelligently, with hopefully reasonable people. Now, some of the battles are really tough. Some of the battles you end up not getting what you had hoped for, you or the developer, or the user. I think if you can make it in San Francisco, you can make it anywhere, because we've got a bunch of interesting people in this town who have their positions.

One of the things that is actually troubling me for the whole society is that we are becoming a group of people who, instead of looking at a big picture, look at issues. "My issue is I'm going to picket and storm and yell and scream that there never should be a building over forty feet on the north waterfront." But there are all sorts of things, and I'm just taking one in my own field. When you look at the [Golden State] Warriors basketball arena that they wanted to put up there, and you look at the way it would have improved that whole area, improved the water and the pier—granted, from a traffic point of view it's bad, but arenas, if you want them in town, and you should want them in town—it would have opened up the waterfront, made access, and have people available to go there.

For the first time yesterday I drove by the new park that they put next to the new cruise terminal in San Francisco. I don't know whether you've seen it. It's just opened this week. I haven't been on it. I was in a car and just drove by it. I don't quite get it. It's an awful lot of hard surface, and there's a lot of place for cars and taxis to get off the street and pick up people. There was a giant cruise ship, it was just enormous. But it's really the first big access. Even the Ferry Building doesn't do much for the water. The Ferry Building is all internally focused, so if you walk behind it there's a walkway and there's the water. They put a few piers where people line up to get on the ferry boats that go to various places. But you're not sitting on the water and using it.

The arena would have given that kind of opportunity. But they said no, and we're going to say no, we're just going to say no, no. And that's their thing. Then other people have their thing. Whether it's about global warming, or now it's called climate change. I don't know the difference. Anyway, that's their thing, and there are 400,000 people, or 300,000 people picketing in New York, marching to show that they're for that. But that's their thing twenty-four hours a day, and Congress is the same way. "This is my deal. I don't give a damn about your deal, but you ought to give a damn about my deal." Instead of saying, "Well, we all got our own deals. Let's work together to get a solution." It's the same way with blending people. It takes time. We're understanding how we do historical things, and maybe we made some mistakes. I think it's called Fontana Towers, the two towers that really stopped everything by Fort Mason in San Francisco.

19-00:31:57
Meeker:

At the end of Van Ness, yeah.

19-00:31:57
Gensler:

They were big, and they were tall. If you look at the length of the waterfront in San Francisco, it would be terrible if those were lined the whole way. Those two buildings—I don't personally feel, though, when I'm in the city, I'm being blocked from the waterfront because of those two buildings, and never to go there again because I can't see the waterfront. I can tell you just living on the water, I look at it—certainly I look at it every day. I say I'm the luckiest guy in the world, I've got a view. But you don't stand there and stare at the water. It's one of the other things. You sit on the street. I think the opening up of little pocket parks on the street here is equally as important as what we do in the bay. But other people, opening the bay view is the only thing they want.

It's like this whole argument with Google and Apple and Genentech with their buses in the city. The buses are taking hundreds of cars off the road. They don't want the cars, but they don't want the buses because they get into the Muni bus stops. Can't we work together and say, "The Muni comes at 10:00 and 10:15, so we'll stop there at 10:05?" Can't we live together? "No, no, we don't want the damn bus there." Well, people are going to come to the city.

You want them to come by public transportation. There happens to be private mass transportation in buses and yet, “I don’t want that.”

19-00:33:33

Meeker:

I think the people who are protesting the buses don’t want the people on the buses more than they don’t want the buses.

19-00:33:38

Gensler:

I guess in those cases they’re people that live here and work on the peninsula. They don’t want people around, and yet they want their business. “Why are our businesses not doing well? Why aren’t our restaurants doing well?” Well, you got a bunch of people who can’t afford to go to restaurants. I don’t know what it is. We’ve all got to live together. We’ve gotten single-focused about life. This is my cause. I’m trying to be a generalist. I think the firm is, too. We’re trying to solve problems rather than fight for our own position. Certainly we have values. We don’t want to do junk, we don’t want to do bad stuff. But we’re in the business of trying the best we can as an organization to provide responsible solutions to our clients that are good for them and good for the community. We think it should be both. But if you listen to certain people, they’d like to freeze the city and the world. “It was wonderful in ’58.” I have a little clipping here, it basically says all these people that have this idyllic idea that they’d like to live in a little town and just live there and be happy forever after, haven’t lived in a little town. I think that really sums it up. On the face of it, it sounds, “Geez, wouldn’t it be nice without the cars and the traffic, and you know everybody and all that?” But I don’t think when you really get there—people from little towns just can’t wait to get out in many cases. Not all, but many cases. So we all have our own lives to lead.

19-00:35:36

Meeker:

Read *Peyton Place*.

19-00:35:38

Gensler:

And historic preservation is one of the interesting things. I’m all for it. It would be terrible to knock down all the buildings in the Presidio, for example, and build up modern tract housing. Wouldn’t that be awful! So I think that that’s a really amazingly successful example. I never could figure out what George Lucas was thinking about his museum. To this day, I thought John King, who’s the architectural editor of the *Chronicle*, had a brilliant idea. He said, “Why doesn’t he use the Palace of Fine Arts? It’s right across the street from this campus. It’s a big empty building with nobody using it now that the Exploratorium moved out. Why doesn’t he move in there and make it the greatest exhibit space for his collection?” Wonderful. Why not? Sounds like a pretty good idea to me, if he’s going to spend \$400 million on a building that has absolutely no context. I do not understand what the designer in that case was thinking. He never obviously went to the site and saw it. I don’t even know what you’d call it.

19-00:36:41

Meeker:

He was probably talking to the client, right?

19-00:36:46

Gensler:

Well, we've done work for him. He had a little model that was maybe four inches by three inches, of a prairie home that Wright had done. He said, "I want my new office building on Big Rock to be a prairie home." Now, that building was 4000 square feet, and the office building we did was 120,000 square feet. Had a basement with 120 cars in it or something like that. We built a prairie home, giant, on steroids. Had twenty fireplaces in it. Unbelievable place. Just unbelievable. Nobody will ever see it, unfortunately. They had to make it a museum. He furnished it all with more traditional, that vintage Wright type of furniture, which these couches are [the furniture in the room where the interview was conducted]. That dining room table. But, again, this house is a collection of a variety of contemporary and transitional and Asian stuff that I particularly like. Korean chests and things. I can't live in a pure perfect antiseptic house. Unfortunately, dog sleeps here, and I sit there and drink coffee and spill it and do things. I live in my house—it isn't a showplace. It's a place for me to live, and my wife and my family and my friends.

Let's talk about the automobile and the retail rollout industry a little bit. We started back with the Gap doing the first rollouts. I told the story about how the Gap and Don Fisher came to me to help do the second store, and we just got into that. We got a capability of taking a kit of parts and rolling it out across the country. I cannot remember how we got into the automobile bit. But we started rolling things out for them, and Nissan and Volkswagen and Toyota. Those have been really interesting, because they're learning that they need to brand themselves. The word brand has really come into it. An auto dealership is an interesting arrangement. It is owned by an individual usually, or a corporation that may own multiple ones. General Motors or Volkswagen does not own the building, and yet has an arrangement with the dealership that they will use their standards to some degree. In most cases, the way the game is played is that the more you use the standards, the more they'll contribute to the construction of your project. In some cases, the guy wants to just make his dealership better, and in other cases there'll be a national or international movement by the parent company of the automobile manufacturer to get more of a branding look on it. I don't know whether we've done 2,000 dealerships, but significant number of dealerships.

The interesting part for me is that you can take a community, a small, medium-sized, thirty-, forty-thousand-person community that has two, let's say, Volkswagen dealerships or Toyota dealerships. One of the dealers says, "I don't want to put any more money in my dealership. I'm fine. I'm selling a hundred cars, one or two hundred cars." And the guy across town says, "I'm going to upgrade mine. I'm going to make it really to the new." Honest to God, we can show that the sales in the new one will go up forty to fifty

percent. So it does make you feel that there is a power of design. If you do it properly and do it right—and part of it is the ability, everything from the service bays where the real money is made, they become more efficient so they can handle the car maybe at a less price and quicker, to the way the showroom is set up, to the way the dealer relationships and buying experiences. But also just a visual thing.

We had an interesting assignment with General Motors. They commissioned us that over a two-year period we'd touch all 4,000 of their dealerships in the U.S. That was more than touch. They wanted to show what they could do to their dealerships. We had teams of people traveling the country, stopping at dealerships and saying, "Here's a sketch. We'll do a sketch and a plan. If you do this and this and this, General Motors will give you this amount of money. If you do this, this, this and this, you get this amount of money."

19-00:42:47

Meeker:

So they were providing incentives to the dealers to encourage them—

19-00:42:52

Gensler:

To upgrade and become more branded. It was especially pushed at the Chevy dealer, if you know that blue portico that they have. You'll see it at almost every Chevrolet dealership now. That's sort of the basic. You kind of had to do that. And then the other stuff. For example, my wife bought a car down in southern California in an auto mall with twenty dealerships in there, but they all had to be sort of Tuscan southwest, clay tile roofs and all. You couldn't knock that down and put up a real modern thing. How do you integrate those? Some of them, one guy's got a barn that he sells from in Iowa, he's got a big fancy barn that he has his dealership in. And how do you brand that and make it fit. It was a fascinating assignment. First it was tremendously successful, and now they've taken us internationally on it, on that journey.

19-00:44:02

Meeker:

What was the measurement of success?

19-00:44:04

Gensler:

Sold a hell of a lot more cars. Dealers made more money. It was upgrading the communities, making something that was a rundown kind of a dump to looking, in some cases, like something the community could be proud of. It's interesting. A lot of the dealerships, some of them got really elaborate. Had nice restaurants in them, and barbershops and beauty parlors. So a wife could bring her car to get serviced, and then her kids would be at daycare there and she'd go to the beauty parlor. A guy would come in and have his car fixed and he'd get a haircut. They went to a variety of directions. It was an interesting experience.

Then there were a lot of them that frankly went out of business. They wanted to close them. If you remember, there was a whole thing that they wanted to close a whole bunch of them, and the government wouldn't let them. You're hurting businesses, going out of business, a lot of the jobs will be lost. But a

lot of them finally found out that they couldn't compete anymore, because these other good ones were around them. It was really interesting for our guys to go in every community and try to find something, rather than here's the standard, this is what we want. I think that's sad.

Those were the kind of things. We've done all sorts of things that have really changed. Now we've moved up to department stores as well, which are becoming whole different kinds of department stores than they used to be. They have to be. They can't compete. They have pop-up stores within stores. If you really get underneath a department store, you find out that all these product brands have their own space. They kind of do their own space. They're almost like a big space, and you rent out floor space to these people. But you package it in one organization.

I'm finding that the retail industry is a fascinating place for us to work and experiment, to learn about people's motives and interests, how they want to eat, how they want to play, how they want to be entertained, and how they want to buy stuff. It's not just I go to buy and then I go someplace. It's packaging what we now call mixed use. Even in just a retail overall environment, you combine hotels and retail together with maybe some office and entertainment. The whole "L.A. Live" experience, where outside the building is programmed every minute of the day and night. It's just one big program driving people all day long to that location. It's fun and exciting and challenging to be a part of that kind of thing.

We had a meeting, I was supposed to be there, was not able to go, on Monday with a very, very successful shopping center developer. One of the most successful ones in the country is his shopping center. He wants to upgrade it more. He finds that these very, very wealthy international people are going there and spending a million dollars on a watch. He wants to do a high-end specialty Gucci, Prada, Louis Vuitton area within the center. How to do that and drive these people to come? Some cases, there is even security where they don't want people to know that they're even there buying stuff. If you go to Las Vegas in the retail, you look at all these stores and you say, "Well, there's nobody in there. Why do they have this big store?" Well, what happens is that somebody comes down and a personal shopper takes them up to the room or whatever suite that they have all these jewels, and they just buy them. They're there in the store. Some people come in, but a lot of people do the shopping in their suites, in their villas, whatever the hell they have. The amount of money that those stores do, it's sort of like online sales but it isn't. It's personal sales right there. It's enormous.

19-00:48:45
Meeker:

Well, this brings up actually an interesting question, because on the one hand, thinking about retail, you have new retail concepts. You have these celebration marketplaces, like the Grove in Los Angeles, right?

19-00:48:59

Gensler:

Absolutely.

19-00:49:00

Meeker:

That are kind of like a new concept. On the other hand, you have malls. And malls, up until the 1980s, 1990s, were almost community centers. It was where so much retail happened. But malls across the country are closing left and right. They're getting abandoned.

19-00:49:21

Gensler:

Yes. Two things have happened. One, there probably were too many of them no matter what they did. But secondly, the internet has attacked the market that the malls really appealed to, which was the young, especially teenage girls—the young market. Now they live on the internet, and they buy on the internet. It was a gathering place, but it wasn't a buying place. They'd go there and they'd look at stuff, and then they'd go home and buy it on the internet. A lot of stores were really suffering from that. Then the demographics has really shifted in some ways, where the average middle-class earner has cut back on their buying. That was the market for most of the malls. People found that if they enclosed a mall, and, again, part of that is weather, but also is a confined environment. People have really discovered that people like to walk on streets. I remember when Don Fisher came in and said, "We're going to start developing streets with stores." There's the one over in Emeryville that's—

19-00:51:02

Meeker:

Oh, Bay Street.

19-00:51:03

Gensler:

Yes. There are a whole bunch of places where they've really almost created their own new streets. They're really malls, but the feeling is much more walking down a street and being a part of a community, bumping into people, seeing them that way rather than going into this enclosed, "I've got you trapped," kind of a feeling, surrounded by parking, acres of surface parking. I'm certainly no expert, but we have people that are experts. Matter of fact, we've opened an office in Mexico City, because the largest Mexico City department store operator, one of the big players in Mexico, came to us in New York where we have some real experts in this and asked us to open up and do their work in Mexico. They've got a whole bunch of facilities they've got to rework and build anew. There's a big grand opening coming up in a couple of weeks down in Mexico, and I'm again not going to be able to attend.

19-00:52:08

Meeker:

So the reworking here, it sounds like it has a lot to do with the retailers coming to you and saying, "Listen, the internet has changed retail commerce. How do we respond so that we don't lose our market share and these buildings that we've invested in don't become kind of empty shells," right?

19-00:52:30

Gensler:

Absolutely. Yeah. There was a time, and, actually, I don't see it now so much. But there was a time when call centers started happening. We were converting, I'll bet you, one every couple of weeks. Say a JC Penney store would close, and we would turn that space in a mall into a call center. It had a couple of things: big open floors and parking, and places for the people to eat and do some shopping adjacent. So instead of it sitting there hoping that they're going to get another project, a big store, they said, "To heck with it. We'll put people in here." You get 300 people in a call center. Now, they don't shop every day, but if you don't have a big cafeteria they'll go and use the food courts and other things right there in the mall. We were finding that was an easy way to put additional air conditioning on the roof and make it happen. So we were involved with a whole bunch of them. There was a whole phase, God, it must have been ten or fifteen years ago, where we must have done a couple dozen of those conversions. I haven't heard of them recently going that direction. Call centers have taken a slightly different role. One, they started going off-shore, although a lot of them are starting to come back on-shore again.

19-00:53:59

Meeker:

When the retailers come to you and want their retail spaces to compete, to provide something that online shopping can't, how do you respond?

19-00:54:09

Gensler:

I think a store has to be more than just a bunch of clothes on a bunch of racks and tables. It has to be an environment that people feel they can come in and sit down and look at stuff. There's a variety of service methods, of how you service the customer. You can do it like Apple does, with amazing young people who are nerds but are told to be polite and have a little handheld. You don't have to go to a cash register, you don't have to go anywhere. You just buy it, they get it, and they give you a little receipt and you walk out the door. To some places like Sears or Penney's, where you could hardly find a person to help you, you had to do it kind of on your own. I think that there's a fine line between that. I'm not an expert on that at all. Again, we have people. We've created these practice areas. We have, I think, twenty-three or twenty-six of them, but retail being one of them, where people that really know and spend every day with retailers. Each one has their own concept.

It's clearly more than just the merchandise. It's how you present it and how you promote it. One of the dangers of retailing is it becomes hot, and then it becomes over-hot, and then nobody wants it at all. Nothing's changed, it's just it's kind of run its course. There's H&M, which can refresh their stock every three or four weeks, constantly refresh their stock, which is amazing how they do that. I'm still not sure how they do it. Versus Gap, which has a two-months or three-months cycle, and has to order it a year in advance and is not sure which is going to be the hot items. There's a whole balance and scale of your company, if you're a one-off versus hundreds or thousands of outlets. And whether you're the organization that's hot at the time, and how do you get

hot? I don't know. I don't understand all these—I thought the Gap for a long time did an amazing job with pictures of famous people, implying that they wore their jeans or they did that. Clark Gable and Gap khakis. I remember that whole khaki [campaign].

19-00:56:56

Meeker:

James Dean, right? Yeah.

19-00:56:57

Gensler:

They did a lot of things to draw people. Association has a lot to do with it. They got to get into magazines and the advertisements, become either exclusive or this or that—at the high-end, did you wear her dress or his dress at the Academy Awards? Retailing I think is the toughest business out there. I think it's almost as tough as being a restaurateur, which is retailing in its own way. Do you sell the same thing over and over and over again, or do you change your menu? There are positives both ways. McDonald's has its basic menu, and they're constantly changing it. In & Out Burger has the same damn thing they've been selling for thirty years and everybody goes there. It's loaded with fat and calories but, man, is it tasty. I was sitting here the other day—we have one down in Strawberry Shopping Center—and Jim brought me a [burger]. I hadn't had one in a long time and, boy, it's pretty damn good. So each [business] finds its niche. What we're trying to do is create an environment.

One of the things that you learn in retail that is different, and hard for architects and designers to accept, is that at least every five years, maybe every three years, you got to change the look of your store. That's a really hard thing. "Geez, I designed this. I think it's pretty beautiful. It's gorgeous. Why would you want to change it?" Well, I want to attract customers and I want to have something new to show them. One of the things that we're working on is how to make an environment that repeatedly attracts people, and how can you make change fast. You can't shut the store down for two months while you're changing; you got to change it on the fly at night.

I think it was Victoria's Secret went into a thing called Pink for young girls. They had like 600 stores, something like that. In like three weekends at night, or maybe it was just all week long, we had people working in those stores. It was all prefab stuff. The minute the center shut down, we would rush in with teams of people all over the country. And like in three weeks, the whole thing was changed and this was added to a store. It was an incredible boost. New customers, new volume, new product, new excitement. Those are the kind of things that are going to have to be done more and more. You can't just build a beautiful place. Like Neiman Marcus, one of a kind. We're forever changing those places. You'd think Neiman Marcus would be kind of set. No, they say the clothes this way and the clothes that way, and that's the way it's done. But they're even changing.

Begin Audio File 20

20-00:00:07

Meeker:

Today is the 24th of September, 2014. This is tape number twenty, session number ten, and this is Meeker interviewing Gensler.

When I did my series of background interviews, a number of people I spoke with referred to the importance of a study that was done by the consulting firm McKinsey. I know that you had worked with them over the years on a variety of different projects. I haven't seen the study, so I'm not entirely sure what I'm referring to here. But maybe you can foreground this by talking a little bit about how your firm has interacted with consulting firms and, when you went to them, what kind of problems you were trying to have solved.

20-00:01:03

Gensler:

Okay. Well, the firm was growing up, and it was getting bigger. We had done work for McKinsey and a number of others. In those days the accounting firms had consulting groups, and we had done office space for them. One of the early office spaces we did was McKinsey in the Bank of America building, one of our early projects. So I knew the McKinsey people a little bit. I didn't know them real well, but I knew some of the guys. I don't think there were many women there at the time.

But we were getting bigger, and it just became clear that—you normally model yourself on other architecture/design firms. And I was looking at all the architecture and design firms, and they made no sense to me. We were going in a totally different direction in the terms of the way we were running a real business. We were trying to have a continuity of leadership over a long period of time, and we were building it on the basis of huge repeat client relationships. I couldn't find a role model that made any sense at all. So I one day decided to talk to McKinsey, one of the guys at McKinsey. I said, "What do I do?" They said, "Well, you can work with us. We work in two ways." I said, "What's that?" "Well, we can all have dinner some night and you can pick up the tab, and we'll sit around the table and talk about the issues. Or we'll do a program and do a report and study for you and it's \$500,000." I blanched. Five hundred thousand dollars was more than I could possibly imagine. I said, "We're in the business of selling consulting services. How much is that per hour?" He said, "It's \$500,000. I don't know how many hours it is, but that's what we charge." I said, "What do I get?" "I don't know. It's \$500,000." I went back to the group and said, "This is not good, gang, but I really think we got to do it."

So we did, and it was probably the smartest thing the group ever agreed to. They came in and they really, really looked at us. Ted Hall, who was the head of the office, and a guy named Bill Meehan and a guy named Marty Manley were the three people. Bill and Marty were the key. Marty was 80 percent of it. They really looked under the covers and really got to understand our firm in

great detail. McKinsey is different than most organizations in that they don't implement it. They're not part of an implement, which is really—I kept saying, “Well, aren't you going to help us implement what your recommendations are?” “No, we've given you the tools. Now you go implement it.” I said, “Well, we design a building, but we also watch as it gets built. We help you along the way, and you move and shift.” “I know, but that isn't what we do. This is the way McKinsey works.”

Anyway, we got a series of reports and studies on a lot of various different areas. Finance and HR and recruiting and promotion. There were a whole series. There is no document at the end of the process. You get a whole bunch of kind of sub-reports. Almost initially it felt like they were not really very much, but in terms of when you got really into it and you thought about it, they really changed a lot of the way we think, and built on some concepts that are core to our firm's development and future growth. We literally would not be where we are, the firm would not be where it is without the input and the direction that they helped us develop. We became good friends of the people and got to know them.

I'll give you just a handful of them, because they're on the top of my head. The concept of “one firm firm.” I never heard that. I don't know whether they made it up or they had used it before, but it's meant so much to us. And that, for the Gensler organization, means that we have one firm, no matter whether you're in London or San Francisco or Abu Dhabi. It's all about the firm, although we have various offices, but no office silos. But we all end up as one firm, we all share and we work together and we promote together as a firm rather than individuals. We don't have a star system; we have a constellation of stars. We think that's core to the way we do everything.

One of the things that we wrestled with was promotions. Who becomes a principal in the firm? I may have said this before, but we used to call them vice presidents because we are truly a “C” corp. But the state of Texas said you can't deduct the expense of vice presidents or above for taxes. So we changed it, and we call ourselves principals rather than vice presidents. So that changed, that word changed. But how do you move a person to, like in a law firm, a partner? We had historically been doing it where the local office would recommend somebody, and then the people in the local office would make a pitch to the management committee for that person's promotion. McKinsey said, “No, you can't do it that way. You've got to do it by having the local people propose a person and give you some background. Then people from other offices who have no vested interest in the person, whether they get promoted or not, doing the final interviews, recommendations, research, and delving in to make the recommendation.” That change has been expensive and complicated, because we got people flying in from Shanghai to interview people in San Francisco, and people in San Francisco went out to Shanghai to talk to them, or L.A., and people going to New York or London.

So we invest a lot—not spend, but invest a lot of money on that process. We have over 200 partners now, or principals, but each one of them has been vetted in this way. That makes us all feel much better, because what used to happen was, “God, I just need a couple more principals. The clients want to meet a principal.” So I put up Joe Blow. “Well, he isn’t really a principal.” “Yeah, but I just desperately need him. We can make him a principal.” Principals don’t get locked into a compensation system, but they do in some ways. We just didn’t want Joe Blow to hang around, and we had made some promotions that really weren’t equal. They were not at the level they should have been, because one of the offices said, “Oh, I just got to have this person. I just got to. I can’t keep them. They want to leave if I don’t—” “Well, let them leave.” Anyway, the new process become a core value of us.

The studio is the structure of our firm. We’re built around a series of studios in each office. The small ones have one. New York has seventeen, and L.A. probably has the same number. San Francisco probably has twelve or fifteen. Depending on size. We try to keep them from twenty-five to forty-five.

20-00:10:13

Meeker:

Forty-five to twenty-five?

20-00:10:15

Gensler:

People. They may be around a practice area. They may be hospitality, or maybe multiple practice areas. They’ll usually have two leaders, maybe three. A technical leader, a marketing leader, a managing leader, depending again on the size of the studio. They’re in many ways responsible for their own activities, generating their own business, keeping their own clients. But at the same time, and this is the complicated part, they have to share across the offices. So they’re loaning people to other offices, and they’re loaning within the office they’re in, and they’re borrowing people, and they’re moving people in and out. Nobody really sits and looks at a profit and loss statement, but we kind of do. Is this studio bringing in their fair share of business and doing stuff? How’s the quality of their work, and the relationship with the clients?

So it’s a scalable manageable arrangement, rather than the design department and the production department and the marketing department and this and that. Some studios are big enough to have their own marketing capabilities, and some use central marketing, depending on the project they’re going after and teaming with other offices. In some ways, you can think of a studio as almost a homeroom. It also is an area where people can go and talk to a principal, find out how they’re doing and what they’re doing, what their future is and what their goals are and everything, from bonuses to you’re going to have to leave, and everything in between.

The concept of a studio is a really core value of the firm, how we organize and how we manage. People ask us, “How do you control 4,000 people?” The

answer is, you clearly don't. You have management people that you trust and you work with and you respect. We bring them together a lot, and they share ideas and opportunities. There are training courses and programs for them. But it's all based around this kind of homeroom concept of studios. Some are more flexible than others, and some leaders are stronger designers. It's a really good way to manage people dispersed around the world. There are maybe 150 studios or something like that around the firm right now. That's a good thing.

We were always struggling with interoffice billings. "You borrowed him. Do I pay you for his whole bill, or do you pay me?" and all that. We finally gave up all that crap and said, "Look, we're one firm. Let's do what's right, not what the financial statement—" People are being compensated by performance and happy clients and making money. But let's don't get ourselves so tied down in money transfers and all the complications that that brings to it. There were dozens of little things that they said, "You really ought to do this and you really ought to do that." I can't think of a lot of them right now, but there certainly were a lot of those.

They worked with us. If we said, "This doesn't work," they'd come back and say, "Well, let's try this and this." But as I stated before, they wouldn't help us implement it at all. They don't give classes. They didn't come in and give a training session to our guys, "This is the way you want to deal with this situation or this situation." Which I still find fascinating, that they don't do that, but I guess they don't want to spend their time doing that. They really only will take assignments when they work directly with the CEO and the senior management. That's the level they want to work at.

20-00:14:57
Meeker:

So the studio system idea, this was something that came from McKinsey. Do you know where they got this from?

20-00:15:07
Gensler:

I don't know. One of the things that they're very, very, very cautious about is even telling you who their clients are. They do not tell you where anything comes from, they do not tell you how they do research or anything. Now, since that time they've started to publish. I'm on their email, and I probably get seven or eight articles a week. They have their own research. I think it's like our sending out research. It's sort of reminding clients that they're there, and they're thinking about issues and current issues. But how they do that, I have no idea. I don't want to say they're secretive, but they are. I have never heard them mention another client's name, as well.

Marty has gone on and became assistant secretary of labor, then had his own businesses and lives in Berkeley. His wife's a professor at Berkeley and now he is head of a business school, runs a business school for a Scandinavian firm. Hult is the name. Did a commencement address for him in San Francisco. But they've got like six, seven hundred kids, and I think going to a

thousand kids in the business school. It's a fascinating business school, in that they cram two years into one year. They go six days a week nonstop, long days. These are mostly international kids living in a foreign country. So they come in and spend this time. Highly sought-after people, and this is a for-profit business school. But very good. They do it in one year instead of stretching it over two or three years.

20-00:17:23

Meeker:

Since McKinsey didn't deal with implementation, how did you mobilize their ideas into practice at Gensler?

20-00:17:35

Gensler:

Well, that's a good question, and I'm not sure I have a good answer. We all read the stuff they gave us. In those days, the management committee would meet on a regular basis, every six weeks or so, and we started rolling it out. We started running a training program. We started Gensler University as an outgrowth of that, where we would bring in trainers to implement some of these ideas. It didn't happen overnight. Probably over two or three years, it got rolled out. For example, McKinsey is a worldwide organization, but English is the language. So Gensler, although our people from marketing and things work in local languages, basically we're a U.S. company. We use English, and that's the language we communicate in.

It's tough when you're like in China where 80 percent of the people are Chinese, maybe more. We ask them to learn English, and help them, send them to language schools and courses. I always worried for a while that in these international locations, that people would not feel comfortable working for an international firm. But I found they've been very excited about it, especially women, who in many communities don't get a chance like the men do. We hire a lot of women designers and people in architecture, and they do extremely well. So we probably internationally, at least in Asia, I'll bet you we're sixty to seventy percent women because of that. And they're terrific. Very loyal and very hardworking.

20-00:19:47

Meeker:

Were there any ideas that were presented by McKinsey or in other circumstances that you implemented and realized they didn't really match with Gensler very well?

20-00:19:58

Gensler:

I'll use the word we Genslerized a lot of stuff. I'll go back a second. I really strongly believe in the best consultants you can hire. There is no point in trying to be a world-class organization and not have the best people. And they're smart. But you have to ultimately be your own firm and do what you are capable of. There was an organization, I think out of Kansas City, Talent Plus, that Ritz-Carlton uses and Disney uses and a lot of companies use to evaluate their people. During this process we were not sure how strong some of our people were and where their weaknesses and strengths were. And these

people come in and give you this interview, test interview thing. I can't remember exactly how it was done, but it's quite detailed. You'd get a ten- or fifteen-page typed report on each person. Which I always thought was funny, that I got the top score. There were smarter people than I am in our firm for sure.

Anyway, these are the people that are really potentially leaders, and this person couldn't lead his way out of a paper bag. Some of it was not good. Well, it wasn't appropriate information. One of the things that people have trouble with is we're a design firm. There was a gentleman named Don Brinkmann. We have the Brinkmann Award. Don died, but he was considered one of the top designers. He was the Orlando Diaz of New York. He was brilliant, but he was a Gensler guy until he died. They said, "I don't know why you hired this guy. He couldn't lead anything." Well, right, he couldn't lead anything, but he could design like a wizard, and he did it all himself. Clients just adored Don. His job was not to try to lead things. So you had to be really careful, because they were talking about leadership potential.

We have a situation right now where they went back to them after maybe twenty years, this organization, and evaluated a bunch of people. They came back and said, "This guy, he's no good." "Well, he's leading one of our biggest offices right now, and he's doing a heck of a job." Turned the situation around when we had a leader who was an amazing marketer but couldn't manage people. He had grown up in the Skidmore system, and he was trying to almost force the Skidmore system on us. It just didn't work well. This guy's come in, and he's got the staff happy and he's got the clients happy, and he's doing a heck of a job. They said, "This guy, you might as well start planning to release him because he's no good."

So you got to be your own firm and you got to believe in certain things. We don't want everybody cut out of the same mold. We want a variety of talents and variety of approaches. Now, there are certain skill sets that we'd like to do, and one of the things that you learn is build on their strengths and manage their weaknesses. Most people, if you see a person's weakness, they spend all the effort trying to change the weakness. That's not a good style. It's much better to take the things that they're good at and make them better at it, and just manage that other stuff. Try to avoid them having to deal with that where they're not strong.

There are a lot of things over the years that I've picked up from consultants. The McKinsey support continued on for, I don't know, ten years, until three years ago. Ted Hall, who retired from McKinsey but was in line to be their managing partner, and then a tragedy, one of his sons got killed and he just couldn't handle the emotional thing. He's a very successful farmer and restaurateur and winemaker up in Napa now. He became an advisor to our board and went to every board meeting, consulted with us and helped us through a lot of interesting problems, and brought his background of

McKinsey. McKinsey became, for us as an organization, not just a consultant but became somewhat of a role model. They have international offices, they have mostly high-level people in various countries. They're on their own. How do they manage them, and how do they build offices and open offices, and how do they promote and do a lot of things. Some of it they told us and some of it, as we went along, especially in various countries—how did McKinsey open in India? Ted was able to tell us, “Well, this is what we did, because I opened the office in India.” So we've used that.

Then we had a gentleman named Jim Edgar who was a close friend of mine but turned out to be an amazingly good consultant. He ran the consulting practice for Touche Ross and then started his own consulting business, although his consulting in business, normal consulting, was more in product and marketing and those kind of things, which we didn't use him for. More the HR and helping us manage the leadership transition with Margo, Tony, and Ed, and helped us meet with each one of them and me and talk. We'd get it worked out.

And then Denny Rice, who is our attorney, who joined us real early, I talked about before—he's a lawyer, but he's an amazing sounding board. I hate to say it but because I'm the founder, I'm a little different than everybody else in terms of the pecking order. There are times you just want to talk to somebody who's independent, not part of the firm, to get an opinion. Denny really got to know the firm and the people. He was on our board for a long, long, long time, although never attended a board meeting really. But was an advisor to us.

Those kind of people, they're expensive, but they're knowledgeable and they tell you like it is. They're not out there hustling you. They're just out there giving you great advice. Jim, for example, helped us through the ESOP, when we wanted ESOP. We ran all sorts of numbers. Does this make sense? How do we do it, and how do we want to make this work, and how do we want to make that work? He just did a wonderful financial analysis for us so that we all got comfortable. So we use outside resources. We've been using an accountant named Steve Mayer a little bit in our finance. He's accounting. Now we've kind of outgrown him, and it's too bad because I like Steve a lot. He's doing personal stuff for me. But the firm is—especially in the international stuff, because Steve just doesn't have that experience. So we're looking for a guy. There's a guy in, I think, Boston Consulting who the firm is using now. I think he's working out pretty well.

20-00:28:19
Meeker:

I'd like to now move on to pick up some stuff that we were talking about in our last session back in June, and that was the international expansion. We already covered kind of a broad overview of how you expanded into new countries and everything. But I think one thing that we didn't talk about was

how this really started to begin with. And that was, from what I understand, the work with Shimizu Construction.

20-00:28:53

Gensler: Shimizu.

20-00:28:53

Meeker: Shimizu Construction out of Tokyo, and there were new offices to be built in Tokyo and Hong Kong. This kind of, from what I understand, spurred the expansion into Asia.

20-00:29:07

Gensler: Well, yeah.

20-00:29:08

Meeker: Correct me. Sounds like I'm not getting this right.

20-00:29:10

Gensler: Well, it did. It very much did. There was a guy whose name I've gone blank on who was an American who had been in the Korean War. After the Korean War he ended up in Japan, the military, and then married a Japanese girl. Fred something or other. He built a pretty nice interiors practice, very similar to ours, and he came over one day. He came to the States and introduced himself to me. He was a nice guy. I liked him a lot. He said, "Gee, we're seeing a bunch of American companies starting to come to Japan. You could really help us and we could help you when your clients—we could do the work there for them. Your clients would be happy, and maybe you could help us when some Japanese clients come to the States." Although he had mostly American clients. So we built a relationship working with them. We started going to Japan on a regular basis, because some of our clients were going to Japan and we wanted to be with them. We'd introduce them, and they would help do the local. We didn't know how to do things, drawings in Japanese and a bunch of other things.

Then we got a call from a company called Shimizu. We had stopped off at the consulate and talked to the government business development people. And I'm pretty sure, although I never got verification, that they really pushed for the Japanese to hire some American businesses. They were coming here and we were accepting them, and they were pushing into the U.S. market. But they were being very resistant to Americans going into the Japanese market. Shimizu was the biggest developer, I think developer/contractor. Biggest contractor for sure. Also had a development arm. They were working outside of Japan, in Southeast Asia and other places. The U.S. government said to them, "You'd be smart if you hired some American consultants." They were building a new headquarters. So they came and asked us if we would do their work. We didn't compete with anybody or anything—we were the largest interior design firm doing that. That's the kind of thing the Japanese and the Asians love. It sounds crass, but they want to deal with number one, and we

were pretty good at pitching that. We were the largest interiors firm. Not the architecture side, but the interiors. Architecture was beginning to build up, but people knew us as a large interiors design firm.

So we went over. They had their own huge interior design department. But we knew the American way, the new way of working. We spent time with their people and talked about things. We finally agreed that we would set some standards for the office space, basic office space, and that we would do the executive floors. There were going to be two executive floors. So I went over with Jim Follett. Jim and I went over and worked with them. They gave us a little sketch about how they wanted the executive floors laid out. And it was really awful. They were building their own new headquarters, twin towers in the dock areas of Tokyo. It was a nice building complex, and they had designed the buildings. They were nice buildings. I liked their designers. They were nice guys. But they didn't know a thing about interiors and work flow and work setup. So anyway, we took this sketch and came home. We didn't have anything there, and I didn't want to get with the guy who I'd been with before. He'd want to push himself in, and it was not going real well, although my son Doug did work for him for a while. He lived in Japan for about a year, year and a half. He worked for him and then worked for Takenaka—there were big five construction firms, of which Shimizu was the biggest.

So we did this drawing, these drawings, and were very proud of how we worked it out. We thought we had taken what was on this rough sketch. It was like the beginnings, my first years when I went in business, where I'd get a sketch from some office manager on grid paper. They couldn't quite count the number of squares, so the chairman's office was three times the size of anybody else's. I said, "I don't think it needs to be that much bigger." But anyway, so we show them this really nice plan. They always said, "Oh, very, very nice. Very, very nice plan. We really like this. This is really well done. But where's the plan that we gave you?" And I said, "Well, this is sort of modification." "No, no, no. Where's the plan we gave you?"

And all of a sudden a light bulb went on in my head, and I realized this was drawn by the chairman probably. There was no way a Japanese lower than the chairman was going to show him anything but his plan back. They were not going to say, "Well, your plan was nice, but we've got a better one." That's the Japanese culture, and that's the way it's going to be. So we meekly came home and redrew his plan, modified it a little bit and tried to line up some things and make some things happen. They reluctantly went in and showed him. I don't think we ever met him, actually. They went in and showed him. He said, "Oh, okay, I guess that's all right." So we actually built a very, very nice floor, although it could have been a hell of a lot nicer.

After the job was done I got a tour of the space. We had a Japanese teahouse in there, and all the various Japanese rooms. It was really quite a beautiful job. There was a staircase that connected the two floors and it was not in the lobby,

it was not the most prominent thing. It was down one of the side halls, but usable by everybody to go between the two floors. We were walking by, said, "Oh, that's nice." The guy stopped and he said, "Very sad story. One of our workmen committed *hari kari* building this stair because he felt that it wasn't of the quality that it should be with the chairman." I thought, "Oh, my God. I designed something a guy felt it was so hard to build he committed *hari kari*." That's Japan.

20-00:37:20
Meeker:

Wow. This was in the 1980s or nineties?

20-00:37:25
Gensler:

Probably early nineties. Anyway, we did a bunch of stuff with the Japanese.

Then there is a huge developer in Japan. Dick Bender, who was the dean of the architecture school at Berkeley, now retired, has always been very, very active in Japan, and would go back and would bring Japanese groups. In the old days, twenty Japanese would show up at your office and take pictures of everything you did. Dick would go back and forth. God, I'm forgetting everybody's name this morning I want to remember. I'll remember it in a second. But there's a family in Japan that ran everything. We could see that they were the key players in terms of office space in Japan.

So we decided that we would open an office in Japan. There were more U.S. firms coming. This thing hadn't worked out well with the other guy, so we needed to be there. We sent a couple of people over and opened an office. I can remember the company bought buildings and numbered them one, two, three, four. We were in number eight, which had an elevator but was like a six-floor walk-up. It was pretty rough. We came in, and we had a guy [Steve Louie] who had gone out to Asia and Singapore for us for Boehringer Ingelheim, a drug company. He had gone out there and married a Japanese woman in Singapore and wanted to stay there, so he became our manager. So we had a guy who knew Japanese a little bit, and knew Gensler, and that was work. We got started with this office, and we built a real kind of modern slick little office in this really terrible place.

So we had this office, and we made a deal where they were talking about we would be partners and we'd have a business, and they would put some of their people in the business. Mori. The Mori Building Company. Mori's a really powerful people. We would have this joint project and joint everything. We would control it fifty/fifty, and it was going to be great. They were going to bring all the business to the firm of their work, and they had millions of feet. Roppongi was being built, and all these buildings. He built a model of the city of Tokyo, maybe 10,000 or 15,000 square feet. The smallest building was maybe a half an inch tall, and every damn little building in the city was shown. What you realize, Tokyo is really a one-story city or a two-story city with a bunch of big high buildings. Anything except for the park where the

royal family lives. He said, “I’m going to change this and I’m going to build hundred-story apartment building, clear out all these one-story places and build hundred-story apartment buildings. I’ll build one here and one there and one over there. The rest will be all a park, and people will live in the parks and get out of these one-story—”

20-00:41:58

Meeker:

Sort of a Corbusier style?

20-00:42:00

Gensler:

Very Corbusier. He built this gigantic model. It was unbelievable. You got up on gantries to walk around it. You had gantries so you could change a building when a new building went up and people dropped down and put a new building in. It was an unbelievable thing. Dick Bender knew the Moris very well and would show them around. So I’m thinking this is going to be fabulous. No business ever came out of the damn thing. We got our own business a little bit, but no business ever came out of it to speak of. A little bit here, a little bit—but you couldn’t keep an office busy on that.

So the Mori thing never took off. Finally we started having business there and we got a few more opportunities, so we opened a real nice office. It’s been a struggle, it’s been hard. The Japanese really resist hiring Americans. We’ve had to make most of our work off of American clients. The office is probably 90 percent Japanese. They’re wonderful workers. They’ve been with us a long time. There’s a Japanese woman who runs it, which is very unusual in Japan. She struggles a little, but she’s done a good job. Two good design/marketing people who are Japanese, who are partners, and have done a good job. They’re very creative. We’ve gotten into things different there. Do a lot of product design and furniture design. We do a lot of hotel interiors. We haven’t really gotten into much architecture. A little bit. Still a lot of interior work. It’s maybe forty or fifty people right now and doing fine. But Japan is tough. They’re having a tough economy. They take care of their own first, and you’re at the end of the food chain with them. That’s Japan.

We also were having the clients who wanted to go to Hong Kong. Credit Suisse wanted a big job done in Hong Kong, a big Hong Kong office. So we put a project office with those suites, office suite things to do that project. A guy named Peter Gordon went over and set up an office and did that. Somehow we got a big television station. It was like Universal or something. They were a TV station, but they also made all these Chinese movies, had a back lot with all the old Chinese towns and warriors and sumo. It was an interesting job. We did a whole campus for them. We got some interesting work. This was all just before the turnover. We struggled in Hong Kong because they wanted everything what’s called design build, so we were always trying to scurry around, find a contractor. The contractors basically had their own little design departments which they were throwing in for free. When they had to hire us, that made their price, they said, non-competitive. So

we struggled in Hong Kong because of this design build requirement. Credit Suisse wanted their job. And a couple of other major law firms and other things. So we had some nice projects, but it wasn't really going anywhere.

That was at the same time that people in the Chinese planning department in Shanghai, especially those who had gone to school with Jun [Xia] and were calling him in Denver to come over and help them. China owns all the land, and yet they were selling it to developers. The developers were coming in with these really ugly terrible buildings. We talked earlier about "look at me" buildings. These were godawful things. They said, "We're trying to create a new China, a new Shanghai, a new way of thinking." Jun was running back and forth, and finally he got tired of flying back and forth and was just exhausted. We were not competitive, because we were trying to draw the work in Denver, which is our least cost office in the States. Price of staff is cheaper there than anyplace, but it's still not cheap compared to China then. China now has moved up, and some of the prices we pay to hire staff in China today are comparable with any of our offices. Don't kid yourself. They've moved up the numbers pretty quickly.

Jun said, "I'll go over there and open an office," which he did. It's been a booming success. Then he was getting calls about Beijing, and finally they had to open a Beijing office. That's gone pretty well. Not like Shanghai, but we've got, I don't know, forty or fifty people up in Beijing, I think, and they do some very nice work. We're getting more work up there, both architecture and interiors, although they're mostly doing interiors. The architecture's being done in Shanghai, although I'm not positive of that. It may recently have changed, but I think that's the way it's happening. And some of our stateside clients are doing things in Beijing because they feel Beijing is the place that they should be, with the government and everything.

So China's been a very good opportunity for us. Now we're considered, I think, practically local. One of the tricks is, and we've suffered a little bit in London, you can become too local and then you're just like every other damn firm. So they're really talking about hiring a global international kind of a firm, and there are a lot of those around. We want to have something that's an international firm, bringing us new ideas from all over the world. So we balance having not all Chinese staff. I'm guessing that 80 percent is Chinese, but 20 percent is international. Australia, Germany, U.S., England. There are a lot of Brits in China. So there's a variety of people that we have, and they're making a wonderful go at it.

Then we opened up in India because a guy came to us. Well, two things. A guy came to us and said, "I could help you in India." We had a lot of people that wanted us to outsource our work to India. We never felt comfortable with that, didn't like that. We have a big platform for production of drawings and capability. The gentleman who you met this morning, Bruce Bartlof, is the head of it. Bruce figured out how we can get our stuff to Japan and to China.

So everybody said, “Well, a cheap place to produce documents.” We were getting hurt especially on these retail rollouts in the beginning, but even other things where we just couldn’t compete with the cheap prices that people were prepared to do the work for.

We said, “Well, what if we have our own people?” So we went with this other guy who had his own design firm but said, “I’ll help manage.” David made a deal with him to open up what we call an insourcing office. It was a Gensler office, was really this group office which we’ve subsequently bought out. It now is a 100 percent Gensler office. We went into a free trade zone, I think, and we could only export our work. We couldn’t do work for India, and we started getting work in India. So we’ve now moved to a different location where we can do work and be an Indian firm. We do a lot of insourcing there. It’s worked out terrifically. They’re good people and they’re nice people, and they’re now Gensler people. We’ve got some good leaders, and they’ve gotten into the community and started to do other work. Then through China and other things, we’ve met more people in India. We have a fairly thriving practice there right now. India is a very tough place to do business.

At the same time, just as an aside note, the East Coast was saying, “We got connections in Costa Rica. Costa Rica would be a great place to have an insource for the East Coast, the same time zone.” So we put an office in Costa Rica with, I don’t know, twenty people. They were doing retail rollouts. They’re now over a hundred down there, and they’re doing work all over South America. Now we’ve opened in Mexico and Sao Paulo, and I don’t know where else we’ll open in South America. They were expanding and they said, “God, I need help. I’m flying from Costa Rica to Brazil. God, we’ve got clients that want to go to Brazil.” So those offices happened.

Similarly in Asia, a group called the CP Group, which is one of the largest agricultural firms in the world, they’re like Cargill or something. They started as a seed company, and now the richest guy in Thailand is a guy whose name is forty letters long and I couldn’t pronounce it. But it’s the CP Group. They started with pigs and chickens and now grow everything. They said, “Well, how do we get the products to market?” So they put their own trucking company together. Then they said, “Well, geez, we need more markets to sell our food,” so they built shopping centers with grocery stores in them. Then they said, “Well, God, we’d better build more elaborate grocery stores.” He has the number one permit from Mao Zedong to be a foreigner to do business in China, so you can tell he’s connected. They wanted to come meet with us. They’ve got a design group. His daughter is an interior designer and an architect of sorts. So we have a thing with them where we have a company that does work for them and for other people. It’s been okay. We’re not really good partners in that, but this one we’ve got an office. They’ve got some people in it and we’ve got some people in it. We keep busy, but it’s not going where any of us want. With this whole changeover in government there, I’m not sure what that means at all—

20-00:54:02

Meeker: Changeover in government in?

20-00:54:04

Gensler: In Thailand. They've now changed governments there. I think it's more of a Communist government than it is anything right now. I'm not sure what it is. Everybody tells me, "No problem, no change, Art," but I'm not involved day-to-day anymore so I really don't know. But to me, it doesn't feel easy that Thailand's going to be one of the growing parts of the world. I think they've got political and economic problems that we may be caught up in. The CP Group has moved parts of their operation out of Thailand and is big in China. We're doing two forty-story towers for them in Beijing and other things all over the world for them.

20-00:54:51

Meeker: Well, this brings up the question of: Have you felt like you needed to leave any international markets because you go there and the business practices or the political situation or just the business opportunities wouldn't be worthwhile for you? Or is there opportunity everywhere and it's worth it to stick it out for a while?

20-00:55:16

Gensler: No. There are places that are tough. There are places that are tough. I'm not sure that we've actually opened and then pulled out. Certainly Japan, for example, I think we're the only U.S. firm that's left there. We've hung in there and had some slow years, but we've hung in there. Brazil is still giving us fits. Brazil has very weird taxation. You can't do work there and bring it out, and you can't bring in work from the States. It gets taxed at 40 percent, so it costs you too damn much money. I mean drawings. They tax the value of the completed building at 40 percent to stop anybody producing drawings outside and bringing it into Brazil. But we have an office there. Seems to be growing. Seems to be doing okay. I don't know, there are twenty people or something like that in Brazil right now. But each one of these has been driven by a client or a series of clients that said, "Geez, it would really help us if you had an office there. We really could use you." And we've had somebody raise their hand and said, "I'll go."

I think our guys felt that Singapore was a pretty safe haven in a lot of things. So they put an office in Singapore without a lot of work, but potentially quite a bit of work. They've done okay, and I think they're doing much better right now. But they had a slow gestation period to get up, because it wasn't based on a big project where you could go in and work on it, which was the normal way that offices got started. Especially in the States, but London and other places. With a big two- or three-year project. It sort of was a project office, and then it morphed into a location office.

Singapore, we kind of went in and said, "Here we are and lucky you, we're here." I think it's been a slow slog, but it's now caught on. We've got clients

and projects, so it'll do quite well. But like a lot of things, I am constantly worried. We could have an office in the Russia, and we could have offices in a number of places.

One of our guys just wanted to go into Libya. "Gee, I was an architect, I lived in Libya, it's a wonderful country. Gaddafi's now calmed down. He's going to be terrific. We could open an office and I could get all this work." We said no. Nigeria, we got a project in Nigeria. The contract said we never have to go to Nigeria to see this project. We're going to send you drawings, you build it, but we ain't going to Nigeria. There are a number of places like that. In Russia we've got quite a bit of work. I'm scared of Putin. I think he's a dangerous, dangerous man. I just don't want our people to get caught in the middle of crossfire. And the Middle East scares me a little bit. We're in Kuwait, do a lot of work in Kuwait, but our office is in Abu Dhabi. So far the Emirates have been pretty calm. Qatar, they've got an office to do this super project there. God, I saw pictures of it the other day. It's like building an entire city at once.

20-00:59:01

Meeker:

Is this the Doha project?

20-00:59:03

Gensler:

Yes, Doha project. We have an office, but it's really just a project office. Definitely we're not taking any more work in Qatar. That's a bad place to have an office and not right for us. And Russia right now, we've got a couple of the big Russian banks that are begging us to go and open an office, but we just said—I don't like it. And China makes you nervous. In a sense you have to be squeaky clean, because today there was a guy sentenced to life. He's been a professor and said, "We ought to be separate and more because we don't speak Chinese, we speak Kurdish or Uzbekistan," or God knows what. And he's thrown in prison for life. His family, everything he owns, his family is standing there with nothing. They do things that aren't nice. It is a true issue. On the other hand, there are an awful lot of really nice people there.

We're constantly checking with the State Department of where we can go. We're in ninety countries doing projects, and before anybody is allowed to get on a plane, you got to be cleared with the State Department that it's a safe place to go. This is a dangerous world we live in right now; it's volatile every day. Colombia, which used to be a bad place to go, is now getting good, but it still scares me a little bit. And Venezuela. "Oh, we ought to go to Venezuela!" I'm not going to go near Venezuela, right. Cuba. We can't go to Cuba, but Venezuela we could go. People say there are opportunities. There are no opportunities there. Everybody's got some need.

So it's an interesting time to be an international global firm. I'm very proud of the firm for doing it, but it's a lot of work, a heck of a lot of work to protect our people, deal with currencies, deal with legal immigration of our people, and hiring people. One of the biggest questions we had, we went into

Amsterdam. It was a great place to go on the Continent. It finally turned out to be not such a great place. By the time we left there we had to buy out our staff. That cost us a fortune. You can't just fire people. You buy them out at two- and three-year salaries. It's crazy. So you got to be careful where you go. Amsterdam was the only place I can think we pulled out.

Interview #11: October 2, 2014
Audio File 21

21-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is October 2, 2014. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Art Gensler and we are at his home in Mill Valley. This is tape number twenty-one, session number eleven. Probably the last session.

We have a lot to accomplish today. Let's get to it. The first question that I have for you, Art, is a topic that we've talked about a little bit here and there but I'd like your overall thoughts on, and that's the green building movement. I believe we talked about it a little bit in the context of the Epson building in Torrance, which had some innovations. I'm wondering, perhaps, the way to begin is when was the first time that you recall being presented with the idea of green building, sustainable building, reducing energy or necessary resources?

21-00:01:09

Gensler: Sure. Well, I think it was the Epson project in Torrance, California. We'd heard about this raised floor concept where you push the air under the floor, it comes up through the floor. Instead of pushing down cold air through hot air, which is rising, you're just flowing up cold air, cooler air. So it means that you have much less cooling to do, because when you push it down through the warm air you've got to introduce it at a lower temperature. It uses less energy, and the way that the flow naturally flows is that you also have less fan energy. So we got into that. We had seen it. It was being done in Europe, but nobody had done it in the U.S. We started with that, and that was a greatly exciting and successful project. I can't remember who the engineer was, but they really went along and it turned out to be quite successful.

I got intrigued by the fact that we were using energy pretty willy-nilly and not being very conservative about it. Energy prices and the whole energy problems started hitting the world. It became something important. So our first thrust was basically energy. At the same time, I met David Gottfried, who was the founder of USGBC and also the world GBC, I guess it's called. David and I got started, and he got the U.S. Green Building Council started. He asked me to get involved, which I did. Then the Gerald Hines people came to us and said, "We really think we want to start treating our buildings better, really save energy." And Energy Star came along. They asked me to sit with them as a group. A gentleman named Jerry Lea from Hines, who's their preconstruction services guy, who really looks at the guts of their buildings as they were working on them. Jerry's become a good friend of mine.

They were looking at it and saying, "Geez, we ought to be doing some stuff." For new buildings, it was just new buildings. They had the beginnings of the rating system, the first generation of them. The USGBC has a funny way. Everything is by consensus, and they vote on everything. Every member. So

they don't have like an executive committee. When they want to change one of the regulations, the board doesn't vote on it. They put it out to the entire membership. It was a little different way.

I don't think it is as important to worry about the little margins at the top. I want to broaden and have the big stuff that can apply to everybody, every project. So Gensler wrote its own standards, and we published a document. It had little flip charts, and was going to sit on everybody's desk and say, "This is what Gensler stands for." It was a little different than the USGBC. I may have mentioned this before, but we have this 80/20 rule. You can accomplish 80 percent of the green stuff, in my opinion, with 20 percent of the effort and money, and the last 20 percent costs 80 percent of the effort and money. It doesn't seem to me to be worth it. We had started a philosophy. Recycling is important, although I don't believe landfills are going to be filled. If you fly over the United States, there's a lot of empty places that you can put stuff. People say we're running out of landfills. We aren't. But water is becoming scarce.

The biggest thing that started, and we were struggling with it, was manufacturers didn't know what the hell they had in their own product. So you'd ask somebody, if you got a green product, that they didn't know what they had. We had some power in the industry and so we were saying, "Come on, guys, you got to find out what's in your products." An off-gassing or what is—

21-00:06:08

Meeker:

Except for like carpets or something like that, right?

21-00:06:09

Gensler:

Wood that's not from sustainable forests or all sorts of things. We were one of the group from our firm that was pushing to say, "Wait a sec, we can't do a lot of the stuff that we need to do unless we get the manufacturers onboard." To their credit, they jumped onto this and said, "This is something obviously that's important." They started building and manufacturing and designing products that were much greener. That allowed us as an industry, and for our firm in particular to know what we're dealing with.

It kind of got the ball rolling, and then Hines got the ball rolling as a developer. We were designing buildings. There was a classic meeting that was held in Aspen, Colorado. Hines would bring all their people there, the key people, and I was asked to speak with a couple of my guys about what the new building should be. We said, "You got to start thinking about this green stuff seriously." The finance guys were saying, "Yeah, but we're trying to build these projects in Atlanta," it turned out. They were suburban office buildings, and they kept saying, "Geez, the locals can do it cheaper than we can, we're losing every project. We can't get them lined up because we're losing them." So we said, "What if you offered a different product? What if

you offered a really green product? Would that make a difference? Could you do that?" We gave everybody little yellow stickies and they could put, "Do you want a green product or do you want a cheaper product? What do you want?" These guys were walking around with these stickers like it was going to vote on the next election.

Anyway, they finally voted, and to the amazement, 80 percent of them put them on. "Let's go with the Hines organization. Let's do it right." It was a really big breakthrough meeting. Gerry Hines was there, and all the key people. They said, "God, let's do it right." We worked with them on developing some standards, and developed some building prototypes that would really look at the glass and the insulation and the orientation and the lighting and the raised floors and a whole bunch of other stuff. It was a really exciting time. It's evolved. We set up some standards that we said, "These are Gensler standards." But we've done things that are really terrific. We don't go for LEED rating on every project, but we basically just do it.

What I've been lobbying for is that it finally ought to be built into building codes almost, that ought to be just the way it is. One of the other big things that happened was that a lot of it depends on the contractor and the way he builds things, from a recycling point of view and from sourcing materials and a whole bunch of things. The contractors got on board. So I give the U.S. Green Building Council enormous credit for in twenty years mobilizing practically the world, from contractors to manufacturers to designers to people occupying and operating these buildings, a platform in getting excited about it. And it's, for all intents and purposes, the way projects are done today no matter what.

I'm still wrestling with them. There was a conference that David Gottfried put on last week. He interviewed forty of us in the sustainable world. A lot of them are still, in my opinion, very theoretical and very idealistic. That's great; you need that kind of people. But they're worrying about the one-tenth of one percent, and I'm worried about the masses. And if we can get everybody in the game, all the buildings. They say, "Well, we've got ten thousand buildings." Yeah, but there are a million and a half or two million buildings out there, and we got to get to all of those. Let's don't worry about the two at the top percent. Now, they're good research, they're symbolic. But my position, and I think the firm's position, is let's do the right things and not worry. Frankly, one of the problems is when you do these super platinum projects, they don't work very well. The operating engineers in the buildings haven't figured out how to make them work. Now, they'll get there. The software isn't quite right. So although the engineers designed this stuff, and I think the engineers do a good job of designing the stuff, when you get in the field and you start installing it and operating it, it doesn't operate like the engineers designed it.

The USGBC wants you to report all this stuff. Well, people just don't want to report that. I'll use one client. I won't name the client. But we could never get any information out of them. I finally figured out that they have a lot of facilities. One was very, very green, and I think that if they published "this is our green building," the people in the other buildings would have said, "What about me? Why am I in this crummy building? You're putting all your effort into this one." But now companies are reporting their standards, and they're trying to develop standards that are uniform. So we're dealing with the same statistics all the way through. And that's coming. Again, Hines has come out with their own standards that are just absolutely terrific in their commitment to it. That's not the only one, but they certainly have been leaders in it. So it's important.

21-00:12:50

Meeker:

It sounds to me like what you're saying is that you've done the platinum buildings, and it's great that there are people out there who are theorizing the next wave to get to what will be the platinum buildings. But you have your Gensler standards that maybe get you 80 percent of the way there, but then allow you to do a lot more bigger projects along those lines.

21-00:13:17

Gensler:

Well, not even bigger projects. All our projects.

21-00:13:21

Meeker:

Or just more. Yeah.

21-00:13:21

Gensler:

We've set a Gensler standard, said, "We're going to do this." We used to go in and say to a client, "Do you want a green building or don't you?" Well, we don't even ask that question anymore. It's part of the service that we provide. We think that the right thing to do. It's like, do you want the building to stand up or don't you? Well, we think yes, I'd like the building to stand up. I don't think you have to ask do you want a green building or don't you? You live in this world, you ought to have it. We're going to build buildings that are better for the environment. Buildings do use a lot of energy and do a lot of things. We want healthy buildings for the employees to work in or people to use, rent or occupy. We're dealing with literally millions of people every day now, we're that big, occupying, using, walking through, whatever, our space. Twelve people in a beautiful little office that's perfect is good, but we have to deal in a different kind of scale.

21-00:14:30

Meeker:

Well, those smaller projects aren't going to make a dent.

21-00:14:34

Gensler:

Yeah. They're just not going to do anything. I just read a statistic that blew me away—I'll give you one statistic that is on the whole kind of game. If you read about shale oil. There was a big article in the paper this morning. Oh, the water it uses. Shale oil per multiple million gallons or BTUs uses three gallons

of water. Ethanol, for the same BTU generation, uses 2,500 gallons. Three gallons versus 2,500 gallons of fresh water. It's unreal. But if you read the story in the paper about fracking, oh, the water that they use is unbelievable. Now, nobody ever tells that other side of the story.

There's a lot of people have a vested interest in certain things. I'm a neutral guy. I just want to do stuff that's smart. Whether it's global warming or not is a whole different—if it's climate change or not, whether we're causing it, there are basic things that one ought to do because we know how to do them. It's common sense, and we know that it's better than what we were doing before for the environment. It's really straightforward. The biggest problems are coal gas fired for generation, and the biggest problem we have in the world is China has got a billion three hundred million people. They have to get power for them, and they have coal-fired power plants. That's where 90 percent of the pollution is coming from in this world right now: China and India. It'll be interesting to see how bad the volcano that erupted in Japan is. But volcanoes, if you really look it up, cause almost as much damage on a massive basis as anything else. It's an interesting problem.

21-00:16:42
Meeker:

The Green Building Council started, I think, in 1993. To me that's an interesting period of time because there's two events that precede that immediately. One is the Gulf War, the first Gulf War, where obviously oil is a headline question again. And secondly, a pretty major recession.

21-00:17:11
Gensler:

Yes.

21-00:17:11
Meeker:

And these two things, do you think that they play a role in the establishment of the Council and really getting industry on board?

21-00:17:19
Gensler:

No, I think people have used that as a lever. It certainly has influenced people. But if you follow it through, it doesn't follow, because if you believe that we should become energy-independent, then we would have a government that said, "Allow these things to happen." The Gulf War is all about us getting out of dependency on Middle East oil, and yet whether it's the Keystone Pipeline or regulations or shutting down fracking in New York State or Pennsylvania, one hand is doing exactly the opposite of the other hand. There is nothing wrong with cleaning up the atmosphere. We ought to be as a country proud of ourselves. You and I remember when L.A. was brown sky all the time. It was horrible. It's clean as San Francisco now. Sure, they got a hell of a lot of cars and they have a few bad days of the year, but it has changed dramatically. The improvement is dramatic, and people are seeing it, and rightly so. We learned how to do something. We should do it.

But we shouldn't invent crap like ethanol, which is terrible. It's subsidized, it uses all this water, and it screws up the price of corn and the availability of corn for people that need it to eat. We get into these things because we subsidized it, and it becomes a rite of passage for the people in Iowa that they can grow corn and get subsidized and paid for it whether it makes any sense or not. To take that away, well, look it, you'll displace and bankrupt all these farmers who did all this stuff, screwed up land that they shouldn't have planted on at all.

Our problem is we get into things and we can't get out of them. I'm a guy that likes to take steps slowly and not trip over myself. In my book I talk about slow and steady versus crashing forward. I think that's really a better way to do things, rather than the opportune—and I'm sure there are guys that make billionaires with one snap. I give all the credit to them. But for 99 percent of the world, a step forward each way is—rather than we're going to cut off all this or we're going to do this or this. Let's take it a step at a time. It isn't going to happen tomorrow. It's going to happen over a period of time. So let's not shut everything down. Let's transition.

I think natural gas is a clear transition. Has it got CO₂ discharge? Yes. Are we such a stupid society that we can't figure out some gas or something that'll disperse the CO₂ over the next hundred years? When people tell me in fifty years all this will be a disaster, as if we were going to do nothing in technology in fifty years? Look at the change in the world in the last ten, let alone fifty. My God, we'll come up with something. The world is a lot smarter than that. It's this idea that everything right now needs to stop because we'll never change. They're using the capabilities of today. I think electric cars today are ridiculous, but a lot of my friends think they're perfect. My feeling is when you really get behind it, it's not a very effective deal. You're still having to generate power and suck it in. So power plants are producing electricity. Nobody counts that. It's not coming out the tailpipe, it's going up the smokestack of a chimney in an electric power plant. It ain't much different except that you send it over electric lines, which depreciated a lot by the time it gets to the plug versus putting it in the tank and just burning it and going out the back.

But we will get better. We will do stuff. I am all for moving forward. I just think that we as a society have gotten ourselves so wrapped up in stuff. I sit here and scream reading the press when it says, "Well, it's already decided." It isn't decided, and no reason you can say it's already—and these things about—I can't even remember the phrasing that they use in the press right now. The deniers. The deniers. What do you mean, the deniers? Because they don't agree with what you're saying, then they're deniers? It doesn't make any sense to me. But I live on this planet, and I'm going to do what I can and our firm can do to try to do the right things.

I'll give you one example. Glass. Fifteen years ago glass was clear glass. Then it got tinted. Now we have glasses that can do almost anything in terms of heat reduction. There's electric glasses that they'll put a charge in them and they can literally read the sun. When the sun hits it, they make them darker, and when the sun goes behind the cloud it makes them lighter. We can do all sorts of things. It used to be theoretical. Now it's for real. And the glasses that we put in buildings today are fifty times better than the old glasses. Well, we didn't have those ten, fifteen years ago. So now when we re-glaze a building and reskin a building we are able to do those kinds of things.

That's the kind of thing I'm excited about. I believe the world goes forward and progresses. It doesn't just stop today and we're going to stop everything. There's nothing magic about 2014. There just isn't. There's an evolution, and it'll happen. We're not going to kill each other. We're not going to just be dying in the streets because we didn't figure out something. We'll figure it out. We're a smart group of people on this planet and they're not going to kill themselves. It's like childbirth. It's going down and it's going down dramatically, probably too far in some ways. But in many ways that may be good, because we don't have jobs for that many people as we might have. So nine billion people they say is the max and then it'll start going back down again. Two thousand fifty, there are going to be nine billion, and they're going to start going back down. Well, good. That's fine. But we take care of ourselves.

21-00:24:23
Meeker:

Gosh, there's a whole series of other questions about green building, but I think I want to move on. That's a whole interview in and of itself, I think.

The next thing I wanted to ask you about was transformations in the leadership structure of Gensler. This really starts to happen in a major way around 2000. I understand that there's a new executive council, I think 2000, with a bunch of new names that I hadn't really seen before, right? And then Anthony Harbour retires in 2002, Friedrichs retires in 2003. I don't know when Margo Grant leaves.

21-00:25:11
Gensler:

About the same time.

21-00:25:11
Meeker:

About the same time. And then I guess a new board itself was established in 2003. Can you talk about this transition?

21-00:25:19
Gensler:

Sure. Well, let me go back and bring it up to when we started the firm I was the sole owner. Had all the stock, was the sole owner. Over a period of time we had some really terrific people join the firm. Three of them that were really pretty early on, in the first ten years, were Margo Grant, Tony Harbour, and Ed Friedrichs, who really became key players. Tony went to Houston and

got it started and did Pennzoil, and Margo joined him down there, was the design leader. Then when Mobil Oil saw Pennzoil, they asked us to interview for their job ultimately in Washington, D.C., and Margo went to New York. We won that job, and she moved to New York. We had done the Bank of America building here in San Francisco, the interiors for the tenant work. In L.A., the Bank of America and Arco built twin towers. We were asked by Cushman & Wakefield, who had that assignment as well, to come down and do that project in Los Angeles. Was a group, what we called Group Three, but it was a firm called JFN in New York, Gensler, and Selje, Bond & Stewart, a Los Angeles firm. It never really worked out very well because we ended up doing most of the work. But we had started this separate firm to do it. Ed was commuting back and forth to do that and then finally said, "Hell, I'm going to move to L.A. and run the damn thing right." We built an office with a gentleman named Marv Taft, who we were told we really needed to hire by some local real connected people. He was a great guy and a good designer. A firm called Ketchum, Peck & Tooley, who were managers and developers and contractors; they were good people and they helped us a lot.

Ultimately it became clear that we needed a board of directors. So I had Tony, Margo, and Ed, and then I had myself, Drue, my wife, and Denny Rice, our attorney. Now, I never at the time thought about it was three and three, but if there was a case I was going to say, "Okay, I got my lawyer and my wife and me." It never came to that, and frankly we never voted on anything in the board.

21-00:27:48
Meeker:

It was just consensus?

21-00:27:49
Gensler:

It was just consensus, and it's been that way since. We've had one vote. I'll bring it up now because I think it's so ridiculous. We've had one vote in the board. I think they actually vote now, but as long as I was running it, for the first forty-five years, it was consensus or we didn't do it. One time I knew I was going to lose, but I decided I would bring it to a vote. It was whether we pay vice presidents overtime or we don't. My position was that because we bill their time to the client, and many times they're working over the weekend or something to get a project done. So they're working, and let's say we charge 150 bucks an hour for their time and then they get nothing. I said, "But we bill it, so instead of having an overhead and a cost to them, we put the 150 in the firm's pocket," I didn't think that was fair. They said, "Well, we'll make it up in bonus time. We'll keep track and we'll make it up at bonus time." I said, "Everybody else gets paid straight with overtime except for the people by law that are required time and a half, the administrative people." So I voted. That was the only vote that we ever had and I lost it, which I knew I was going to do, but anyway—

21-00:29:05
Meeker:

So you voted in favor of overtime?

21-00:29:07

Gensler:

I voted in favor of being paid overtime. But we did make a lot of decisions of when we were going to open an office or how we were going to do it and who's going to move and how we were going to—

21-00:29:22

Meeker:

Well, the name change, too, right?

21-00:29:25

Gensler:

I think that they were a part of the original name change. When John Bricker came and said, "I can't sell graphics and branding"—I'm not even sure we used the word branding, I think it was graphics mostly—"from an architecture firm." And we decided to be called just Gensler.

So we went along that way, and it went along for a long time. I've always given stock to people. The way we do it is basically you dilute your own stock. We start out with 300,000 shares. Now they've given out about 250,000 of treasury stock. So my original 300,000 has now grown to 550,000 total in the organization. If you just assumed I still owned all the original 300,000, which I don't, then my stock would be diluted by 50 percent, almost. But I kept diluting it and diluting it, so Tony and Margo and Ed could get significant stock. But they wanted more, and they wanted this and that and the other thing. And I did that. They were managing principals and they were getting more. Well-deserved, don't get me wrong. Well-deserved. We had some tugs and pulls.

There was a separate system where if you became a vice president you got 500 shares, and then if you did well and the board thought you were doing well, you might get another 250 in another year. Then down the road you might get another 250. Or if you weren't doing that well, you didn't get anything more.

21-00:31:20

Meeker:

What were some of these tugs and pulls? I'm curious what some of the issues were.

21-00:31:23

Gensler:

Well, they thought they were entitled to more ownership. They ought to have a percentage. They kept talking about, "I want 10 percent. And I want 10 percent. And I want ten." I said, "Come on, guys. We got all these other people. We're never going to get you to 10 percent unless I give you everything I got, and I'm not going to do that. That's not fair and that's not right."

21-00:31:45

Meeker:

Is that what they were asking?

21-00:31:46

Gensler:

One of the things that I've learned is that ultimately people know I'm straight and fair. It runs through the firm. They can trust me. If I tell them I'm going to do something, I do it. Once you lose that you can't ever get it back, so you have to be really careful. You have to be fair. But you do things quietly, and you help and you work with people. Ed was going through living in L.A. and then he came back. Finally he became president. I was CEO and chairman, and he wanted more responsibility and wanted to do things. I said, "Fine." He's ten years probably younger than I am, maybe fifteen. So that seemed good. He was much more business-leader oriented. Margo was the designer and didn't worry about—oh, she worried about business, and Tony same. Tony came in one day and said, "I'm retiring. I've bought a house in Santa Barbara." I said, "What are you talking about, Tony?" He had gone to London because he's a Brit, born there. He left Houston and just all of a sudden up and left and went to London and ran that office. Tony just sort of up and left and said, "I'm retiring." Although his parents lived quite late. His brothers didn't, and he got very nervous about his health and some other things, so he just retired. Then Ed wanted to take over the firm.

21-00:33:30

Meeker:

How old was he when he retired?

21-00:33:30

Gensler:

Probably sixty-five. I don't think he was quite sixty.

21-00:33:37

Meeker:

Okay. So you expected him to stay around a bit longer, right?

21-00:33:41

Gensler:

Another five years or so. Maybe he was sixty or sixty-one. I can't remember exactly. Ed and I got into some things. He had some tough marriages and some things, and it just didn't feel right to me. He had brought in David. When Ed was in L.A. and he was president down there he said, "I don't think that our administrative side is being run properly," in what we call corporate services. So he brought David in, who has a financial background. Not an architectural background or design background, although he's been around it his whole life. He went to Stanford Business School and Dartmouth, so he's pretty solid in that kind of stuff. So Ed brought him in, and then they got into a pissing contest about some things and I never quite decided why. Ed really went at David for a while and it was really awkward. It just wasn't right. So Ed decided he was going to retire. Profit sharing and the ESOP and the ownership stock, he went away with a very nice package, as did Margo. Margo started saying, "I'm going to be retiring," so she was selling off some of her ownership. But both Tony and Ed just kind of took major, major lump sums or they retired.

21-00:35:05

Meeker:

Who do they sell it off to?

21-00:35:07

Gensler:

ESOP was then, so they were able to sell part of their stock to the ESOP and part to the firm.

21-00:35:12

Meeker:

So they sell it back to the—

21-00:35:14

Gensler:

Back to the firm; some of the stock was sold to the ESOP. But it's to the other employees. All the other employees. What we do is balanced. We have a profit sharing plan and an employee stock ownership plan. Let's say we're going to put ten million dollars into a pool, and here's where we need to buy back stock from people. We'll put seven million into the ESOP and three million into the profit sharing. Those numbers I think are like thirty-five million now. The ESOP would buy the shares back at what's called fair market value, not book value. All the other transactions are done at book value in and book value out. The book value has gone from zero, one penny a share, to like \$320 a share. What we always did was we gave every stock. Nobody in our firm bought any stock. They had to declare that stock and pay tax on it as if they got it, and that set their base. From then on it was capital gains appreciation. Some of us who got in early got a very low base. All my stock is worth a penny, but when I finally get around to sell it, on a fair market value it's over a thousand dollars a share. So if somebody had a hundred shares, that's a lot of money. Not everybody can sell to the ESOP, but we've allowed very senior people to do that. We've tried to keep the ESOP with less than 50 percent ownership so the management team has a good chunk. The key employees have a good chunk, and then the ESOP has about 45 percent. That worked pretty well. Then Ed left and Margo retired.

21-00:37:21

Meeker:

How did that feel?

21-00:37:22

Gensler:

Well, it was a thing I could really see coming, and I think they did, too. That the next generation, the Davids, the Andys, the Diane Hoskins, the Dan Winey, and Robin Klehr and Joe Brancato really were coming on strong. I said, "Let's make them executive committee." Then I said, "I think we got to make three of them the executive directors." It sounds crazy, but I think it was still the right thing to do. It wasn't that I'm three times as good as one person, but with three of them, they don't compare. If it was a single person everybody would have said, "Well, Art wouldn't do it that way," or this or that. But when there are three of them, they never say that because they're not thought of as the same as me. I've been around so long and so involved in everything that you could see it coming. "Well, Art doesn't do it that way." They had to have their own freedom. With three of them, they could. They balance. It's tough, but it's like the office of a president. They're something like that. And it has worked. They rotate responsibilities and do other things. They've really worked it out.

21-00:38:43

Meeker:

With the co-CEOs right now?

21-00:38:47

Gensler:

There's three CEOs right now for all intents and purposes. Because there's three also, two-to-one at times when they disagree on an issue. They have different strengths. In one sense they get upset, because David is in some ways the face. He is the front guy, but he's also the money guy. Andy is the sort of design guy, and Diane is the strategy face. She lives in D.C., and Andy lives in L.A. David lived in L.A. and now is living here in San Francisco. Then we started having one of the other three was the chairman and one other was a vice chairman. They get together four to six times a year, the whole six of them as the executive committee. They do a lot of strategy and planning and long-range thinking, but the day-to-day is by the three of them.

It's worked pretty well. I can't remember, and I should, whether Ted Hall, retired McKinsey partner, or Jim Edgar, helped me on those. I know Jim helped me a great deal in putting the ESOP in. It was pretty much Ted who was the one who—but it may have been Jim, as well, who helped me think through and talked. Jim did a lot with Tony, Margo, and Ed. He was very involved in calming them down and being the sort of voice between—they couldn't say things to me, they'd say it to him, and he'd say them to me. Jim is a management consultant. He was with Touche Ross, head of consulting group for them in the West Coast. He started his own firm of Edgar, Dunn & Conover. But Jim [Edgar] is a guy I've known since college, so he has really been a very calming force, helping balance a lot of the stuff. Ted Hall really probably was not that much involved in those transitions, but was the one that really helped us as we expanded globally. We said, "We're going to India." He said, "Well, I remember starting the McKinsey office in India. This is the things you better watch out for." He gave us a lot of good ideas and pointers. He, as Jim did, attended most all of our board meetings and executive meetings.

Parallel to this we'd have a management committee which was probably another six people. So there are like twelve or thirteen people. Those were rotating people that we thought were potential for board seats and potential for other things. It was an outgrowth of we wanted to have a body of people that first touched all the offices or regions, but also had practice area responsibilities and administrative responsibilities and other things, so that we weren't isolating ourselves. That has worked out extremely well, I think. A number of people have rotated off the management committee and onto the board now. The board has expanded. I think the board is eleven people. There are a number of people that come on the board and off the board. But the board, in honesty, is the executive committee, the six of them, and the management committee is this rotating group of people.

21-00:42:26

Meeker:

It sounds like then, what you're kind of talking about is, obviously with this transition, some difficulties around ownership levels and such.

21-00:42:41

Gensler:

Oh, it was sometimes really tough. Really, really, really tough.

21-00:42:47

Meeker:

But there's also a generational transition kind of happening?

21-00:42:52

Gensler:

Well, there's a need for generational transition. Unfortunately Tony and Ed, not Margo, although Margo had a tough time. She never married until she was like sixty. Then she found the love of her life, a terrific guy. Then he died, and that was a real blow to her. It was really tough. Ed and Tony kept getting into divorces and getting their net worth chopped in half. So they were always saying, "Well, geez, all I have is this." "Yeah. You only have half of what you've gotten because you keep getting these divorces." I give myself credit. I was steady through the whole thing. I didn't get nasty. I never raised my voice. I did that. We tried all these things out, and Jim was pretty helpful in cautioning me, "Art, be careful of this and this and give this." So we gave them some more stuff. Maybe they deserved it.

I have no regrets about anything from a fairness point of view. I think that all of them were well set financially. They've gotten the recognition. We invite them to our major events. Walter Hunt, another one, who was vice chairman, they're coming to the annual principals meeting up in Boston. Margo's coming up with him. We were just talking about the fiftieth anniversary next year. We'll invite all of them back. These are tremendously charging people. These are people that have accomplished a great deal in their own right. They've made the firm a better firm. They're wonderful people. They're close friends of mine. They're still all close friends of mine. I email or talk to them a lot. I respect them, and the firm wouldn't be where it is today without them. Everything that they gave to the firm, they gave it their all. But everybody has a self-ego enough, and so to just sit there and let Art Gensler hand it out, that probably isn't realistic either.

I was the first generation. Tony, Margo, and Ed with me were the second generation. Now David, Diane, Andy, Robin, Joe, and Dan are the third generation. I'm proud of that. I think that many firms don't get to the third generation. This team is working really hard for who's going to replace them. They're not planning on leaving for at least another five years. But they're working on it now rather than working on it a week before they decide, "I'm out of here," as Tony did. I said, "What are you talking about? Retiring? Tony?" He said, "I've already bought a house in Santa Barbara." Give me a break. "Goodbye. I'm leaving London." David flew over and co-managed it for a while.

I think it's part of creative, talented, positive but aggressive, and you have to be people. I have respect for every one of them. Each one of them contributes so much to this firm. We use a phrase in the firm that I think is truly unique but really the right phrase, which is a constellation of stars. We're not a star system. It isn't the Art Gensler firm. It's a constellation of people. Our clients believe that, I believe it. It isn't about Art Gensler at all. That's right. To me the word Gensler means a firm of a whole bunch of people. It almost is coincidental that it's my last name. That's the thing that we've created which is so unique. It's not about the senior people, and all the rest are just out there to support us. It's about all the people in the firm. That's a style and attitude that I think too many organizations don't understand.

21-00:47:48
Meeker:

Let's move on. I want to talk about Vegas. Let's talk about CityCenter. So CityCenter, the largest private construction project, from what I understand, in the history of the United States, resulted in eighteen million square feet of buildings. Several city blocks in Las Vegas. It wasn't just one star architect that was on the marquee but you had Libeskind, Cesar Pelli, Norman Foster. The list goes on, right?

21-00:48:30
Gensler:

Yeah.

21-00:48:31
Meeker:

There's the massive institution of MGM Grand, right, that bankrolled it, in part with Dubai, which is another complicated factor. Then there was Gensler.

21-00:48:47
Gensler:

Yeah. Well, that's an interesting story. I got a phone call one day and they said, I can't even remember who called, "I'm from MGM and we want to come and talk to you. We'll be up Tuesday." I never said, "Why?" which was dumb of me. I should have said, "Well, why are you coming to see me?" But when some potential client says they want to come see you, you say fine. So they get there and they sit down and I thought, "Well, they'll tell us about why they're here." They said, "Tell us about your firm." I had brought four or five different senior people in to be in the room because I didn't know what direction the meeting was going to go. We showed them some pictures of our work and talked about interaction and interfaced with them. They said, "Well, we are building this big project." But they didn't tell much about it. Hardly anything about it.

21-00:49:51
Meeker:

Did you know of it already?

21-00:49:52
Gensler:

No, no. I didn't know anything. Didn't know anything. They got up and left, and I went back in the conference room and said, "What the hell was that meeting all about?" It was the most bizarre meeting, because they just came, talked to us for an hour, and left. About a week later the phone rings and it

said, “Hi, Art, this is so-and-so. You won.” I said, “What did we win?” I’m telling you, I had no idea. They said, “Well, we’re building this multiple project with multiple architects and designers we haven’t picked yet, and it’s massive.” I think it was going to be five billion at the time. It ended up being seven billion. “And we want you to manage it.” I said, “Manage it?” “Yeah. We have a development department because we build stuff, but they’re not capable of doing this. We’ve watched the interaction of you and your people, and we think you could do it.” It was an assignment that no other architect or person to my knowledge had ever been given. What they wanted us to manage was, and rightly so, they assumed there were going to be multiple consultants. I think in the end there were 200 that we ended up having to manage. There were these starchitects, as you mentioned, the Fosters, the Pellis, the KPFS, the Libeskind. It went on and on. But there were also engineers and landscapers and graphics and signage, electrical.

21-00:51:32

Meeker:

Builders?

21-00:51:33

Gensler:

It was everything. They wanted us to manage it. They even thought then there should be three architects of record that would produce the documents for the whole thing. These starchitects don’t want to produce documents. But it was all literally one site, and yet it had three teams drawing the drawings and making sure that the water pipe from here flows to the water pipe there and putting it all together.

21-00:52:02

Meeker:

Who was the architect that did the drawings, for instance the plans?

21-00:52:08

Gensler:

Well, there was Daly. There was HKS, and there was a firm out of Toronto, Adamson. They do a lot of production work. By and large, they’re good. But it was a massive project, and Perini had been given the contract to do the construction.

21-00:52:47

Meeker:

To build it?

21-00:52:48

Gensler:

To build it. Now, there’s a guy named Tutor, Ron Tutor, who had just bought Perini, a firm called Tutor-Saliba. I had had a run-in with him because he was the contractor that built Moscone [Convention Center] underground, the one under the ground off of Mission Street. Ron is a tough guy. He really is heavy construction. He built BART to the airport and a lot of other stuff. But he’s a tough contractor. He’s a tough guy. We were building the roof of Moscone. Well, Moscone has columns ninety feet apart, and then it has a waffle roof. The Redevelopment Agency insisted that that roof would hold up any building they wanted to put on top of it, which were these big spans.

21-00:53:40

Meeker:

This was like the Metreon Center? Yeah.

21-00:53:42

Gensler:

Yeah. I said, “Well, come on. Can you make the architect at least work with our ten-by-ten grid?” We had this waffle ceiling, a ten-by-ten grid. “Oh, no, no, no. We don’t want to have any restrictions on our designers putting buildings on top of this thing.” I said, “That’s great.” Anyway, so we built the roof, were in the building of it, and all of a sudden my guy—gal, actually—came and said, “Jesus, they’ve left out tons and tons of steel in the roof structure.” So I called up Ron. I said, “Ron, you’re going to have to pull this whole goddamn roof thing off and redo it with the right steel.” “Oh, your engineers overdesigned. You know it’ll hold up. Don’t worry.” I said, “Ron, I ain’t going to pay you. I’m not going to sign the certificate of payment.” He screamed and yelled.

But we actually got him to rip out the whole damn thing and do it over. The Redevelopment Agency just absolutely controlled the thing, and said in terms of that roof they wanted to put a garden and buildings wherever the hell they wanted. So I knew I was in for it with Perini having Tutor as the owner. Perini was okay in some ways.

When we got the assignment the client said, “Okay, let’s put together a list of star architects. You help us interview them, and we’ll run some charrettes and design competitions.” They did a whole bunch of things. They had hired a firm out of New York who does master planning to do an original plan. Andy did some work to modify it a little bit. Then we’d say, “This is your zone. You come up with buildings for here and for here, you come up with buildings.” Give them a program. We ran these competitions, and then we selected them. It was fascinating. Then we were starting to hire. They came with their engineers, and we’d approve some and not others. The ones that we needed to hire directly, so we’d do that. They actually built a major building, God, a hundred-thousand-foot building, on the site next to the Taj Mahal, which was the project office. We put everybody in this building with all the MGM people, and everybody started working together and came up with this program.

It was a fascinating process. I would go down once a month to sit in meetings and for me it was a fascinating—because I wasn’t the day-to-day guy at all. A guy named Walter Hunt was. He commuted back and forth to New York. We had a bunch of people. We at one time had like sixty or seventy people onsite, at least fifty people onsite working on stuff. There were three construction and design zones. Working with various consulting teams, making sure it all integrated. And program. The project got a year behind, because MGM couldn’t make up their mind what program they wanted. They would look at something, “We’ll make it bigger, smaller, make the casino here. Why is this over here?” So they got behind. One of the concepts the project was going to

have, it had to go—there's a gentleman that owns MGM, had the prime ownership, Kirk Kerkorian. He was ninety, and he said, "When this thing opens I'll be ninety-two. I'm not going to make it much past that. I want this thing done." The only way to do it was to just draw and hand the drawings out the door and have the contractor building, moving earth, and digging holes.

21-00:57:36

Meeker:

Which you can do in Vegas, right?

21-00:57:36

Gensler:

Which is what we do in Vegas. Because in Vegas, in the casino world it's time to open, and design second, and cost third. Where normally it's cost or design, cost, and then time. In Vegas it's the other way around in the casino world. But Perini was supposed to give us GMPs for each package and they never did. It was like, "Well, what's this costing?" "Well, you'll know at the end." It's sort of like what's in the health care plan, Obamacare. "You'll find out when we pass it." Ms. Pelosi's little comment. That was sort of the way it was. We kept saying to MGM, "Guys, this doesn't make sense." Kirk Kerkorian and MGM said, "Kirk wants it done on this date, because it's his ninety-second birthday and he just wants to see it finished." So it was ball-out. Just go flat out.

We took on the monorail. There's a monorail that runs and ties to Bellagio and to Taj Mahal and the MGM CityCenter, all MGM properties. We did some graphics and signing and a bunch of other things, some stores. We basically were in the management role. That was important for us as a firm, because first we had always had an ability to work with other firms. Early on Cushman & Wakefield said, "You really understand an office building and the user better than these designers of the building. They're great, but they don't understand how a building is measured for leasable area. Can you tweak the building to make it better?" We had been working with a lot of these architects. We hadn't worked with Libeskind, but we had worked with Skidmore and Foster and Renzo Piano and Pelli a lot. We knew these people. We were comfortable sitting with them and talking and working with their buildings. We had never really managed them, but we could interface pretty well with them.

It was different than we'd ever had an assignment for and managed. But I think in the end we did a damn good job. We learned a lot, and we learned about large projects and the complexities. These are complicated projects. When you take eighteen million feet and they've all got to fit together, and power plants and God knows what, and then the level of detail in the casino in these high-roller rooms, suites and stuff. It is really complicated. They wanted all electronic stuff that you'd touch a button and every curtain moved. Then we dealt with major art, Maya Lin and Henry Moore sculptures. It's like a museum. So the level of involvement was just enormous that we were involved in. Again, seven billion dollars is a lot of stuff.

21-01:01:25

Meeker: So you actually were compelled to get into the details of some of like the electronics and the—

21-01:01:31

Gensler: Every single thing.

21-01:01:33

Meeker: Okay. We should actually switch tapes, because I still have some more questions about this.

Audio File 22

22-00:00:00

Meeker: This is Meeker interviewing Gensler on the 2nd of October, 2014, tape number twenty-two, session number eleven. And we're talking about the Las Vegas CityCenter project. To get a better sense about just precisely what Gensler's role was in this project, can you maybe give us a description of what the team was, how many people were actually working on this project on a fairly regular basis?

22-00:00:35

Gensler: Well, we were called the executive architect, which was a new title. Nobody knew what the hell executive architect was, but here we were. We had to write the rules as we went along. Our team of people morphed over time, but Walter Hunt had a lot to do with it, and a bunch of other people who are now in our Las Vegas office. Some of them stayed, some of them left after the project was completed. A lot of them went to other Gensler offices. We didn't lose a lot of them; they went to other Gensler offices. It was a team that had to be so multi-disciplined, and had to be organized, because you had to see that stuff got done on a certain date, and it had to fit in with everything else. There was a lot of coordination. We were really coordinators. Challenge of making the design architects make decisions, make the clients make decisions. Then the architects of record had to draw the stuff, then they made changes, and then everybody had to approve the design. All of it while you're going on the fly because of this crunch of time schedule.

We broke it into these three zones, one, two, and three. Then we had to make sure, because it's one site, all the utilities and things are servicing the whole thing. Underground is tunnels and miles of parking, all sorts of special areas and foundations and God knows what. They had to all fit together, so we had to be making sure that the engineers were coordinating again with the contractor, who was out there buying stuff that maybe we didn't want and wasn't approved, and samples. He said, "Well, I can't get this, so I'm substituting this. Would it be approved?" So we were kind of the jack-of-all trades, keeping the master schedules, keeping the documents for what is there and where it's going and how it all fits together. Everybody else is sort of their

isolated pieces, and we were the one putting the whole thing together. So there's a lot of interaction with our people.

MGM had a gentleman named Van Arsdale, who now works for us. He was involved in hiring all the interior designers and working the hotel rooms, and then reviewing the stores and the restaurants, picking the restaurant operators and the retail operators that are going to be there, seeing how they fit in. I think there were 200 different consultant teams. We had on our team about fifty to sixty people there, in this facility that they built, the project office, which they've now torn down—it was a nice office. Nicely finished. It looked like a building its last twenty years. It was very nicely done. There were engineers that were there. There were MGM people that they hired to monitor, and then there was a huge group of accounting people just keeping track of numbers and dates and deliveries. You can just imagine furnishing, putting the drapery, the carpets, the chairs, the tables, the beds, the linen, the towels into a building that size. We have these meetings with operations people, and we would coordinate that. “No, you got to have a janitor's closet here. I can't work without this.” Or, “The linen closet isn't big enough for the maids.” It was everything. How they're going to operate them. And then the whole security in a casino.

One of the big things that was interesting. It was at a time when they were trying to kill smoking, and they finally agreed to do no smoking except in the casinos. What they did was fascinating. They said, “We can't have no smoking in like the blackjack tables. We can't do it.” We did a pressurized air system. So the air in there was cleaner than a clean room in a high-tech lab. But there are pinholes. If you look at a table in there, there's a pinhole around the edge of the dealing area. So that the dealer is here, and he's sitting in the little thing. There's pinholes, and all the air is coming up to shield him at a force that will not allow smoke to get through it.

22-00:05:56
Meeker:

So the dealer is shielded?

22-00:05:57
Gensler:

The dealers were saying, “Wait a sec. We don't want smoking. It's killing us.” So we created this whole new concept of everything pressurized coming up out of the table with pinholes, so that they were in this sort of cocoon of fresh air. It was really an interesting thing. And it works. But the extraction of the air in that casino is, as I say, like nothing you'd have other than in a clean room in a big lab.

22-00:06:30
Meeker:

Well, this is interesting. The way that you just described it, this seems to me to exceed an executive architect project management role, that you actually really got into a lot of the problem-solving side of things.

22-00:06:42

Gensler:

MGM would say, "We've got to come up with a solution this week because our dealers are complaining."

22-00:06:49

Meeker:

And they would come to you to get that solution?

22-00:06:51

Gensler:

And then we would go and find a consultant, or we would work with the engineers. We didn't come up with the solutions. We facilitated them being solved, the issues. Because they didn't know what the hell an executive architect did. If it didn't fit anyplace else, it was in our lap.

22-00:07:11

Meeker:

You were then the first point of contact with the project funder, basically?

22-00:07:13

Gensler:

Oh, everything, yeah. It was a fascinating time. Then when they got into building, MGM was going to do all the field checking and punch lists, and we ended up having to do most of that. And systems. When you got a punch list of 3,000 hotel rooms in the Aria, the baseboard is chipped in room 230. We started doing a lot electronically, things that had never been done. Hell, if we'd had iPads it would have been a hell of a lot easier, but we didn't have them then. A lot of things we didn't have. Today we get better and better at it. We have apps that solve a lot of that stuff. I think MGM really was pleased with our stuff. Jim Murren, who's the president, really has complimented and been very positive about it. There was one man, "Bobby" Baldwin, who was really in charge of the whole thing. He ran a hell of a ship, and he made a lot of decisions. There are people criticizing him for this or that.

What happened, just the end of the story, is that there was this big surge in condominiums being built in Las Vegas. They were selling them and making a fortune, and that generated cash to pay for the project. If you take a hotel, amortize it over thirty years, it does put its payout one night at a time. Where a condominium, you build it, you sell it, and you get the cash for the sale. Then you can invest it back in the building almost immediately. But what if those units are sitting there? All they're doing is draining cash, you have no cash. That's where the project got into trouble, because the market just stopped with the 2008 stock market crash. It didn't just slow down: it just stopped. They got saddled with this huge amount of condos that they couldn't sell. The market also slowed down for gamblers. People just weren't coming to Las Vegas. They got caught in a time cycle that was a disaster for the project being completed, because we were open all at one time. I don't know, there are 5,000 hotel rooms and a gigantic casino and huge retail, all these restaurants and stores, and Cirque du Soleil and a bunch of other things, and it was just the wrong time. Timing is everything. But when you take a project that takes five, six years, you don't know the financial cycles that you're going to go

through. That's the nature of the big-bet gamblers and big-bet developers. And that's what they were.

One of the other things that was interesting was that if you looked at Las Vegas up to that project, basically the idea was that they would be themed. Whether it's the Venetian, gondoliers, or the Paris with the Eiffel Tower, or one of the others with battles of pirate ships and Treasure Island. Each one had this kind of theme. Bellagio.

22-00:10:40
Meeker:

Italy.

22-00:10:41
Gensler:

Italian, Italy theme and all. And they didn't want that. They wanted something totally different. They wanted contemporary, fresh, modern architecture. That was a big risk on their part. I can remember Sheldon Adelson, the guy who owns the Venetian, saying, "That's a dumb idea if I ever heard one. It ought to be themed. They don't know what they're doing." Those guys are vicious competitors.

One of the things that I really want to say, because a lot of people think of Vegas as kind of a sleazy place: I found them incredibly knowledgeable, quality business people. These people are really sharp. They know the numbers, they know what they want, they know how to make decisions. They push the chips out on the table and they go for it. I never had one sleazy thing happen the entire time. We've stayed there and done business there. It's a fine community of people. It gets kind of the mobster rap, but it's a very bad interpretation of what as a businessman I saw in Vegas. They are really good, sound, solid people.

22-00:12:07
Meeker:

You had referred to the economic downturn, the recession that comes in 2008. It hits Vegas a little bit before that because of issues around real estate. Did that have any impact on the work that you did as executive architects?

22-00:12:24
Gensler:

No. To their credit, they never came to us and said, "Cut back. Don't do this, don't do that." I guess the fight is still going on. The Harmon Hotel, which is the one Foster did, where they discovered that the reinforced concrete/steel guys had trouble putting the rebar into place and so they burned off these hooks at the end. They just put them in and wired them together instead of having the hooks there. They got halfway up and this was noticed. All of a sudden they said, "Jesus, how are we going to fix this thing?" Well, the first half of the building was a hotel, and the second half was going to be condos. Well, they didn't need any more condos being built, so MGM was thrilled about that. They really had too many hotel rooms, so they didn't really need the building finished. They weren't anxious to have the building, even though it's the most prominent building on the corner of the site. But they're saying,

“Hell, I ain’t going to put people in an unsafe building.” The engineers kept saying, “Well, it’s safe up halfway, so we could just leave it halfway.” And Foster’s saying, “Wait a second. I designed a forty-story building, not a twenty-story building. This is ridiculous.” They’re now in the process of demolishing the building after—

22-00:13:50
Meeker:

Oh, they are?

22-00:13:50
Gensler:

Oh, yeah, it’s coming down. Whole building’s coming down.

22-00:13:53
Meeker:

Had it ever been finished or not?

22-00:13:57
Gensler:

No, it had only gone up to twenty stories, but the glass curtain wall was all the way up the twenty stories.

22-00:14:05
Meeker:

But they never furnished it or anything?

22-00:14:07
Gensler:

Oh, no, no, no. No, no, no. Inside it was just a shell. They never built the condo piece, which was another twenty, twenty-five stories on top of it.

22-00:14:16
Meeker:

Yeah, I think it was supposed to be forty-nine stories. It ended up being twenty-six or something like that.

22-00:14:20
Gensler:

Yeah. So that has always been a cloud, but in reality the timing was such that—so there’s like a \$400 million loss of revenue. I’m not a lawyer and don’t want to pretend to be. But the problem was the fact they weren’t going to have any revenue, because nobody could fill the hotel rooms or sell the condos. It was almost a drain. But they’re saying, “Wait a sec. This is our performer, and this is what revenue would have paid for the building and all that stuff.” So there’s a big, big number between Perini and MGM.

22-00:15:01
Meeker:

It sounds like Gensler didn’t get involved in that. That was really a question of the builder.

22-00:15:03
Gensler:

No, we didn’t. We obviously would work on the MGM side, because they were our client. But they have nicely kept us out of it. I appreciate that a lot. We all learned a great deal.

Anyway, the thing I want to switch to is that it has meant a lot to us to be in Vegas. Although we’ve continued to do work for MGM and other

modifications, new restaurants, this and that, things didn't fall the way they thought, so we'd have to make modifications. We've done work at Mandalay Bay and Bellagio's and other places, properties of theirs. We built an office, we were doing office spaces and things like that. Some people went to work for Venetian who called us one day and said, "We're doing a new project in Macao. We'd like you to be considered one of the designers." They told us about the project but they said, "It's heavily themed. It's really heavily themed. We think the theming ought to be California. That will attract people in Macao." We don't know how to theme stuff. So we did this godawful solution that was really ridiculous. It had Golden Gate Bridges hanging off of it, and the Hollywood sign on it, and all sorts of crap. It was stupid.

22-00:16:58
Meeker:

It was very Robert Venturi.

22-00:17:01
Gensler:

Yeah, very much so. Anyway, I went and saw Mr. Adelson, who was the chairman and major owner. Mr. Adelson had talked to a woman named Trish Wilson who was a very, very wonderful hospitality designer. She does the interiors of a lot of the major hotels. She's out of Dallas and very good friend. Mr. Adelson, who has got neuropathy so his legs aren't very good, and he had a walker or he's in an electric cart, wanted to redo his office. Trish said to my partner, Judy Pesek, go over. Judy's a specialist in workplace. "Go over and see Mr. Adelson." Judy thought that the assignment was to decorate his office and make it a nice-looking office. But what he really wanted was to find out how he could get around his office, have meetings there, and his secretary in the office, and a lot of other things so he didn't have to move so much. So anyway, Judy went over to see him, started showing him—"Do you like traditional or do you like contemporary?" "What the—?" He's pretty rough with language, and he just started yelling at her. "You stupid lady. Don't you know what the hell you're doing and why you're here? Get out of my office!" And she left in tears.

22-00:18:36
Meeker:

He didn't want to look at finishings but he wanted to—

22-00:18:39
Gensler:

She was over here and he was over here, and they never got to even talk. The punchline of the story is that she said, "I'm not dealing with him. Never send me into a situation like that, Art." So we walked down to present this awful thing we had done for Macao. As I walk in the door he looks at me and he says, "You're the son of a bitch that sent that goddamn woman that didn't know what the hell she was doing to see me." I said, "Wait a sec. Trish Wilson, your friend, picked my friend and never told her the right assignment. Now, calm down. I'm here to show you some stuff." "I don't know what the hell I'm wasting my time talking to you about." Anyway, got him calmed down, and we set up our stuff and we started making—before that, his people had prepped us and said, "You can't show him that. That's too contemporary.

He doesn't like it. He likes theme stuff. That doesn't work. This is no good." So we left a whole bunch of stuff in the hall and brought in this stuff.

I present this stuff, and he looks at me and says—and he's very Jewish—he said [in dialect], "Mr. Gensler, you got to have something better than the crap you've just shown me." So I turn to my partner. "Go out in the hall and get this stuff." We had a model. I took one, and I dropped the building model into the contest model. We called it the Phoenix. It's a very complicated project with five hotels on the same site all connected with a casino. Because the casino, he doesn't want any columns or big towers coming down, we had the elevators and stuff outside of the casino. So it's a very complicated design. Dropped this in, he looked at it and he turns to his guys and he says, "Build it." And ever since then I'm the only architect he'll talk to. We've built a wonderful relationship. He's tough, he gets upset. He's like the fifth wealthiest guy in America, and he's sitting there arguing the color of a fiber in a carpet. He's down to the details of nanoseconds.

I'll just tell one more story that fits in. He was building stuff in Macao before we got to know him, so we helped on a casino because he wasn't happy. But we didn't do the casino floor. That was all done and spec'd and they put it in. He went to see it and he said, "I hate this thing." It was just a grey granite floor and he said, "It's for the Chinese. It needs decoration. It needs color. It needs this." He called me on the phone at home and he said, "You guys have really screwed up." I said, "Wait a second, we didn't do the floor. We had nothing to do with it." "I don't give a damn. You did it." I said, "No, we didn't." He said, "Come down and see me."

So I did. I went down, and he said, "You got to do it." This is like all the corridors in the casino, maybe seven or eight hundred running feet of corridor. There's a lot, and these things are ten feet wide. Maybe not that much, but 500 feet anyway of ten-foot-wide corridors and eight-foot-wide corridors, all these grey granite. He says, "It's terrible, it's just god-awful. I've got to have it all ripped out and done in five weeks." I said, "There is no way I can do it in five weeks. I couldn't rip it out in five weeks."

He says, "Now, let me explain to you, Mr. Gensler. Mr. Gensler," giving me that piece of paper, "I made eight million dollars on that casino yesterday. I made seven million dollars on that casino yesterday." He's got a whole bunch of them. "I made ten million dollars on that casino. I don't want to lose a day. Get this casino open in five weeks." So we got a circular cutter and we dropped in colorful discs that we had prefabricated. Dropped them, sprinkled them all over the place, and I guess he's happy. [laughter] He said, "I'll go get the materials from Italy, the colored marbles and the granites," and the other special things that he wanted. He said, "Don't worry. I'll get it here. I'll send my own—" He's got a fleet of like fifteen, twenty planes flying for the casino. He has his own personal 747. And he said, "So it cost me five million to change the floors. See, I was going to make seven million. I only made two

million. But then the next day I make seven so it was worth the change.” He deals in numbers that are just mind-boggling. He’s worth like \$30 billion or something. He’s a wealthy guy.

22-00:24:02

Meeker:

Did you ever get the opportunity to fix his office?

22-00:24:04

Gensler:

No, and didn’t want to. Because it’s so sensitive to him, I just said no. We always meet in his conference room. As a matter of fact, he redid the conference room. He didn’t use us. I don’t like what he did to it. We’ve decided it’s better for us to stay away from interiors in his stuff and do the architecture. These are projects that he has that are three billion dollars a pop. They’re like six million square feet in one building and with 3,000 hotel rooms. So we’re working with him now in Korea, Japan, we’ve looked at things in Spain. He was going to do a whole city replication of Las Vegas and a strip and sixteen casinos.

All sorts of levels of security. The high-rollers in that world, they treated separate, with separate routes to get to their rooms versus the average Joe. So they have a million feet of retail, a million feet of convention and meeting space. They have two or three hundred thousand square feet of casino space and 3,000 rooms and 1,500 cars of parking. It’s complicated, big projects, and he has us doing studies. Canada. We did one in Toronto. These places that are thinking about going into gambling. The votes in Korea and Japan are coming up very soon. He wants to be first in, and show the people what he wants and what he can do and what he’ll do. He calls it an integrated resort. The secret is that he gets people to fill the room with conventions during the week, and then the tourists or the gamblers come on the weekends. His occupancy is unbelievable. But a lot of the conventioners gamble, as well. Then he has a whole section for high rollers, a guy that’ll lose \$10 million a day and say, “I’ll see you tomorrow.” It’s a different world, especially in Asia. So we’ve done all these studies, and we’re building a bunch of things. But the explosion could happen in the next six months if gambling gets approved, and then he gets to be one of the licenses. He did that in Singapore, has made a jillion bucks down in Singapore, the Marina Bay Sands. He’s a fascinating man. Really a fascinating guy.

And that’s one of the joys of my life, is that I get these people that are like nobody else. Right now I’m dealing with five billionaires. You deal with these people and they think differently, yet they’re still intense about every little thing. So it’s fascinating.

22-00:27:33

Meeker:

You talk about the pleasure of working with these people, yet at the same time clearly they’re not easy to work with. Do you have a sense about your strategy? What is it over the years that you’ve done that allows you to be successful working with very difficult clients?

22-00:27:52

Gensler:

Well, I wish I could tell you. I think I'm a very straight-up guy. I don't try to B.S. them. I don't try to sell them something that they don't want to buy. I listen to them. And I have gathered around me, and we have assembled as a firm, a team of really great people who, although they want to see me, I've been on leave with Mr. Adelson because I've been sick and haven't been able to go visit him. We produce realistically good stuff. He's been through three or four iterations of his own staff. He's fired the president, the head of real estate, and the head of design—he's just fired a slew of them. We're the only one that's survived the whole way. In one stage his staff was saying, "Well, let's bring in some other architects." He said, "Why would we do that? Gensler's going to do everything." It's a wonderful relationship. How long that'll last, he could blow up on something.

There was a session I wasn't at last week with him. The staff had sent us in a direction that we knew wasn't right. We did it, and he blew up and said, "Why do you do this? This is not what I want. You know what I want. I want it the way Art showed it to us before." I've told my people now you got to do what the staff asks you to do, but have our own solution. Like the first time when he said, "Build it. I don't want all that crap that you've just shown me. You must have something better," that we can say, "Well, how do you like this?" and he'll say, "That's what I want." Even after four or five years working with him, because he's got a staff, good people, I like them very much, but they often misread him. I think we have a better read on what he really wants. He either likes it or dislikes it real quick and knows what he wants.

22-00:30:15

Meeker:

How did you come up with a solution to the California theme casino?

22-00:30:20

Gensler:

Well, we didn't. He said, "I don't want some theme damn thing. I want it contemporary." So it became totally contemporary. It's just bizarre. We still haven't built the building, by the way. We're doing a building now which I'm embarrassed in one sense about and very proud in another sense. They did some survey work on what the Chinese wanted to see. They were going to build a 3,000-room, moderate-priced product. Most of their product is pretty high-end, and I think they were getting overloaded. Macao wanted to spread the crowd out. So we're doing a thing called Paris; it's very French and very themed. He insisted that we do it. I said, "We don't know how to do it." Well, we actually have some people that used to work for Disney in the theme parks. They could do it, and they've actually done a quite amazing job, and he's got this French interior designer. We don't know anything about that. It'll be all French interior design. I think it's going to be a low medium-price product. It's going to have to be. But it's gigantic, and we did all the planning and everything. It's well under way in construction right now. We've done everything from airplane hangars for him to God knows what. We just do stuff for him. He's fascinating. But most of it's studies that will ultimately happen. He earns in a half a day what we bill him in a year. It's incredible.

22-00:32:14

Meeker:

Another outgrowth of CityCenter and the work that you've done in Vegas is, of course, these massive projects that are beyond buildings. They're almost total cities. I've heard people refer to a project that you did at Doha, along these lines? So the idea of moving beyond buildings into, in essence, building cities and these super massive projects.

22-00:33:14

Gensler:

There's a number of factors that are happening, especially in China and the Middle East. People don't build a single building anymore, they build complexes. So when we have our Monday morning call, they talk about projects that are four million square feet like they were 100,000 square feet in the States. It's multiple-building complexes. We've had to start thinking. They're all mixed-use. They have hotel, office, retail, entertainment, parking, parks, public spaces. China has been a big influence in that, and the Middle East has, too, Saudi Arabia and other places. Even new cities we've been designing. We did a huge study for Mecca, of all things, a white Christian firm doing Mecca. Obviously we can't go to visit it. But they got two million people at one time. They come for, I don't know, a period of a few weeks or something and then they leave. Over that period of time, people are coming and going, but there's still like 500,000 people walking around the black rock. We developed ways of getting people in and out of the site, hotels and condos and other things. We hadn't done a lot of master planning. We've now got a really talented team of master planners, so we've been able to handle that end of the project. CityCenter also taught us how to manage complicated things.

A couple that I'm most proud of. One of them is for Victoria's Secret. Victoria's Secret came up with a concept called Pink, which is for girls' underwear, little girls. And so in, I think, six weeks we changed 800 stores. Every night they'd come in and change it, and the next morning there was a whole new concept. Sort of as we do now, pop-up stores. But it was a logistic nightmare to deal with every one of these stores, and get all the people to come in and do the electrical change, the lighting change, the fixture change, the carpet, or whatever. We were able to manage as well as design it.

Then the new General Motors came to us. We had done their offices. My partner, Bill Hartman, he runs the Detroit office, actually went to school with the then-president/CEO of General Motors. He said, "Look, I got to rebrand 4,000 dealerships. We got two years to do it." So we had to rebrand 4,000 dealerships. That's a lot of places to visit. What I mean by rebranding, we would go in and say, "They said if you do this kind of modification we'll give you X number of dollars. You do this, we'll give you Y number of dollars. You do this, we'll give you Z number of dollars." So we would have to go in to every dealer, do a plan. We'd take pictures of them, we'd do renderings over the pictures, we'd do plans and say, "Here's what you can do. You can upgrade the service bays. This way you can update your sales area. This way you can update your parts and storage. This way the outside space. You can

upgrade this way, and you'll get different amounts of money." But we had to go in and touch every one of those dealerships.

Ultimately, most of them we did not actually do the actual implementation, because they want to support the local architect and local contractors. So our role was to go and make sure that what they did, and when they did it, complied with the guidelines for the areas in which they did the work. We had been doing design work for the automobile industry. We'd done a lot. I think we did 800 Volkswagen dealerships and a thousand Toyota stores and Nissan stores. So we have a really good knowledge of how a dealership works. I think we had fifty people traveling the road all the time meeting with people and producing these packages. Again, it was taking a kit of parts, which we developed. In this case GM did most of the kit of parts. It could have been better, in my opinion, but it's okay. And we made it better. As we went along we said, "Geez, we could change this and this." It was both a design thing, how it all fit together, and that's very complicated design, and the aesthetics. Some dealerships are in barns and some are in shopping centers, these auto malls that have very strict—one down in my area, in San Diego area, the Carlsbad mall has got all tile roofs. Then Chevy has to come in and GM has to come in with something that's totally different than that, and how it fits in and how you coordinate. Our guys just did an amazing job of going around the country. We finished 4,000 of them, and now they've given us another three or four hundred that they've decided to keep and do.

22-00:39:06

Meeker:

I'm wondering, with these complex projects, how is it that the firm does them? Did you develop like a software program that allows you to manage the projects?

22-00:39:16

Gensler:

We do it a series of ways. One, we do have app developers that do the software programs for this. We custom these programs to what we need. Secondly, because we're one firm, maybe at one time you'll have eight offices working on one assignment. They're all working together as if they're one office. It isn't, "Well, I want to do the ones in my area, and I only want to do this kind of stuff." It's a project for the firm, and the firm is going to work on it. So we're able to balance where we do the work. In many cases, the drawing was actually done in India or Costa Rica. It was done in the offices in the area sometimes. There were maybe five or six which were key offices that had a real bunch of people, and then five or six others had a balance of people that had some involvement, so they could go and check a site. But because we're all one firm and all the money goes into one pot, people don't say, "It's not my style," "Oh, I don't want to do that kind of work." You're a team player, you're with Gensler and we do it.

Is doing 4,000 dealerships a glamorous thing? No. Is it important to get done? Well, somebody's going to do it; might as well be us. Maybe we can do a

better job, I'm sure we can, than other people. GM wanted to have one point of contact who ran the damn thing, so they just said to us, "Do it. Do this and do that," and it got communicated through our system. Rather than trying to train twenty firms how to do it and then having inconsistent results and inconsistent monitoring. It turned out to be financially a great project for us, organizationally a great project for us. We've gotten comfortable with that.

Now, Doha is a different story. Doha is a good story and a tough story, in that they're building like six or eight city blocks in Doha. It's a whole new area of Doha. They're building ten, fifteen stories, a mix of buildings. They're halfway up now, construction. We were doing a couple of blocks ourselves, the buildings and design and the production work. We became the architect of record for the others; they had three or four other architectural firms. The problem is that we have a very unsophisticated client in the government of Doha, who never wants to move the end date but wants to change stuff all the time. We were not as strong as we should have been in saying, "Time out. Let's get the act together."

Secondly, the queen had this idea in the middle of the project, after everybody had done their designs, "Well, these are really nice looking buildings but it doesn't say Doha. We're going to have to have a Doha architecture." Well, Doha architectures are mud huts or something. There isn't such a thing as a Doha vernacular. So she hired a guy in London, a professor, to come up with a Doha vernacular, and then we all had to go back and redraw, trying to implement the window frames or the doorframes or the overhangs. It was just bizarre.

And, again, they don't want to move the end date and they don't want to pay us for it. So we said, "Wait a sec. You've approved all this stuff, and now you want us to start over again and redo it and not pay us." So there have been some very tough negotiations that David has particularly taken on the responsibility, much to his chagrin, to sort out. It's not been pleasant, and it's not been cheap. Literally there was a stack of eleven-by-seventeen binders of each of the claims that we had that was ten feet high. A stack of reports. They wanted everything in detail. "Why are you asking us for more money?" Then they kind of ignored it and want to settle. It's been a very tough project for us. But we made a commitment, and we are going to keep it. It'll get built. They keep asking us to do more work, take on more responsibility. We said, "Look, you're not paying us for what we're doing. We're not about to take on any more." But we'll have six or eight blocks of Doha with some interesting buildings, and I think in the end a very successful project.

But it has been one of the toughest projects the firm's ever taken on. We learned a painful lesson in that it was started and run and developed by our London office. They're terrific designers and people. The client's project manager was a good friend of the manager of our London office. They had worked together at Skidmore. Often in the Middle East, where the ex-pats that

they hire, the locals don't listen to in the end. They can't go and say, "Look, you have an obligation to pay the bill." They just throw him out of the office and fire him. They really can be really brutal. So these people were nervous about trying to defend causes that they know are right. He's finally gone, but people they've replaced him with haven't been any better or have any more influence. You get people that say, "I can't really get this all cleaned up." But it's been really tough.

And one of the things. We started out with a fee that we thought was so big we could never spend it all. Well, we've spent it all and more. It was such a big project that it just was an enormous potential financial opportunity, a chance to get in a country that's got lots and lots of money and does some interesting buildings. So Doha and Qatar are places we won't work anymore. But Abu Dhabi and Dubai have been terrific, and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia now we're doing. The Middle East is not easy. But they do want wonderful projects, and they build them pretty well.

Years and years and years ago with Yamasaki, we did all the interiors of the Dhahran Airport, which was in eastern Saudi Arabia. We had a whole terminal that probably was a half-billion-dollar terminal for the king who goes to eastern province once a year maybe. We'd say, "A gold chair in the bedroom would be nice." He had slept at the terminal. "Oh, yeah, that'd be a good idea." So we'd find a gold chair. It was just crazy stuff. Well, so we've worked in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia, and now we've just gotten the contract to redo and rework the whole terminal. Frankly, I don't even know what the assignment is. But it's fun to go back. Yamasaki's firm is no longer in existence. Go back and rework it and do stuff. We did a mosque with all sorts of hieroglyphics and stuff. It was an amazing building.

So we've had some amazing assignments in the Middle East, as we are having amazing assignments in China. In the U.S. also there's beginning to be more and more complicated mixed-use projects. The fact that we learned a lot about how to deal with the multiple pieces and can share that with our clients and actually pull it off has been a big game-changer for the firm. But it hasn't changed in any way the basic concepts of the firm, the scope of work we do, where we're still doing little jobs, a one-off candy store. Why? Because a candy store might as well be done as well as anything else. We've got a young designer who could do a great candy store: give him a chance to do something. In six months he'll design it, get it built, and see the results. These other projects take five years sometimes, or longer. So we haven't changed, we've just added this other layer of capability onto the firm that I think puts us as one of the few firms in the world that can do this kind of large project.

22-00:48:58

Meeker:

Does Gensler have a government relations arm?

22-00:49:02

Gensler:

Well, for the first probably thirty-five years we didn't do anything for the government.

22-00:49:08

Meeker:

No, no, no, that's not what I meant. I meant government relations. Do you feel like your firm, given not only the work that you're doing in the United States and the regulatory issues that you encounter doing that work, but also now that you're very international, that has implications I would think for domestic policy, foreign policy, politics. I'm thinking, for instance, in my interviews with Kaiser Permanente, they've got a couple of people in D.C. They've got a couple of people in Sacramento. That's their government relations, their public policy arm, where they're interested in influencing the course of government because they realize the course of government impacts their business. Is this something that Gensler has developed?

22-00:49:59

Gensler:

Well, the answer is yes and no. If we can, we stay as far away from government as we can. By the nature of doing business in the community, I know the mayor pretty well and a bunch of people. But I try very hard to just stay away from that. You can get yourself so caught up in that stuff that you go crazy. Although we're big, we may be two percent of the global market. Maybe one to two percent. So we still have very little influence in the percentage leverage we have. I'm taking the top 500 design firms. And you take the total billing of that, ours is about one to two percent. It's just very difficult.

On the other hand, we are getting asked more and more by governments to do projects. They respect us, and we're so involved with things like airports, which have a big effect. I'm going to come back to that in a minute, because there's an issue that's come up, I am going to do some lobbying on it. We just have stayed away from it. Doing projects and going after government projects, frankly, the process that they put you through, you're broke before you've even started the project. I don't know why anybody works for the government. But we can get these IDEQs, which are multi-year contracts where they can just call us and say, "Do this project," and it falls within that contract in a certain dollar amount. We can do it and not go through all the fanciness of competitions and designs, and partnering with contractors, and design build and all sorts of stuff that they want to do. It just kills you and wastes a lot of your time. They get five firms doing it, and four of them lose and don't get a dime. So we've stayed away from it.

But we did hire Bob Peck, who's a fabulous guy. He was head of GSA and a good friend of mine who I got to know because at one time he was government relations for the AIA. I just happened to meet him and got to know him and like him a lot. Then he became head of GSA, and that helped us. We did a lot of work for GSA, because Bob was able to control some jobs. Then he got fired by Obama because the guy in the western district abused his

privilege. Had a conference going on in Las Vegas, and he took his wife and kids to Las Vegas seven times, I think, to check out Las Vegas, and then billed it all to GSA and Bob's processing people didn't catch it. So Obama fired Bob. I said, "Bob, this is crazy. You ought to work for us." He came over and is doing a fabulous job helping clients. He was the largest landlord in the country. He had more space. So he can work with our developer clients. He put in stuff in operating systems and other things that our clients are just loving. He's the head of a consulting group on the East Coast.

But I was going to come back. These are the kinds of things I get involved in a little bit. The airport is a government office. There is a board of supervisor guy who is on this bandwagon of distributing work around, so he's trying to pass a law that all government projects must have at least 40 percent minority or small business consultant contracts and contractors. Must have at least 40 percent of the fees going to small businesses. Well, in theory that sounds like a very nice thing to do, but in practicality it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't work, because take us doing an airport. If we have a huge fee, and let's say you get a million-dollar fee or five-million-dollar fee, whatever you get, we can spread it around. But small businesses, they can take two or three people. Well, two or three people may chew up \$200,000 of the five million. A small business, if they got eight people, and the way we run projects, we put everybody in the same room. So they're the airport project team, rather than a Gensler and a Joe Smith and a this and a that and the other thing. They're the team. They work together. So I'm concerned right now that we can't let that law go through, at least on certain kinds of projects, because physically we'd have to hire twenty small firms. That doesn't help the firms and it doesn't help us. I understand what they're trying to do, but they got to think about it in a different way.

22-00:55:29

Meeker:

Maybe change this law or prevent this law from getting passed?

22-00:55:30

Gensler:

Well, first, it's probably inappropriate for projects over a certain size, for small businesses to be involved. Maybe they can be medium-sized businesses or something else where they've got enough people mass to help them actually make a contribution. Maybe there's ten or fifteen percent for small businesses. But they've got to come up with some way that makes some sense.

Audio File 23

23-00:00:00

Meeker:

This is Meeker interviewing Gensler, tape twenty-three, the 2nd of October, 2014.

One major project still ongoing that we haven't talked much about is the Shanghai Tower. This broke ground I think in 2008. It topped out this year,

and I understand that it will be open to the public in the next year or so. The world's second tallest building. A major, major project. Going to be China's tallest building. I don't know if this, say, would mark a departure from previous work, but it's certainly a marquee project. That Gensler is not simply the executive architect but they are the designers of the building, as well. How did this project come along?

23-00:01:07

Gensler:

Well, let me go back a little bit before that. If I've told this story then stop me. But we got to China because a gentleman named Jun Xia, who we hired in Denver, he had been going to Boulder. We hired him. He had grown up in Shanghai, got caught in the Cultural Revolution. His family ultimately moved to Colorado and Denver. He finished his education. But he knew a bunch of the people in the Shanghai planning department. It's unusual, when you think about it. That China, all their architects were in these big large design firms. They merged those design firms into universities, so they've become LDIs, local design institutes. They were cranking out some very mediocre stuff. The planning department, the people who Jun grew up with, said, "Jun, we got to do something better. We're trying to take land off the public ownership and developers are buying it. We're generating a lot of revenue. But we want quality designed buildings." So they called Jun and said, "Can you come over and work with some of these developers who are trying to get us to sell them the land, but make them do a decent building?"

So Jun was commuting back and forth from Denver to Shanghai trying to do this, drawing this stuff in Denver and getting on a plane and flying back. It was in the time, ten, fifteen years ago, when technology was not that way. You didn't have Skype, you didn't have GoToMeeting and a lot of other stuff which we have today, worldwide networks. So it was just not working well. Jun finally said, "I'll move to China." He left his wife in Denver. They were very close, but that's the way Chinese do things sometimes. His father recently died, but his mother still lives in Denver, and his wife's there. But Jun went to Shanghai and started an office, started hiring people, and we are supporting and building it.

It was sort of at the same time that China took over Hong Kong. The people that worked in Hong Kong really couldn't move to Shanghai, because they spoke Cantonese and not Mandarin. So that was a mess. But we moved some of the people over; we had some Americans, and they went over there.

Jun got to be well-respected by the planning department and is helping these clients do some very nice building. Mostly commercial buildings. I think there were a couple of residential buildings thrown in there. Then a few of our U.S. clients, Hines and some others, went to China and wanted to develop. They hired us to do some projects. The government said, "We've got these three plots for super tall buildings in Pudong," which is across the river from downtown Shanghai, for super tall buildings. And we've got the Jin Mao

Tower built, and then we've got the World Financial Center, which was built by a gentleman named Mori, who's Japanese. It was killing the Chinese leadership that the tallest building in China was owned by a Japanese fellow. This is the inside story. So they said, "We got to get this third plot going and build a taller building." So they had a competition, and we were one of the competitors. It got right up to having the competition, and then the mayor of Shanghai was caught doing something corrupt. He was thrown out and a new mayor came in. So the whole thing had to start all over again, and we were again asked to be—they picked four firms. I think they were Gensler, KPF, Skidmore, and Foster. And then four local design institutes. We were given some kind of a stipend to do a design. Jun came up with this wonderful concept.

23-00:05:33
Meeker:

So the design institute is in essence the Chinese equivalent of an architect?

23-00:05:37
Gensler:

Yes. But they also have their own capabilities, and politically it was important that Chinese show what they can do. Even though we have to use them as a local design institute and they become the architect of record for us on our projects. The local design institute is the official architect of record, and we're just the design architect, although I'll go into in a minute about what that means and the implications.

Jun had this idea of this twisted building with an outer skin and an inner skin. The inner is a series like a wedding cake, with stacked cylinders, and the outer skin rotates around the outside as a guitar pick shape. Rounded edge triangle, isosceles triangle. That rotates around. That idea was to shed the wind, which is the big factor in a tall building, the wind load. It causes far more damage and structural problems to the design than anything else.

23-00:06:52
Meeker:

Actually damage, meaning structural damage?

23-00:06:54
Gensler:

Yes. You just have to resist so much force when it's a flat surface. When you can shed it, we proved that you can reduce like 30 percent of the structural steel that you need because the wind is shedding off of it. Ultimately, one of the things we had to do is build a thirty-two-foot-tall mockup of that building, the Jin Mao and the World Financial Center, put them in a giant wind tunnel up in Toronto with all these sensors. We kept rotating it to see how the skin would rotate and where was the point of maximum benefits to us. There is what I call a V or a zipper, that buffets the wind and spreads it out. Not only it sheds it, but it spreads it and diffuses it rather than a solid, flatter, slightly curved surface that's just banging into it and pushing like hell against it.

So Jun came up with this idea, and developed it and developed it. Anyway, we presented, and we won the design competition. Now, Mr. Foster didn't like

that at all. He said he won. He kept flying in his plane back and saying, “Damn it, you all got to hire me anyway.” Luckily, the gentleman who is now the top dog in China was on the jury and likes our scheme, liked the fact that we did what we did. I think it’s also helpful that Jun is Chinese. In fairness, and being objective as I can be, I do think our scheme was the most unique and interesting. I think Foster’s looked like it should be built in Saudi Arabia. The four Chinese local design institutes never really had much of a chance, but the other two were quite good.

23-00:08:51

Meeker:

What did Foster’s building look like?

23-00:08:53

Gensler:

Well, it had all these kind of arches and shapes on the skin. It looked like something with an arabesque scale onto—it just didn’t look Chinese, fit Chinese. We didn’t want to do a pagoda. The Jin Mao Tower is sort of a pagoda-ish design that Skidmore did originally.

Anyway, everybody really liked our scheme, and it was clearly the winner. But then the client became sort of this three-headed animal. We had the China Construction Company, we had Shanghai as the department of public works, and then I think there’s one other. They merged. They were the client. But to their credit, they gave us a key guy, and he’s been there all the way through. The senior guy recently left. It’s like CalTrans. The head of the water district and the roads and the bridges and all that stuff in Shanghai, which is a gigantic area. He was head of that, and he’s moved up to another job. They don’t let people stay in one place too long because of fears of corruption and a lot of other things. But the one guy who’s been the project guy has been with us all the way.

So we started working on it, design and developing. We have Thornton Tomasetti as the structural engineer. The mechanical engineers, Cosentini. They were out in New York. Thornton Tomasetti has people in China, in Shanghai. Jun and they worked very closely, and then the mechanical guys got in. We really did a lot of really creative stuff together. In the Chinese culture, nobody likes to make a decision, to be the single person that makes a decision. So all of a sudden they decided they would have these review panels for everything. The curtain wall panel and the structural panel and the mechanical panel and this panel and that panel. It went on and on and on. I think in the end there were a hundred panels. They consisted of ten, twelve people, mostly college professors who would come in. Nobody would say, “Oh, that’s great. I vote for it.” They’d all sort of muddle around. “I guess they ought to do that. Maybe they should look at this. Maybe this and that.” There was sort of a consensus. Finally, after a few meetings, they’d get to some kind of a consensus. We’d show them some options and some things and they’d agree. Because the building codes are not designed for buildings that tall, there’s a lot of things that are different that you have to do. They were just not going to

put their neck out and be the one that said, “You made that decision.” So nobody personally ever made a decision.

23-00:12:20

Meeker:

Can you give us an example of building codes relevant to a super tall building?

23-00:12:29

Gensler:

Well, just for example, how the elevator is set up because of an evacuation. They have a thing called area of refuge. We did an interesting thing. We created an area of refuge and then a mechanical floor. Every twelve floors there's one of these, and it divides the building in a series of zones. We treat each zone as independent, so they can run together or run separately. The elevators stop at the roof of this, and that becomes sort of a garden floor with amenities. Then you transfer to elevators within your zone. Because they didn't have all the tenant concepts worked out. It was going to be a hotel, and at some time there was condos. It's now a hotel, observation, and meeting conference center, and then office space. The elevating has got to be really done differently. And because the mechanical systems work differently, it's not like all the mechanical room up in the top or all in the basement. It's scattered up through the building. A lot of things are just different. Nobody had ever built like a double skin wall like we were doing, and what is fire safety, and does this need to be a one-hour wall or not, a normal wall? There were things they had never thought about. None of us had.

For example, I like the area of refuge concept. So if you're on the eightieth floor, you go down to the seventy-second floor and you just hang out there. It's a concrete bunker, in effect. That that will stay and not fall down. Like the World Trade Center, all the exterior went and all the floors fell. But we don't have that. We got big gigantic super columns that hold up this building, so these area of refuge floors will stay up there. You'll be sealed in a concrete bunker and they'll have to go get you. And then the stairs go down through.

23-00:14:43

Meeker:

Is that kind of a post-9/11 design feature?

23-00:14:46

Gensler:

No, they've had it for a while, but we still don't have it in this country. I frankly think it's a pretty good idea. I think when we do super tall buildings in this country, we'll put it into buildings. I think it's a heck of a lot safer. But just all sorts of things. I'm not an expert on all of them. But we went through with these people. We actually ended up reducing the steel by \$53 million that had to go into the building. We argued with these expert panels about how much and reduced the column sizes quite dramatically. Our designer actually was a Chinese guy in Thornton Tomasetti. Some of the guys on the panel were his professors, and yet he still had to—spent \$600,000 on the wind tunnel test. So it's been a process that's been interesting.

The first curtain wall mockups that were done, they said, “Oh, we can do the curtain walls. We can do anything. It’ll be perfect.” Well, the first one, I went over and saw it and it was a frigging disaster. Guy with a caulking gun trying to block up the leak. What you do in a curtain wall, you test it. You get an airplane propeller engine and you blast water at the wall and see where it leaks. They had guys running around with a caulking gun. Jesus Christ, this building’s going to last a hundred years, and you’re going to stop the water with a guy running around with a caulking gun? I don’t think so. We got to keep this building so it doesn’t leak, period. So they rebuilt it. The mockup probably cost two million dollars. A gigantic mockup. Bigger than this house.

Anyway, it’s been a fascinating project, and it isn’t done yet. It’s just about all glazed, and they’re starting to work on the interior. They’re starting to work at the base of the building, finishing their stone at the base, and there’s a conference center which has got a glass block roof, and a bunch of other quite wonderful things. Those are going in. It’s been an interesting project. For example, one of the things that was absolutely critical. Fifty percent of the site had to be green. Green doesn’t mean a road. So we were jamming this site. It’s a big site, but we were jamming stuff in. I wanted to make the sidewalk a foot wider. I just felt it was too narrow. Give me a foot. “Oh, Art, I can’t do that, it’s going to take away from the green. The road’s got to be so wide and that will push into the green.” It’s going to sit in a gorgeous park. Chinese do these gorgeous parks and landscape. So there’s a lot of wonderful things happen to it. I think there’s 6,000 cars under the building. It goes down five to six stories, and it sits on 900 piles that are five foot in diameter that they drilled. A lot of things that are just—literally, the piles never hit resistance. Will become what’s called friction piles. It’s just surface area. Mud clinging to them. But there’s so much silt there that we never could get piles to bedrock.

23-00:18:08

Meeker:

Well, that’s an interesting question, thinking about different building requirements for super tall buildings. I know that there was a question around subsidence of soil around the building. How does one determine if the building is too heavy for the site?

23-00:18:25

Gensler:

Bucky Fuller used to talk about how heavy are your buildings. That’s why he did geodesic domes, because they were light. First, you could never have built this building without computers the way we do today. The curtain wall, literally, they took our drawings, put them into their milling and manufacturing machines and it just cuts the pieces. They’re different, because the building is conical, so every floor the panes are slightly smaller, because it steps in. And they slope. It’s just really complicated. Every pane’s fit. When we started we had like 6,000 different pane shapes and sizes. We’re now down to 300 or something. By juggling computer programs, and then these machines put the stuff out. It’s a beautiful curtain wall. Just gorgeous thing.

So we've learned a lot. It's been a very interesting thing. At times very difficult to get decisions. Very challenging. But I bet it will be on every piece of currency. It'll be on every marketing thing in China. I just know it will be. I'm looking out my window and I see the Bank of America. Just to put it in perspective, it's going to be two and a half times as tall as that building sitting there. It's gigantic. So take the Bank of America, put it on top of the one you see, and then cut it in half and put another piece up there.

23-00:20:12
Meeker:

Amazing.

23-00:20:12
Gensler:

It's going to be big. China, the planning department has this model of all of Shanghai. It's gigantic. Again, it's probably the size of this house or bigger, twice the size. Maybe 10,000 square foot. Every building in Shanghai is there, and they have a gantry and they can change a building. It seems in China they're changing them every day. Our model is about two and a half feet high. A lot of Shanghai is one-story housing. So it has changed our attitude about ourselves. It has given us a chance to work on a signature building that when people finally see it I think will go, "Unbelievable." It is a very large building. It's got four million square feet in the tower. It's got two million feet underground. It's just a very, very big building. It can take it in this site, because it's a very big site and it's against two other very, very big buildings, as well. But they're pipsqueak compared to what our building is. Scale and complexity.

So it will change the Gensler firm. It has already. We have ten buildings over fifty stories under construction right now. We've got ten more in design. We have a building actually taller than the Shanghai Tower in Suzhou, I think. I can never pronounce Chinese names. In Suzhou, which is taller than the Shanghai Tower, and under construction. So this won't be the tallest. The other one is a wonderful building, but it is nowhere near as handsome and exciting.

One of the fascinating things. They never asked once in all this time, to me or anybody that I know about, "What's this going to cost?" There was never a decision made, "We can't afford that," or "We shouldn't do that because that's too expensive." This is their building. This is the city of Shanghai. It's owned by China. And the people from up in Beijing said, "Do it," but they've given the responsibility to the city of Shanghai and it'll be owned by them. So people say, "Who are the tenants going to be?" These Chinese government-owned companies. If they don't fill it up with international tenants, they'll move them in. It'll be full.

23-00:22:59
Meeker:

It's a pretty bold thing that you said, that this is a game-changer for Gensler, right?

23-00:23:04

Gensler: Yeah.

23-00:23:07

Meeker: Is it possible for Gensler, considering where it is now and the world of architecture and design and everything else, it's still possible to have a game-changer?

23-00:23:16

Gensler: Oh, gosh, yes.

23-00:23:18

Meeker: So having a marquee building like this really truly is an essential thing for a big architecture firm?

23-00:23:25

Gensler: I'm bragging, but they just came out with, about six months ago, ranking of the best firms in the world. And we were number four. The three in front of us were European firms. If you had asked me forty-nine years ago was I going to lead, be a part of one of the great firms in the world, I'd say, "You are smoking something really funny." So it has changed a lot. I was looking at a list of who we are working with, they're working on the annual report. We're number one in so many categories. Frankly, it's almost embarrassing. We're number one rated in this. Number one in sustainability. Number one. We dominate the market. So we're playing in a different game. My hope is, and my belief in our attitude is we're going to share with everybody what we're doing, but that forces us to keep ahead, to jump to another level.

We like game-changers because it makes us get to another level. We now have this group in La Crosse, and we keep data on all these buildings. Nobody does that. There are areas that we will be in in five years that we didn't even think existed and created. I love game-changers, because people for twenty-five years said, "You're the interiors firm." I now say, "No, we're a design firm." My employees used to say, "Art, when are we going to do real buildings?" A lot of things have changed, because we wanted to keep one step ahead of everybody else. I think all boats rise in a rising tide, it brings us all up. That's important to the profession and to the world, to have quality buildings, whether they're an auto dealership or a Gap store or a Starbucks or Uniqlo store. These are all great designs. Apple store. These are all great designs that really changed the landscape. In their own way very small, but very impactful because they're repeated so many times or modified. We design work for the Shanghai Tower to a wine label and everything in between. We do wine labels for guys, friends; our graphics does a wine label. We get paid \$200 for a label. I don't know what we charge. But that design. We're a design firm. We're not just an architecture firm. We're not just an interiors firm. We're a design firm, and we think that that first allows us to expand and be much broader, but also to have more fun. To me it's fun to be

doing things that nobody has ever done before. We don't know where that is, but we're going to go find it.

23-00:26:38

Meeker:

Well, I think now's a good time to back up a little bit and let you respond and talk about a few people who you haven't spoken about that much over the course of this conversation, that you think you are—here's the list of names that I have. Do you just want me to read down these names?

23-00:27:04

Gensler:

I'll give you one-liners.

23-00:27:08

Meeker:

Okay, yeah. So your wife, Drue Gensler.

23-00:27:10

Gensler:

Well, Drue's an enormous part of the team. Has been from the beginning. I didn't put my mom and dad on the list, I should have. Dad moved out when he retired, to Rossmoor area. He used to come to the office, and everybody got to love him.

Drue has been the leader of helping me get into women issues and hire women. We would never have had Margo without people like Drue. So she's a key part. She's my partner, and we've been married fifty-eight years.

23-00:27:43

Meeker:

Jim Follett.

23-00:27:45

Gensler:

Jim was the first person I hired. He was a draftsman. He didn't have a college degree. He, to his credit, has worked himself up. Finally got himself a college degree. He finally got his license. Because of that, he became the head of the AIA local chapter, he became a fellow in the AIA. He's a real class guy and I'm very proud of him. [He went to Denver when I asked him. Then relocated to New York to work with Margo. Then came back to San Francisco and then relocated to Chicago to get that office up and running.]

23-00:28:12

Meeker:

Hal Edelstein.

23-00:28:14

Gensler:

Hal was the guy who I had worked in Jamaica at one time. He was the head of an office called Rader where I worked for a fairly short period of time. He called me and said he wanted to come to California, get out of Florida where he's been living. Gone through a divorce and was remarried and wanted to come to the West Coast. It was just when we were starting. It was like the first two or three months. He drove out in a Nash Rambler and towed a U-Haul behind him. He couldn't get up the hill to where I lived in Tiburon, so he parked at the bottom of the hill. I had to go down and get him and unhook the U-Haul, and store some stuff. It was a nightmare. When he was looking to

return it, the contract said, “Never haul this U-Haul with a Nash Rambler.” He had just finished driving 3,000 miles.

He became our chief architect, really senior guy, really organized us like I could never—he made the forms. When technology started coming out, he was the first guy that had a little computer. When we started computer drafting, he was the first guy that helped us make the decisions. Miss him. He and Claire, his wife, they were great friends and made a huge impact on the firm.

23-00:29:30

Meeker: Have they passed away?

23-00:29:31

Gensler: Both passed away.

23-00:29:33

Meeker: Charlie Kridler?

23-00:29:34

Gensler: Charlie came in probably the first six or eight months. Charlie has done everything. He left for a while and taught at University of Washington and Cal Poly. Charlie is retired now. He ended up really taking over the Gap account and then all of our retail, really built our retail to be the leading retail design firm in the country.

23-00:29:57

Meeker: Tony Harbour.

23-00:29:59

Gensler: Tony, hired him, terrific guy. He was the guy that I put my arm around and said, “Go to Houston,” and he went without a contract, a deal. I think today you don’t do that, but those days he trusted me. Got the thing of trust. He went to Houston, then he went and helped build the London office and was a board member with me for many years, and a great guy.

23-00:30:23

Meeker: Ed Friedrichs.

23-00:30:24

Gensler: Ed Friedrichs, a guy I saw on a planning commission meeting in Tiburon making a presentation on an unbuildable lot. He designed a house. And he convinced them that he could build a house on literally an unbuildable lot on Corinthian island. I took him out for a drink. He had gone to Penn, and he was an architect, but it was a lousy time and he couldn’t get a job. He was working for a home builder, a contractor. I said, “Come to work,” and he worked his way up to be president and CEO and a board member with me. A terrific guy, is now a consultant. He’s retired, but he acts as a consultant to the profession.

23-00:31:06

Meeker: Margo Grant.

23-00:31:07

Gensler: Margo, I got to know when I was doing the interiors of the Bank of America. She did all the interiors when she was at Skidmore for the bank. Unfortunately for them, fortunately for me, they had a policy, unwritten I suspect, of no women partners, and she wanted to be a partner. So when I called her, she was having some—she hadn't been married, but some dating problems. She said, "I'd love to go to Houston." She had done a couple of projects, one for Tenneco there, so she knew Houston. She moved to Houston and did Pennzoil and many, many other projects. Moved to New York to do Mobile. Didn't move to London, but set up the London office. When we got Goldman Sachs, because they were her client, she helped start the D.C. office. She was a powerhouse designer and a powerhouse lady. She is now retired.

23-00:32:01

Meeker: Orlando Diaz.

23-00:32:02

Gensler: Orlando, I can't remember how I hired him, but I'm sure glad I did. Tremendously talented Cuban gentleman that came to the U.S. and went to Georgetown in D.C. Was a landscape architect, trained, but he's become one of the best interior designers probably in the country. One of the high black cape designers. Started his own firm, and does mostly custom high, high-end homes and maybe occasionally an office. He left not because we were unhappy. We were good friends. But he wanted to get into product design, and I wasn't ready to get into product design. He wanted his own firm. It just seemed the right thing to do. But he set the standard and the level of design that we have today. Without him, we wouldn't be there. He made me hire photographers to photograph his work. The fee for the photographer was more than the fee we got for the job, but it was worth it. So I have a great love for Orlando. He's a terrific, talented guy.

23-00:33:14

Meeker: And Don Brinkmann?

23-00:33:16

Gensler: Don was a friend of Margo's and went to New York. He left Skidmore, went to New York. Don was the consummate designer. Just a brilliant, wonderful designer, and he did it all himself in many ways. He conceived it, he drew it. Orlando worked through other people. Don did it himself, and did some of the most brilliant work. We have the Don Brinkmann Award at Gensler every year for the best designer in the firm, and it's a really prestigious award, to be a Don Brinkmann winner.

23-00:33:49

Meeker: Don Kennedy?

23-00:33:51

Gensler:

Don Kennedy was a guy who worked in the San Francisco office and kept working his way up. He became the manager of the San Francisco office and really made a difference. When Tony had left and Ed had left and all these people had left, Don was standing there. Jim had left—to manage other offices, not the firm. Don was the guy that stepped up. I was there with him, but Don really ran the office and built it, and did a nice job. Unfortunately we lost him to AIDS. But he was a hell of a guy, and he really did a lot for the firm.

23-00:34:27

Meeker:

Robin Klehr Avia?

23-00:34:30

Gensler:

Avia, yeah. Robin Klehr Avia. We had a group, I can't remember the year, I probably should look it up. But there's a picture in the *Contract* magazine, I think, of the Gensler class of '85 or something. There were like seven or eight of them. Maybe not that many. Don Brinkmann was in it, and Robin Klehr, and Joe Brancato, and Tony Schripper, who left, and some others. Robin is a marvelous person. Tough as nails and charming as can be. A wonderful clotheshorse; she always looks perfect. But she runs the New York office and the Northeast region like nobody could ever run them. She's got 500-plus people and clients that just swear by her. She's just coming off being our chairman of the board; she's an amazing lady, and tough. But when I say tough, she just drives for perfection. People love working for her and with her.

23-00:35:47

Meeker:

Joe Brancato.

23-00:35:48

Gensler:

Brancato. Joe Brancato is the best marketer I've ever seen. Makes me look like an amateur, and I'm pretty confident I'm pretty good. But Joe is the hardest-working guy. Carla, his wife, is a piece of work. She's Costa Rican, and that's why we have an office there. Her father was the ambassador to the U.S. from Costa Rica. That's why we have an office in Costa Rica. He's got more connections there. But Joe will go anyplace, anywhere to land a piece of business. He called the other day and said, "Geez, I'm here in Nicaragua. We really got to get—" Or Guatemala, I'm not sure. "Joe, we're so busy. Why do we need—" "But there's so much going on here." He's opened the Sao Paulo office and helped open the Mexico City office. He opened the Costa Rica office. There are a hundred people in Costa Rica. Joe is just an amazing guy. His amazement is when people move, he keeps the current client and finds a job for them someplace else and then gets a new client. He just keeps working the market. He's Mr. New York. I'm telling you, it's amazing.

23-00:36:56

Meeker:

Jim Furr?

23-00:36:57

Gensler:

Jim Furr. When Tony had run Houston, it was going really well. He could never kind of get into architecture. He kept trying. We did a few buildings. But Tony decided to move to London. He up and left, and had two good guys. They're still with us. Actually, one of them is retiring, just recently retired. But they were not really the leaders that we needed in Houston. I went down there and said, "I want the best guy in Houston." Well, Jim Furr's name kept coming up and coming up. He had his own firm called Hoover Furr. He had sold it to a firm that was maybe more a program management firm than it was a design firm. They did do design. I went and had dinner with him and put my arm around him and said, "Jim, you're going to run this office." He's done a great job, built the Texas and South Central region with Dallas and Austin. Tony kept trying, but never could actually pull off. So Jim's been a tremendous—and Jo, his wife, is a fabulous lady. The two of them just are great representatives. And he's been a teacher at Rice. He's a really special guy.

23-00:38:09

Meeker:

David Gensler.

23-00:38:11

Gensler:

Well, David was recruited not by me to join the firm but by Ed Friedrichs. David went to Dartmouth and then Stanford Business School, and worked for the Pacific Stock Exchange, managing some money for them. Then worked for Morgan Stanley, then Jim Edgar's firm, and then worked for a medical applications company. Ed said, "I need somebody that can run this place," so David has done that. He has grown and has become an incredible leader, and is now one of the three executive directors who is really running the firm.

23-00:38:51

Meeker:

Andy Cohen.

23-00:38:52

Gensler:

Andy Cohen Ed hired in Los Angeles. I think Ed hired him. I'm pretty sure. But he was in Los Angeles. Andy was an East Coast guy, but was in California. I think he went to Pratt. He is a brilliant designer, but he's also a brilliant marketer and a people person. He can be tough, but he's very charismatic and very hardworking, as all these people are. We ask people to work awfully hard, but we also play hard. Andy's one of the best. I was with him on the phone for hours this morning. He's an executive director, as well.

23-00:39:32

Meeker:

Dan Winey.

23-00:39:33

Gensler:

Dan Winey is an interesting guy. He had come and actually interviewed us for General Motors. We didn't get the job, but we were really impressed with him and we kept talking to him. He was in Detroit. We tried to get him to move and join the firm, get him out to San Francisco. He was working in Detroit.

His dad had worked for General Motors. And we couldn't relocate him. Finally all of a sudden he showed up one day in the market working for another firm. He was there for a few years, was the president of a firm called Whisler-Patri, which is a great firm. But Whisler and Piero Patri had retired and he was trying to run it. We said, "Come on, join us." He did, and he's now one of the executive directors, of the six. He's run the San Francisco firm, he's built Seattle and San Ramon and San Jose, and then he decided he would take on Tokyo when we first went there, and Hong Kong and then Shanghai. Now he's living out most of the time in Shanghai and traveling Asia, opened Singapore and Bangkok, and helped in developing Bangalore. So he's been an all-around super trooper and a wonderful, wonderful leader and guy. He's just a really special guy.

23-00:41:04
Meeker:

Doug Gensler.

23-00:41:05
Gensler:

Doug is interesting in that Doug went to Cornell, as I did. He and his not yet wife decided they wanted to go and live in Japan. They went over to Japan and worked for a guy that I tried to do business with. That didn't work out. Went over to I think Takanaka, one of the firms that has a design department. Big construction firm with a design department, does pretty nice work. They lived there for a year in Japan, and came back and worked for some other people. Then Margo called him up one day and said—he was working for us in San Francisco. She called him up and said, "Doug, you got to run the Boston office. We haven't got anybody running the Boston office. We've done sort of a project office. You can do it." Margo convinced him to move to Boston. We've never gotten him back, and I can't get him back now. He's doing an incredible job. He's got a hundred people in Boston, and got Fidelity and you name it as clients there. He's doing wonderful design work. He and his wife have really become part of the community. He's got a home down on the Cape in Chatham, has become part of that community. He's just really all-around talented, both as a designer but as a manager and leader.

23-00:42:22
Meeker:

Walter Hunt?

23-00:42:23
Gensler:

Walter Hunt, we have the Walter Hunt Award. But Walter is a go-anyplace, do-anything-for-you person. He joined the firm here in San Francisco as a designer and worked on some early projects, and then he'd do anything. One of his friends said, "Gee, I want to take a year off. So, Walter, run my company. I'm going to sail around the world." So Walter took off and ran this guy's company. You may remember the Nut Tree, they had those big hobby horses. They made all that kind of toy stuff for people, like the Nut Tree. When Walter came back I said, "Walter, don't unpack. We need somebody to run Denver." So he came through the door and went out the door and went to Denver. He and Judy and their kids, they moved to Denver and he built a

wonderful practice there. But Denver has always been an off-again/on-again town, and Margo needed some help in New York, so Walter left. Got some people and went to New York and helped Margo. He became vice chairman on the board, and he was the one that went to Las Vegas, back and forth for CityCenter. He went to Doha in the beginning of that to get that going. He's an incredible guy; he's retired now. He did all sorts of stuff. He started the Architect League in New York, quite the thing. Helped them buy a building and build it. He's very active at Yale. He's an amazing guy and a great family man.

23-00:44:03

Meeker:

Diane Hoskins.

23-00:44:07

Gensler:

Diane Hoskins is a really interesting one. Diane is an executive director with David, Andy. Diane went to work for us in New York, I think. She had gone to MIT, and then she wanted to be more of a developer side. Got her master's at UCLA and then to work for the Reichmanns in Los Angeles. They were building some buildings in L.A. She left us and went to work for the Reichmanns in development. Then I can't remember all the sequence, but she was originally in Chicago but her husband wanted to live in Baltimore. He was working for the governor as the head of development or something. He's a fantastic guy. So we said, "Would you run the D.C. office?" and she went back and did it. And now she's one of, as I say, the three executive directors. An amazing lady, a consummate professional, and a great leader and strategic. She has both the business of development and the architecture and interiors. Victor, her husband, is an equally tremendous guy; they are a marvelous team. He works I think for D.C., developing housing and schools and stuff for D.C. Terrific family.

23-00:45:48

Meeker:

So I have two more questions. The first one is I need to ask you about your retirement. In 2010 you assumed the title of founder, thus relinquishing the CEO/chairman position. Obviously you're still very much involved in the firm. How did you arrive at that decision?

23-00:46:15

Gensler:

Well, I could tease and say they pushed me out, but that isn't fair. But David, to his credit, said, "Dad, it's time. We've got to take over. It's our show. We're doing a lot of the running of the firm." Unfortunately, most of my contacts have retired. Now, that's not totally true. I felt it was time. I was seventy-five. So I stepped down, and in some ways they'd like me to work less. I frankly have maintained an office and my assistant, Belinda, for a bunch of things. I still do these nonprofits. I'm on the executive committee and board of SF MOMA, Buck Institute and Research on Aging, and CCA. So I need some support, and places to meet and stuff like that. With my ankle as I am now—but I go in most every day. Drue and I take quite a few trips, travel quite a bit. But I like to work with designers and projects and consultants.

That was what I was doing this morning. I was talking to a client that's come to us with a really unique opportunity. How can he expand a major shopping center to a very high-end customer base and maybe make a unique addition to this very successful shopping center? I did some sketches, had some ideas and they developed them, and we were talking on the phone this morning. That's the kind of thing I do. I worked with the Gallo family on their headquarters and have gotten to know them, and I'm working with Mr. Adelson and the Sands Venetian people because I have a relationship with him. I know Ray Hunt, as Judy Pesek in Dallas does, and we do some things with them. There are certain clients that I just feel they're my age, I can relate to them and they can relate to me. And, frankly, the firm is my life as much as my kids are, so I really care about it, care about the firm, so I go in. But I'm not making any decisions, I can assure you. I make suggestions, and sometimes they listen and sometimes they don't. That's fair. It's their show. I try to make sure everybody understands it's their show, but I'm still there if somebody has a question and would like to ask me. I'm probably going to give them my suggestion.

23-00:48:55

Meeker:

The last question we wanted to ask is, is there anything we didn't ask? Is there anything that you want to add or any final comments?

23-00:49:02

Gensler:

Well, yeah. I would like to make a comment. I encourage anybody that has an opportunity to do this process to do it. It's been a wonderful catharsis for me to think back about people and names I hadn't thought about for years and years and years. I found it a very enjoyable process, and I think it's going to be, as we move into our fiftieth anniversary, a real tool for our people to build on my recollection of the history of the firm. Although I believe truly that it's more important to look forward than to look back, it's nice to have captured the history. And, frankly, the firm hasn't done a very good job of that. We got piles and piles of files, but I don't know who's ever going to take the time to look through them. So this will be an interesting record of that part. We've got lots of pictures of our projects but no files. Maybe would have been helpful. So thank you for the opportunity. I really appreciate it.

23-00:50:01

Meeker:

Thank you.

[End of Interview]