

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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**BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

SZ: I don't know yet how I'm going to go with this, but I thought I would start with this wonderful question, which is: In your own words, tell me how your very long association with the Museum of Modern Art started.

PJ: I met Alfred Barr; that started.... Are you on tape? I forget.

SZ: I'm on tape.

PJ: Oh, good. I've been doing interviews where I had to repeat the question.

SZ: No, just....

PJ: I met Alfred Barr at my sister's graduation in 1929. He was about to start a museum, and after a very, very short acquaintance, he said, "Do you want to be head of the architectural department in such a museum?" Well, it was a bit of a jolt, and of course, since I was still at Harvard--I didn't get my degree until '30....

SZ: You were just an undergraduate.

PJ: An undergraduate. I was the Class of '27, but I hadn't gotten my degree, so I was

just sitting there. But my passion was architecture.

SZ: All right. Let's just go back, then, to this meeting with Alfred Barr, at your sister's graduation, which was....

PJ: That's what I'm told. I don't remember.

SZ: You don't remember.

PJ: I remember meeting him that spring, through my mother, who said, "This brilliant"--my mother was interested in art--"There's this brilliant Harvard man who is teaching at...." My mother was the president of the alumnae, so....

SZ: Alumnae at Wellesley?

PJ: Yes. And she was hot on architecture herself, so she introduced me to Alfred Barr. Alfred and I hit it off right away.

SZ: What was your first impression?

PJ: Well, that he knew everything, and he was nearly God. As far as I was concerned, this was it. And his idea of a museum was something nobody had ever heard before in the world, you see.

SZ: Was this an idea for a museum at that time, or was it an organizing concept for....?

PJ: No, a museum. He had already talked with Mrs. [Abby Aldrich] Rockefeller.

SZ: Because this was part of the course he was teaching, was it not?

PJ: I don't know the course. No, that was modern art he taught at Wellesley. The

museum part only came through his occasional visits to [Paul] Sachs's course.

SZ: Did you know him?

PJ: Oh, yes.

SZ: But at that time?

PJ: Yes, I knew him at that time.

SZ: Paul Sachs.

PJ: Paul. Strange figure. He was a businessman by association, although he wanted to be much more than that and get into art. But the scholars never liked him because he was a fixer and an arranger--the type we have, all of us, around us; that is, rich people who then become heads of departments at big universities to give them class and dignity. But he asked others to do the actual digging and the scholarly work, which he never did. But he had an eye, and a very good eye for people.

SZ: For people.

PJ: Sachs, and he was the one, of course, that picked Alfred. But....

SZ: But he taught that museum course.

PJ: He taught the museum course. Oh, yes. That's the kind of thing he could do, how to contact with people. He was a people man. But the scholars looked down on him. It's too bad you can't interview Lincoln Kirstein, because he would be very interesting on the subject of "Uncle Paul."

SZ: What was his demeanor like, Paul Sachs?

PJ: Very quick, and very much to the point. You would meet him, and within two minutes he would have found out all about you, and he'd have a point that you'd be interested in going on with. He was one of those absolutely direct.... had a very quick mind. I didn't know the superficiality part of it at that time. I was just very impressed, of course, being a child, but Lincoln knew him much better because of the contemporary art angle.

SZ: You mean the Society?

PJ: Yes. His own, contemporary art.

SZ: Was Barr close to Sachs at that point?

PJ: Yes. Well, close. He took the course. He never talked about Sachs much, later. But, Sachs obviously was consulted by Rockefeller, the ladies. See, this was a little before my day. I just knew him when he already had a museum to start. He was already appointed.

SZ: Alfred.

PJ: Yes. So I didn't know all the history.

SZ: But you thought he was God when you met him.

PJ: Well, it was clear. He knew, he knew what was going on, what was going to happen, which it did, by the way. He was an uncanny man, and, of course, there's no fair way to judge him yet. There will be other biographies, but that settled my life's career, just like that.

SZ: Now, you obviously had an interest in architecture before this.

PJ: Yes. I discovered architecture in an article by Russell Hitchcock in The Arts, or one of those little magazines that meant nothing to me, on J.J.P. Oud, who was the leading Dutch architect. It was clear that a new breeze was blowing in architecture-- and I was always on the wrong side of everything, including when I went into politics and really put my foot in it! So, in this it was clear that... Life changes.... I'm that type. You get a total conversion within two seconds. So I did it.

SZ: But now, you also traveled, well before you met Barr, I think.

PJ: A great deal with my mother. My history, not the museum's, but....

SZ: But, I mean in terms of architecture, so that when....

PJ: Yes. Background in architectural travel. And my first tearful experience was the Chartres Cathedral, and I made my immortal remark in 1919 that if I lived in Chartres I would become a Catholic, and if I were a Catholic I would live in Chartres. Because to get that experience daily would be enough. That, and the Parthenon. It's so obvious, but those were the two things that brought tears to my eyes in the year 1927. So I was prepared for the new period in art that would sweep everything before it, and that would find Harvard the worst place in the world to do architecture. So, Russell and Alfred had this great idea, the "International Style," which wasn't named at that time, but the modern architecture.

SZ: Now, I think I read somewhere that on that trip in 1927 you met Mies in Europe?

PJ: No, I met Mies in 1929 in his apartment in Berlin.

SZ: In 1929.

PJ: No, 1930 really.

SZ: Thirty. That was once you had decided you were going to take on this....

PJ: Oh, yes.

SZ: I see. So, in terms of really knowing modern architecture, as defined by the exhibition that you later did, that came when?

PJ: The exhibition was '32.

SZ: No, but I mean your....

PJ: Conversion?

SZ: Yes. Your appreciation of it.

PJ: No, right away, when that article.... It was a Saul/Paul thing. It's all written down in a lot of places, this Saul/Paul conversion, so I just decided that was my life, period. I had been at that point a concert pianist. I was lousy, but it was another thing, one of my wrong turns--of which I had so many--but it was total. But the big total was the Barr-Hitchcock thing. And I hadn't met Russell in '29.

SZ: So, how did you feel when Barr asked you to come and do this?

PJ: I couldn't believe it. Then I realized what a daring man he was. And, of course, I had another great advantage for him, as I didn't want any salary. That was a big help for him. And I was an enthusiast and I could talk English and, although I knew nothing about architecture, he realized I would learn. He backed me ever since. So we began a long, fruitful friendship. It never varied. No matter what I did, he was always there. An extraordinarily loyal friend. Now, the Modern, then, started without

me. I was in Europe that fall of '29, so I missed the opening ceremonies. But, I was less interested in Cézanne than I was in the future of architecture so I was traveling, looking at modern architecture that fall. Then the next spring I met Hitchcock, and in 1930 we started to work on the book.

SZ: The book took two years to do.

PJ: Yes, it did indeed. There was an awful lot of research, traveling, publishing in those days. The first edition was 2,000 or something. Fifteen hundred I think. It was a very small audience.

SZ: Whose idea was it originally to do this exhibition?

PJ: The exhibition?

SZ: Well, the book and exhibition, were they really....

PJ: They were somewhat at the same time, yes, but the books were different, of course, and one was called Modern Architecture. I get them mixed up even. Most people do, because they came out at the same time. But that was the bottom of the Depression, the real bottom. We had quite a hard time raising the money, and I had to make deals with each of the architects. But, I don't know whose idea the book was.

SZ: You and Russell decided which architects were going to be included?

PJ: Oh, yes. I finally made the decision, because he was teaching, and we wanted more Americans so I made the usual bundle of mistakes. We stretched a bit on the Americans, because they were all European, the ones we liked, and we didn't want

to be Eurocentric.

SZ: Because?

PJ: Well, here was an American institution. We had to be sure we were part of the stream--we weren't--but we pretended. And we included Frank Lloyd Wright, who didn't belong.

SZ: I was going to say.... So, what....

PJ: Yes, Mr. Wright was incredible. Crazy.

SZ: You had some difficulty with him?

PJ: Oh, yes. At the end, but we were great friends. Friend? Yes, we were, right to the end of his life. Then, we took 1930 to look at every building we could in Europe. Russell had no car, and I had the car and the money, so we traveled around and had a high old time.

SZ: Where did you go?

PJ: We went from Vienna, to Berlin, to Rotterdam and to Paris. We didn't go to England, because there wasn't anything there. We didn't go to Italy and Spain, there wasn't anything there, nor Russia; strange to say, there was nothing in our direction there. But Prague, Berlin, of course, was the center.... that's when I settled in Berlin one half year, when I took one of my sick leaves and set up an office in Berlin to get the books together, to get the material together and make more trips. That started us off. The writing of the thing.... Alfred Barr's introduction is still the key, because he was so lapidary in his writing that he could put in one paragraph what took the rest of us a book. That introduction reads like his Cubism book--just a series of sentences, perfectly clear--that you got a picture of the direction that we had worked on for years

to arrive at. But he summed the whole thing up, and there it was. We started, however, before the museum show, with our Architecture Refusé of the Architectural League in 1930. In those days the Architectural League was hot stuff and they gave a show at the Grand Central Palace--it's now gone--a big barn of a place where the League had their shows, and they militated very much against anything that smacked of real modern and so they refused some of the best things.

SZ: Such as?

PJ: The P.S.F.S. [Philadelphia Saving Fund Society] of George Howe and [William] Lescaze, so we took the "rejected architects," we called them, and put them in [a] shop front that we got through friends on Sixth Avenue and 57th, right off the street. Of course, we got more publicity than the show got, because we had a sandwich man walking back and forth in front of the Grand Central. This was Alfred's idea.

SZ: It was Alfred's. . . ?

PJ: It was Alfred's idea, I think. I tend to appropriate Alfred's ideas whenever I can and say that I thought of this. I'm a good publicist, but I'm not the publicist Alfred was. Alfred was incredible at sniffing out odd little things like that. Of course, none of us knew what kind of publicity would happen. It reminds me, of course, of my show two years ago [Deconstructivist Architecture]. It wasn't a show, it was a one-room thing....

SZ: And look what happened.

PJ: Right. I said, "Who are all those people...?" It was the same thing then. People went to this [show of] "rejected" architects. And, of course, anything that's rejected by the establishment gets a hearing. So, we had a high old time, being mean to the

establishment, which was good. And, of course, Alfred was enjoying the same fame, with his shows, showing up the Met, not having any Cézannes and things like that. So, those days were very heady. And, of course, we had the advantage of not having a bureaucracy.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about what it was like.

PJ: Yes. There were about three of us. There was Alfred, and there was Cary Ross-- just one of the devoted people--and Jere Abbott and me, my secretary, Ernestine Fantl, who later became head of the women's section of the London Times. There was a man at the front desk who was the man who put on the carpentry work, who put on the changing shows. That was the staff.

SZ: In the Heckscher building.

PJ: The Heckscher building. Less than that; I had no office. I did the catalogue and the book out of my bedroom. Ernestine sat on the bed and I'd sit in the chair and we'd try to shuffle this thing all together. But, you see, the advantage of that--not having space and not having anything--was that you didn't have to sit around worrying about bureaucracy. Look at what [Stuart] Wrede has to face now every morning: the director, the money-givers, the artists--all of them baying and screaming about "I got a right to this," and all the other eighteen departments that are in depth. You could-- and they do--spend their time covering their own asses, which is a normal thing for any bureaucrat, whether it's an army or the senate or The Museum of Modern Art. Or any museum. Any organization, if it gets ossified that way, it's much harder to...

SZ: But, thinking back in that time, did you expect that it was going to go on pretty much the way it was?

PJ: Yes.

SZ: That it would not become ossified; that it would....

PJ: Of course. Our idea was to continually rejuvenate it, and fresh.... Well, it became ossified so soon they fired Alfred Barr, if you can imagine [LAUGHING].

SZ: Well, we'll get to that.

PJ: I don't know anything about it--I wasn't there--but, it was quaint.

SZ: So, it just had this aura of...?

PJ: Of pioneering. Of heady, shifting, and.... We got no press, of course, except in the news pages, by having [included] "rejected" architects, but there was no consideration of the architecture. There was nothing like there is now. There was no press like [Kirk] Varnedoe's. We didn't have any trouble, because people didn't count anyhow, like Royal Cortissoz. Who else was there? Oh, then we had one good friend--"Dooby Dooby," we called him--[Henry] McBride, of the...which [newspaper] was he [art critic of]? The Post? [The New York Sun] I don't remember. But there were so many papers, of course.

SZ: Well, there was a certain excitement over, I guess, the first exhibition. Then, of course, the second one, which was the Nineteen Americans, where the press was not overly favorable.

PJ: Neither was Alfred. Poor man. Again, like us, he had to scramble around for Americans. Then, of course, the museum was an instant success as far as the public goes. We couldn't use the elevators and, you know, the usual problems. We never dreamt there would be people coming. That was what we left out. And there were no offices. I kind of recreate the plan of the Heckscher building, because

they're going to have a show, now, of the exact plan of my show, and they're going to get all the models and the pictures together.

SZ: Who's going to do this, the Modern?

PJ: The Buell Center, Columbia. Of course we should do it, but they beat us. But, the sixtieth birthday of that show will be more important than any other, because there's more interest now in that period than there was any time since. It's amusing how things jump periods like that.

SZ: Was that one of the things that was so appealing about the International Style, that it was so different from what was here?

PJ: Oh, yes. It was a revolution, you see. It wasn't the same as the Russian, but it gave us that heady sense of creating new things. But they did too, the architects, in Germany of the '20s. This was really a backlash or a carry-on of the excitement in the '20s in central Europe. I've said this many times, that Germany was a vacuum that absorbed other cultures. The modern movement wasn't created by the Germans at all; it was the Dutch, the Swiss, the Danish, the Russian. Lissitsky from Russia, and Dada from Switzerland. De Stijl from Holland. Le Corbusier from France, stepping on a very fertile soil. Gropius and Mies and the "November Gruppe" and the revolutionary lefties. So, it all coagulated to make Germany the most fertile ground, because it was a defeated country. So, it was the excitement in the '20s, in Europe, you could almost feel it. It was the same with music, with [Virgil] Thompson. I mean, he and [Gertrude] Stein, you see, for Americans, see, the center of the Paris excitement. In Germany it was Mies. You can't repeat that now, because there's no such thing as that kind of a revolution that's needed. It was the right time, Alfred Barr was at the right place, the right man. Except he was wrong; he couldn't run a museum. A minor thing, but to the money people it wasn't minor. He

didn't need to run a museum, see, in the first three or four years. He went and got the pictures sent and hung them up. And he needed a staff so they didn't get a hole in them, and he was very careful about that. He was a purist when it came to handling actual pictures. But, as to organizing a museum and the staff and everything, it was totally foreign to him.

SZ: So, how did it all operate in those first years?

PJ: It didn't. It just....

SZ: Happened?

PJ: "Have lunch," and "Let's us get together," and "That would be an interesting show to do. Let's call Joe." You know. And, "Maybe Mrs. Rockefeller will give enough money to do that one." Heavens. My first.... I had a little bit of a room--not in the Heckscher building, [in] the first house...the Museum occupied afterward.

SZ: Where you moved.

PJ: Yes, that was the first move. The dates...I don't know, but I remember once Mrs. Rockefeller went by and she came to my office. I never went to see the little room that I had after I set it up with objects from the design collection. She said, "Philip, you haven't polished the silver in your cases. I saw some dust there this morning." One remembers these rebukes, believe me, because she was a very royal.... It's like having the Queen Mother come in and say, "I found a speck of dust on your glove," you know. Of course, she was right; I hadn't maintained it. But that was the kind of personal involvement.... Oh, yes, she was very much that way. But it was her box that wasn't polished, and the shelf was, of course, dusty. But in those days we didn't have a staff that took care of those things. I was supposed to go down and dust it, which I damn well did! [LAUGHTER]

SZ: Afterwards.

PJ: Yes, afterwards. But, in other words, she--more than the other two ladies, of course--was very interested in the day-to-day thing. And, fortunately, she liked Alfred. Fortunately, Alfred liked me. The trustees weren't going to give us our show. Not the money, but the permission to have an architecture show. That wasn't what a museum did. It's almost hard to think back now. But there is still that feeling around, that architecture.... So, I made a speech--extremely bad--and you could hear the sigh of fatigue....

SZ: When was this?

PJ: It was in a night meeting of the board.

SZ: Oh. Pleading your case.

PJ: Yes. Pleading my case to start an architecture department, and Mrs. Rockefeller got up and said, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, I know you're not interested in this, but it just may be that when this report is put into writing you might find it interesting." And, of course, her word; nobody dared to say a word. I can imagine how bad I was, if you had to say "in writing." And Alfred just stood by me, and he pled for architecture, the way he did for all the different directions the museum went in--photography, film, library. There was no library. I remember I got Iris Barry; that's a well-known story. I paid her salary. First I bought her a dress so she could interview. She was no librarian; she was interested in film. But she was the librarian at the Modern for a few years. But, you see, there is one person who never knew about libraries--Alfred Barr made her go take a course at Columbia. But, you know, she was good. Alfred knew it, I knew it, and when the idea of a film department came about, it was obvious. But that's what he did. He collected interesting people in the various fields. [Beaumont] Newhall, and afterwards, Bill Lieberman. These all came along in later years. He was good at that, like picking me and picking.... I was a good choice, for a

propagandist department. Abbott-- maybe not such a good choice, but he [Barr] had to have an assistant. He had to have a confidante in that field, and Abbott fulfilled his place as a fidus Achatus, a faithful follower, but he wasn't particularly able in his own right. But, again, he was rich.

SZ: Abbott?

PJ: Yes, [Jere Abbott], and so was James Soby, you see. But Soby was a great choice.

SZ: And these were all people Alfred spotted for their....

PJ: Yes, whom he found for their ability to help his passion. He had only the one passion, the Museum. Marga [Margaret Scolari Barr]--an appendage. I'm sure he thought of her that way, though he wouldn't admit [it]. Daughter.... "What do I have a child for, for heaven's sake?" He treated her that way, unconsciously, but he had only one life. Toward the end it was very, very sad indeed.

SZ: He was close to Abbott before, as I recall.

PJ: Oh, yes, they went to Russia together.

SZ: They made that trip.

PJ: Yes. He's always needed a Soby or a me or somebody to work along with him. But that's true of a lot of strong people.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about Abbott, if you would.

PJ: That's it. It's so gray, there aren't many memories about him. He was a friend of the arts, independent, and I think he had a job at Smith [College] before or after--both, I guess.

SZ: Well, I know after.

PJ: After, yes. But, no, I don't think he had any charm. He was older than Alfred. Again, he was closer to people, in a way, than Alfred was; he wasn't so "ivory tower," but he had no impulse on his own to do anything.

SZ: So, when you think back on those early--as you call them--heady days, he's not a part of that.

PJ: Heady days, he was just a part of the mist. He was the social director, but he never did a show that I know of. Strange, isn't it?

SZ: Well, he ended up not staying too terribly long.

PJ: He didn't? Well, Alfred could get rid of people in his way. [PAUSE] It's extraordinary, how one-man-show it was, though, when you stop to think. He picked some good people. Alan Blackburn was a good choice for business. Iris Barry was a wonderful choice for film.

SZ: But, she was someone you knew.

PJ: Did I bring her in?

SZ: That's what you just said, I don't know.

PJ: It's just possible I was. Where did I meet Iris Barry?

SZ: But, in any event, what you're really now describing is sort of that second phase of this institution, where its mission was expanded and it was taking on more people.

PJ: Yes. I missed those years. After '35. I left at Christmas of '34.

SZ: Now, this board meeting you attended, where you asked them to...? What was so terrible about your plea?

PJ: I must have stuttered and stammered, the usual first appearances. I just wasn't prepared. Then, of course, they were so inimical, they were so.... There was an architect there, of course, her brother--Winthrop Aldrich--who was an architect and thought it was all nonsense anyhow. He said, "It's a lot of nonsense, my dear."  
[INTERRUPTION]

SZ: But, Mrs. Rockefeller, she obviously was already on your side.

PJ: Oh, yes. Through Alfred. She bought anybody Alfred bought. She was that loyal, and we got along well too. But....

SZ: You said she was so personally involved in the early days.

PJ: Oh, yes. Yes, she strode the halls and she set up on her top floor, where her husband [John D. Rockefeller, Jr.] never went,...her own little [gallery].

SZ: That was in her own house.

PJ: In her house, right next door to the Museum. She was a...I mean, imagine having somebody like that as your patroness.

SZ: Well, tell me some more about Mrs. Rockefeller.

PJ: Mrs. Rockefeller was.... I don't know anything about her because she was too grand and too awe-inspiring. I feel about her the way I do about the Queen Mother. I met her only once, but there is a woman that you walk into a room and you know royalty

is not dead. Felt exactly the same way with her. She knew it, and she used it to the hilt. I mean, "the three women [Mrs. Rockefeller, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, and Miss Lillie Bliss, founders of the Museum]!" One woman and two girls! But, she was always modest about all that. Modest until she got that steel backbone, and she did scold me and Alfred once in a while, when it got too tough. But the money thing didn't bother her because it wasn't that much from her point of view, and she got her husband to give the land and the house and everything.

SZ: Essentially, she was supporting it. It was essentially her....

PJ: Her game. Now, this wasn't published, or even admitted by her, but it was a one-woman, one-man band. Of course, the result was we had only one person to go to-- Alfred Barr, see, because she wouldn't see you. If you said, "I want to report on something that Alfred Barr has done," you couldn't tattle to her. You don't call the Queen Mother and complain. Then, if she said, "I want a new fireplace," you didn't say, "Get this architect or that architect." She knew. Had it done. But she'd listen very carefully and visit every single show, very religiously. Now, she never gave me money. The founding of it and all that, but she never gave any pictures. She gave us a lot of the stuff that later went down to Williamsburg, but the great pictures came from Mrs. [Simon] Guggenheim. She was the biggest donor we ever had.

SZ: For paintings.

PJ: Paintings. Well, that....

SZ: Mrs. Rockefeller had a lot of drawings and prints.

PJ: Well, those don't count when you.... What's a museum doing? They're into paintings, and Alfred could never get enough paintings. That's why I came in handy.

I would give him a \$1,000 painting when he needed it for propaganda to get more paintings. Like the [Jasper Johns] Flag and things like that he had his mind set on. So, oh, God, the great days. But, it was his iron will. That man...the two iron people. But, of course, being a kid, I was more impressed by them than I would be, perhaps, now. But nevertheless, I think you'd have a hard time finding a combination like that anywhere in the world, in any institution. It was in that period, without space to hang, without a building, without backing from an institution, that the whole issue was made. Those first shows, you see, showed it was a place worth supporting. And think how fast, from that building to the Heckscher building to the present building. It was just an amazing push, and a gain in reputation, all due to one man...and one woman--let's not take away Mrs. Rockefeller's role. As a matter of fact, she was the only one I ever reported to besides Alfred, and I didn't really report to her. It was through Alfred. Did she ever call me down directly? I mean call me up? Of course, I remember about the dust, but she never would interfere. That wasn't her dish. Her dish was to make a great institution. Isn't that amazing?

SZ: Yes. Now, Lillie Bliss.... Now, she died soon after it was founded. So....

PJ: And Lillie must have been impressed by [Mrs. Rockefeller]. I didn't know Lillie very well, and, of course, she never had any direct contact with me. It was through Alfred and the Rockefellers, but Lillie Bliss's collection, of course, was what got us started.

SZ: Yes.

PJ: She was an extraordinary friend of the arts and of artists, which Abby wasn't.

SZ: But, a lot is made of Abby as a collector.

PJ: But she did make the collection....

SZ: Well, I'm saying.... Things that are written talk a lot about her great eye and her ability to find....

PJ: Find what? Early American?

SZ: Well, she had several areas of interest. Early American...folk art. And then something of a contemporary....

PJ: She didn't have any Picasso.

SZ: Well, then, what do you think drove her to found this museum?

PJ: The sense of doing great things in a field that she was genteelly interested in. She was interested in architecture. Donald Deskey did her top floor. We later used.... My mother later used Donald Deskey to do our dining room at home. She was interested, but really, it was people and the creation of institutions that interested her, through, of course, the general.... Even her husband was creating institutions rather than [pursuing] any passion he had, except for vases--Chinese vases. There he was excited, you see, but he had no interest in all these institutions he had founded. And, as you say, no fun.

SZ: Well, that's just the impression one gets, looking. Just a couple of other things, then you tell me how you're doing for today. The effect of the board in the early days, because you keep saying it was really a two-person institution....

PJ: Well, there were some other players. [Conger] Goodyear, and later, Stephen Clark.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about Goodyear.

PJ: Goodyear's a hard nut to crack. He was a tough, irascible man, who was in love with

his dogs, as far as we know. Except he kept.... He married Eliza's [Eliza Bliss Parkinson Cobb] mother, you remember--it got very incestuous--but he really ran the institution as an institution. Poor Mrs. Rockefeller was, after all, a lady. In those days ladies weren't executives. It didn't cross their minds. He was, and of course later, in Buffalo.... no, before that. Before he came, too. Yes. He was a remarkably independent thinker, and ruthless. He reminds you a little of [William S.] Paley, except Paley was not much of a can do type. It was Goodyear who actually did things, and he was a lover of pictures. He had a very strong taste, but very interesting. And irascible to a degree.... if he didn't like his dog, he'd throw the nearest telephone book at that poor dog. He'd say, "To hell with you." And yet, he always was there, in his office, a Sealyham. Wonderful dog. Now, when I left to go to Huey Long, he loved the idea. That was exactly the kind of thing that just suited him. When he was in New Orleans he'd say, "Come, let's have dinner. What's going on?" You know? Nobody could believe their ears. Of course, that was the worst thing I ever did, from the point of view of New York society. But he was a man of totally independent judgment. He didn't give a damn about anything--Mrs. Rockefeller or anybody.

SZ: How did he get along with Alfred?

PJ: With difficulty. But Mrs. Rockefeller was a great shield. Goodyear wouldn't take her on. No, he was really a backer of Alfred, until those terrible days in the war. But then Stephen Clark got more and more influence in the conservative direction, as Alfred's waned. I missed those years. You see, I was away. In fact, after '35 I really didn't know what happened internally. I heard, of course, from Alfred, in much too much detail. And Marga. All the woes and [the] unfairness of the board. Oh, yes.... the fact that Alfred couldn't get his way about the building.

SZ: In terms of architect...?

PJ: That's right. That was Goodyear.

SZ: So the board, in the first...well, we're talking really about the first ten years, although what you're saying to me is obviously what you know intimately, really just the first five years.

PJ: That's all.

SZ: The board sat but the board didn't exercise too much influence over what was being shown....

PJ: No, it didn't. Conger was in from the beginning, at the choice of Alfred, I think. I shouldn't talk, I don't know. But everybody gave Paul Sachs the credit for telling Mrs. Rockefeller. And Paul would appear in public to make a defense of Alfred. I've heard him make lectures, very persuasive, and [he] spoke with authority. Harvard University thinks this man is going to be the best.... He didn't know from shit, but it didn't make any difference. He was the voice of authority from out of town with a briefcase. So with Paul's backing and Mrs. Rockefeller, it made an amazing focus. And, of course, the need for the museum just artistically. I mean, the thing was more than ripe, with the battles at the Metropolitan. None of these people had a place to hang their pictures and be proud of them, and that's all donors want to do. They had these collections, and how do you get them famous? You give them to the Metropolitan. But they couldn't. It made them absolutely furious that they.... Mrs. Rockefeller was especially angry, and that wasn't the person to make angry. But imagine, a woman like that starting out with total the responsibility, really, of creating a thing that was going to be a sink-hole, really, for money, naturally, in the middle of the worst depression we ever had. It shows how strong a need there was, and how strong a wave--including mine, the architectural wave, I mean--coming along and breaking at the same point on the beach. It was just an incredible concatenation.

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: 885 THIRD AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**DATE: JANUARY 8, 1991**

**BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1**

SZ: I thought, Philip, today, I would like to ask you about the advisory committee, in the early part of the museum's life.... Do you remember how it was formed? Whose idea it was?

PJ: The point was, we needed people, as I remember it. Naturally, one only has one's own memory.

SZ: Of course.

PJ: It was a breeding ground for trustees, but the young people felt they didn't have enough say; there were people that wanted to say things out there, and that it would be good to get them under the Museum wing and not have a revolution or anything. So they said, "Let's have a junior.... " It was called the Junior Advisory Committee, because they were all young at that time, and that gave...well, a lot of us met for the first time there. I haven't got the list, but I remember Lincoln and Ethel de Haven and Eliza Parkinson; [George] Gershwin came in...later on. I remember him because he was famous at that time. Who was the ring leader? Have you done Eliza?

SZ: Yes, I have.

PJ: Well, she knows it better than I do.

SZ: Yes, but do you remember the first meeting?

PJ: No. No, I wasn't as interested in that because I was from the staff point of view more, so I was interested parochially. I know when Lincoln was doing his mural show [Murals and Photo-Murals by American Painters and Photographers].... I doubt if I even went to some of those meetings. I was on it, was I?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: But, it didn't mean as much to me. I remember them as cocktail parties, where I met people who were interested in the Museum.

SZ: And Nelson [Rockefeller] was on that committee.

PJ: Yes. That may have been one of the big reasons for making it, because Mrs. Rockefeller wanted very much to get Nelson interested. He was away a great deal of the time, or at college or....

SZ: Well, he graduated, I think....

PJ: Yes, but he was taking the world tour, I think. Because he was away a good deal of the time, and I remember her speaking to me about--there was the family member who was really interested. Then, of course, she realized that the older generation would be going along and she was most interested in promoting him. Then, of course, being the take-over type, he took over right away. No more discussions. Isn't that funny? I was going over the beginning of the garden, the notes that [Rona] Roob sent me, and I'd forgotten Nelson's role in starting that garden design, later on in the '50s. But very quietly, in the background, he ran the whole thing. Now, the

present generation doesn't remember that so much, because David [Rockefeller] is here, you see. But David's memory is a little different from the way it was.

SZ: David's memory?

PJ: Yes, because he naturally doesn't want...his memory doesn't glorify the man who really who was the leader. Nelson. So he acts now as he thinks Nelson would have acted, and it doesn't work. It's not the same man.

SZ: You had a good friendship with Nelson Rockefeller?

PJ: Yes, and I think mostly set up through Lincoln. Lincoln has a.... Are you able to talk to him? No. Lincoln has a very strong sense of loyalty to his people he approves off. He approves of me, [Isamu] Noguchi, [Paul] Cadmus, and Nelson, and that's about it. And, of course, [George] Balanchine. Privately. And so he, privately...when he praises one to another, it's very convincing. If he told me how wonderful Nelson was, and I thought Nelson was great, so no doubt he told Nelson how good I was, so Nelson thought I was good. I think it was more secondary than primary. Primary in my relation with Nelson--I'm talking about these very days now--was Lincoln's sponsorship. Because he was so very, very violent in his feelings, which is his charm as well as his difficulty.

SZ: Lincoln.

PJ: Yes.

SZ: Well, what do you think was the basis of Lincoln's relationship with Nelson?

PJ: Male bonding. God knows. It was just one of those friendships that Nelson had with René [d'Harnoncourt], too. But Nelson was also a very.... Always, whenever he made a speech, whenever he was about, he would talk about how great Lincoln was.

It wasn't based on any community of interest of any kind.

SZ: But this was essentially in the early days. Lincoln became disaffected with the museum.

PJ: Yes, but not then. We were talking about the very early days.

SZ: Yes, the very early days.

PJ: Yes. His disaffection came, again, from his friendship with people like [Pavel] Tchelitchev and Cadmus--the realist artists--as against the Barr line of Cézanne, Picasso. Although that didn't surface at this early time, when Lincoln was painting the murals in the Liberal Club of Harvard. But I knew nothing.... I didn't know Lincoln. See, Lincoln has these great hiatuses in friendships, and at the time of the mural show, I didn't really know him.

SZ: But you had known him previously.

PJ: Yes, I knew.... Well, again, it was a strange thing. In and out. He doesn't even remember that he did the murals in the Liberal Club at Harvard, and that was my first inkling that there was a man of the arts in Harvard that one could talk to. Yet, when I was doing.... When he was doing the Bauhaus exhibition, at the Contemporary [the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art], at his little place there at Harvard, apparently I got some material for him. So, I must have known him. But he's always been mysterious. Still is.

SZ: Well, he did do the murals show. Do you remember seeing it?

PJ: Yes, but I don't remember what was in it even. They weren't very good, of course. Why would they be? Who did the show, Lincoln?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Well, of course he, like me, learned from Alfred the whole idea of the contemporary arts and all that. So when he "poofed," of course, it was.... Probably our friendship dimmed at the time when he was getting disaffected, and he knew I was totally loyal to Barr. There was never any question.

SZ: But, his disaffection had to do with the fact that he really championed certain artists that Barr....

PJ: Yes.

SZ: And it all became a question of...what? What was being shown, or acquired...modern art, the theoretical....

PJ: Modern art is all terrible. It never should have been invented. The academy was right; academic art was the only art that was really in the tradition. It's the same impulse that led him, finally, to join the Catholic Church.

SZ: But, clearly, when he started his association with the Museum, he had a different point of view.

PJ: Of course. Well, he started the Contemporary--whatever he called it--at Harvard.

SZ: Society.

PJ: Yes. An entirely different idea. No, he changed, there's no doubt about that. I think, also, Balanchine.... But that was...no, that was about that time. Within the framework of a classic dance, even though.... I remember one of the big points of my life at that time was Tchelitchew's costumes and scenery for Balanchine, in Paris.

Alfred never thought that Tchelitchev was a particularly great painter. Bone of contention.

SZ: So, what you're saying is that Lincoln's a man of ideas and of principles, and that that's come across.

PJ: Very strong, very strong, Prejudices you could also call them. In spite of his dislike of anything modern, Noguchi's a great sculptor. I never tried to pin him down on just how that all worked, but a greater sculptor, of course, was [Elie] Nadelman. That's when I bought mine. Let's see, was I working on...it must have been in the '40s, then that.... Oh. Lincoln was very close to me at the time of the [Second World] war. What happened to the [Junior] Advisory Committee during the war? Did it go on?

SZ: Well, I think it sort of half suspended because Nelson went away, and I know Mrs. Cobb told me that she was living out on Long Island and didn't have very much.... And I think there had been enough tension between the [Junior] Advisory Committee....

PJ: And the trustees, or the [Junior] Advisory Committee among themselves?

SZ: No, I think it was more the [Junior] Advisory Committee's place with the board of trustees, because there was a natural tension in terms of what they had originally wanted to do. Of course, that later altered and changed.

PJ: I think I lost track earlier than the [Junior] Advisory Committee, I really do. I treated it as a place to meet interesting young people. Like, I think I met Mrs. Cobb there.

SZ: Do you remember meeting Mrs. Cobb? Because you've said she's now been a lifelong, wonderful friend to you.

PJ: Oh, we're very close friends.

SZ: Yes. I'd like to know what she was like in those days.

PJ: Well, you see, when one grows old with somebody, you don't see the change. Our relationship is exactly the same as it was right off the bat. We just personally saw eye to eye, not too much on art as on people. She's a people person. She thinks she's interested in the arts, but really it's people. Of course, when she bloomed was when René arrived, but up to that time she was Miss Bliss's niece and close admirer. To me, she also represented the Blisses and the whole foundation of the museum. I mean, Mrs. John D. was a glorious patroness but one quaked. It wasn't that simple old "Hi, honey" kind of thing. But Eliza and I were the same age, almost, so we could look at the thing in a more objective way. But she still had that dreadful husband, and little babies, of course, so it was a little different life. But, she and I were always gossiping between meetings and that kind of thing. Then, on the gossip level, of course, Tod [Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller]...

SZ: Was she strongly involved?

PJ: No. I meant, as a person. No, she never came to meetings or anything. We used to meet at... Well, any gathering at the Modern, there they were. The ladies, of course, played a great part in that committee. I remember Gershwin or I or all the people didn't ever say much, but I don't remember the other characters.

SZ: Well, I have a few names. Eddie Warburg....

PJ: Eddie, of course, came in as a protégé of Lincoln, because we all thought he had a lot of money.

SZ: Was Gershwin a noted collector of modern art?

PJ: No. He was a very famous man.

SZ: Yes.

PJ: He was interested, but that's about all.

SZ: So, you think Lincoln brought him in too?

PJ: No. I don't know who, you see. That's it, that grey area, of the people....

SZ: But he didn't....

PJ: We got a feeling, of course, with Nelson there, that this was the fresh air of the future, that we.... We were of an age, you see, so that we could talk much more shorthand than a Stephen Clark or a Goodyear, and we knew Mrs. Rockefeller's point of view was represented by Nelson. But Nelson was a natural born leader and, of course, when he was there--and a lot of times he wasn't--where the heck.... He was around the world [PAUSE]. But, you see, I never bothered about committees or anything with that fancy a name to it, if it's got a Nelson Rockefeller there.... You see, Nelson.... What's the point in talking to a lot of biddies? Hangers-on, like Eddie. It became.... What it became also was a big place, a group that met in different people's houses for cocktails. In those days we all drank more. It's so funny, now they don't even serve liquor at these things. But, we enjoyed the company and the excitement....

SZ: You were telling me about, I guess, the social aspect of the committee.

PJ: That's what I felt. As a staff member, I want to get back to work. I felt that it was getting to be a ladies' group that was set up for Nelson. Sorry I didn't think of that at first. Of course, that was my feeling, that Mrs. Rockefeller had a perfectly obvious thing in mind, and although Lincoln was a professional, it really was a social group. Aside from that, clearly, nothing was going to happen, and it was well in the hands of Stephen and Conger, and they weren't so much for the Rockefellers as the Rockefellers were, obviously. So....

SZ: And their sponsorship of the murals show was really just a blip in the...?

PJ: A blip, yes, of no important consequence. I think it was rather resented by Stephen, their taking over executive matters. It's just a feeling, because there was no.... I mean, we met and said, "Wouldn't it be nice if," but there was no staff. I don't think Alfred was really too charmed. It made another boss, another thing he had to cope with, and he didn't like to cope, he'd rather work. He didn't mind talking to Mrs. Guggenheim and Mrs. Rockefeller, but the idea of all these society people gathering around, giving him their amateur opinions, wasn't the way to run a museum. He never said this, but I got the feeling it was not important to the institution. But, the girls loved it, of course, as they do still. The International Council is a camping ground of everybody who says, "I'm on the International Council," and the [Junior] Advisory Committee was like that.

SZ: Well, as a staff member.... We talked about the Modern Architecture show last time. We didn't talk about Machine Art....

PJ: Oh, yes.

SZ: ...which I guess was a highly unusual exhibition for you to have conceived of and put

together.

PJ: Well, it sounds as if I conceived it. I never conceived anything, so it must have been.... It was really in talks with Alfred, because the whole Bauhaus approach--that the decorative arts were no longer in existence, but that art could still be made without the handcraft approach--so it was an anti-handcraft show. The worship of the machine was an important part of it, kept over from the Futurists, but it was mostly based on the Bauhaus approach. But you see, the whole impetus is gone, the whole moral socialism of that day, that Alfred really shared. He came through with his puritanism, and with me it was purely stylistic, as coming from the Bauhaus. But Hitchcock and I were more interested in the style side of things--a word that everybody hated and still do--but we felt that a machine made an ideology, a theme that would be good to substitute for the handcrafts. The word we did coin--Alan Blackburn and I did--while we were drinking. It seems that's all one did.

SZ: While you were drinking, did you say?

PJ: Yes. It was about 4:00 in the morning, and the words "machine art" just came out of the air, a very, very good idea. Funny that it doesn't seem like an idea anymore, it's just machine art, but in those days it was an invention from the air. So, that made it very, very easy because we could find the objects all the way from non-designed things--pots and pans [INTERRUPTION]....

SZ: Continuing, yes, you were telling me about the everyday objects--pots and pans....

PJ: Yes, all the way from there, and then we tried to find objects that were designed by names, and there hardly were any names, so we felt we'd better stress just the very fact of the beauty of objects that were just the result of other forces than design. But the beauty of them--like the propeller, which is always beautiful--and things of that

kind. The result, of course, was extraordinary. Everybody hated us deeply for being anti-art. Barnett Newman--I've been reading his new book--has a strong attack on machine artists being the antithesis of what art should be, which is very funny coming from Barney, who's a modern artist. That's an interesting book, by the way, because it shows the prejudices of a modern architect of the early Abstract Expressionism. It's funny. He didn't like Alfred Barr very much because Alfred liked Cézanne as the founder of modern art, and everybody knows it was really Manet, an entirely different direction. That's not the museum, though, except his attack on Alfred.

SZ: That show's been called the beginning of the museum's life as a tastemaker and....

PJ: Yes. Trying to force pots and pans down....

SZ: Whatever. But, I'm just curious. When you went looking for objects to include, were you already looking at your.... I guess you were looking at your environment in that way all the time anyhow.

PJ: That's the reason we did the show, because we were looking at.... Alfred and I had been looking at beautiful, plain objects like ball bearings. I think we exaggerated that, but it made a good propaganda point.

SZ: Another thing that was said about it.... Even though you ran into a great deal of criticism, I guess on the content of the show, your installation technique was heralded.

PJ: I know. Isn't that funny. Oh, yes.

SZ: Well, tell me about it. What did you do?

PJ: That's a good question. It was a multiple installation, let's say, we took a beaker--a laboratory beaker--and had thirty of them, all the sizes they made. That meant an enormous one at this end of a big table, going down to nothing at the other end. The other thing, innovation at the Museum, was lighting. You would take a room this size, it was a house, after all. We made a great big table in the middle and then enormous lights hanging down, just lighting the objects on black velvet. Big new deal, to me, but anyhow, that was very startling, I guess.

SZ: Well, yes.

PJ: It was a very easy show to install, of course, because the things installed themselves. We didn't have a dishwasher over here and a propeller over there; we had the whole series of things. You were surrounded with.... Oh, a copper pot. Enormous ones you could stand in, and real tiny ones. That's all perfectly absurd, but it made whole shelves surrounded with objects. Those pictures are not bad that they have in the files.

SZ: Well, was that a revolutionary way? It was, obviously.

PJ: It must have been; I don't know what they're talking about, really. Oh, the lighting, I did do something else funny. I put a false ceiling in and put the lights above the scrim, so that there was no lighting source showing, and, of course, it made sort of a glow. Not very original, eh? No, the lighting was more original in the automobile show. No, the point of that show was it was a propaganda show. I remember four or five cartoons in The New Yorker. "Why don't you just take that faucet over to the Modern? They'll probably give you something for it." Of course, we were delighted with any PR of that kind. I don't think many people came, but they all enjoyed attacking the idea of non-art becoming art.

SZ: When you did a show like that--this show in particular--and you ran up against a lot of critical difficulty, you were delighted and Alfred was delighted because of the principle....

PJ: It stirred people up.

SZ: Right. But what about the trustees? Did you ever have.... ?

PJ: Well, see, I was insulated from the eyes of the trustees because of Mrs. Rockefeller. It's the word "trustees." What trustees? Who was on the board? [Sam] Lewisohn,...by that time he must have been on the board. Stephen Clark I never spoke to. Goodyear, I really had only the one contact with him when I left. He was fascinated by Huey Long, and he had a lot of interests in Louisiana, so we used to get together, and he would say, "Bully for you, go on ahead." Everyone else was horrified. But Conger was delighted. But he was an oddball, and the rest of the trustees wished there wasn't a department [of architecture]. It cost the Museum dollars, and it made no sense. Of course, they couldn't complain too much, because I wasn't being paid.

SZ: Right. Well, but the exhibition cost money to mount, I'm sure.

PJ: It must have been very expensive. No, not very expensive, but it must have cost money.

SZ: But it was something. But you didn't have to go to them and say, "This is an exhibition...."

PJ: I never defended that exhibition. I just said to Alfred, "Wouldn't it be fun?" and Alfred said, "It would be fun. Put it on." Those were the days. No bureaucracy. That was cooked up by Alfred and me, just sitting around. But the ideas really stemmed from

Barr, My enthusiasm and ability to work hard, I went around and found all these things. Then, I exaggerated, as usual, the propaganda side, which, of course, is the main point. I emphasized the designers that...would drop any imitation of handcraft, to show how important functional shapes.... The shapes themselves were conceived of, and Alfred was the one.... I wrote that little article for the.... What do they call it? The Museum Bulletin? And Alfred had the picture of the sphere, the cone and the cube from Plato. He was very big on Plato. So I looked up the Plato for him, and the article came out I remember. But that kind of purity was Alfred's big meat! Of course, I suppose it's an unusual installation to put an eight foot diameter propeller in front of the building. I suppose what they meant was here was a show that really was an installation. There was no art, in that they couldn't go see the Mona Lisa.

SZ: They didn't see it that way.

PJ: That's right. So, you went into a place that was very funny looking. No great installation. No, I think it was the word, I think it was the idea, and the fact there were a lot of things that weren't consciously art in the show that made it so famous.

SZ: You talked to me a little bit about Iris Barry last time, at the beginning, and you were apparently the first chairman of the Library Committee.

PJ: Alfred said, "Let's have a library committee, and Philip, you be...."

SZ: And that was it?

PJ: Yes. I imagine I was paying Iris's salary to keep her from starving.

SZ: She was a wonderful person?

PJ: Oh, glorious. Handsome, ambitious, witty. She was wonderful. She became a closer friend of Jim Soby than me, because I left, of course, in '34.

SZ: Before you left, did you have much to do with Sarah Newmeyer?

PJ: Sarah? Well, of course, one had to. She was one of the four people there. What was she, PR?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Yes, she was a very funny lady. No, I didn't.... PR was something I didn't need, anyhow.

SZ: You could do it yourself.

PJ: I didn't do anything.

SZ: I was just going to ask you, anything about the theater art show [International Exhibition of Theatre Arts] that was put on?

PJ: Oh, Simonson. Lee Simonson. Alfred, again, started that idea, but I didn't know Lee and I didn't know theater art, nor was I very interested. What year was that?

SZ: That was '34.

PJ: Well, my mind was wandering.

SZ: Your mind was already wandering by then. You left in December.

PJ: I left Christmas Day.

SZ: Christmas Day of '34. Were you feeling unchallenged, or was it just that....

PJ: Unchallenged. There were new worlds to conquer. There was a big world out there. Said there was no food or something. I had to do something about it. That museum was a very restricted horizon.

SZ: You left with Alan Blackburn. By the time he left he was essentially what? He was.... ?

PJ: Business head. It's funny. I found Alan Blackburn and Iris Barry. Who else? It's funny because I just.... Alfred didn't know he was looking for these people, or he didn't have any other source, because there was no reason why I should know people. Odd.

SZ: When you decided to leave, did you seek anyone's counsel on it, or did you just announce it? You said.... ?

PJ: "I'm leaving, I'm going to have fun." I talked to Alfred about it. He was very sympathetic, but not understanding. And that's why I remember the theater arts show. It wasn't in my field, it wasn't as exciting as Cubism or.... In fact, to me, our message was delivered, in my world, anyhow, architecture and design.

SZ: Through those two....

PJ: Yes. The International Style exhibition and the Machine Art Show. What am I supposed to do now? I wasn't a professional museum man. Unless there's an exciting thing like Deconstructionism I wasn't willing to do any hard work. I never liked hard work. Alfred, you see...well, Alfred knew everything in our world. He was the final authority on anything to do with aesthetics. It was Alfred Barr, so that relieved one of having to think--I'm making this up--but you didn't have to think, you didn't have to have arguments, you didn't have to write. It was wonderful, that peace

and comfort that you get in a religion. But that, to me, at the moment, because of my political interests, seemed a small part of the world. Out there there must be something. There was.

**END TAPE 2, SIDE 1**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: 885 THIRD AVENUE  
NEW YORK CITY**

**DATE: JANUARY 31, 1991**

**BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1**

SZ: Two things I wanted to pick up on from last time, because we ended when you just mentioned the fact that you left the Museum in '34, and that, actually, Conger Goodyear, I think, was the only one who....

PJ: The only one who was amused.

SZ: I just wanted to ask you what Alfred Barr had said to you about it.

PJ: Alfred was the most sympathetic of all my friends, and he took my side whether I was right or wrong. He had a complete loyalty that is most unusual among friends. He thought I was crazy, he thought I was making a big mistake. He said, "What's wrong with a career in the museum world in architecture? Why do you think you have to go out and do something? You don't know whether you're any good or not. Why would you just pick up and go off like that?" But he never tried to dissuade me...there was never any question....

SZ: While others did? Is that the implication?

PJ: No. The silent treatment, you know. No, they didn't do anything. Everybody was all very polite. But, naturally, they thought it insane. But I didn't ask their opinion. That

- was very easy. I just wasn't there one day. [PAUSE]
- SZ: When you did finally come back, was there was some discussion about your coming back because of having left?
- PJ: No, not at all. Let's see. When did I get back? In '39? It must have been. And I didn't go back to the Museum then. Not until after Alfred was.... What did I do in '39? I think I call that my "lost year," when I just didn't do anything, except mope around the place. [PAUSE] In '39 war broke out, didn't it?
- SZ: Well, in Europe it did.
- PJ: Yes, well, I was in Germany at the time.
- SZ: When the war broke out?
- PJ: I left. So, that's 39. I had no intention of doing anything at the Museum in '40. Then, in '41 of course, I went back to architectural school. That took three years. Then I went into the Army myself, so I didn't really come back until '44-'45. So '45 was when I started to work at the Modern again, and was doing the Mies van der Rohe show [1947].
- SZ: We'll get to that. The one person I didn't ask you about, from the early days, before you left in '34, was Monroe Wheeler.
- PJ: Monroe was just a distant character to me. He represented another line at the Museum. He was an ex-patriate type. He was in the painting and sculpture department and my connection with painting was Alfred. When did Monroe come, I wonder? I've forgotten.

SZ: But, as a person, at that time, you don't have...?

PJ: I don't have a clear picture. He was a charming, wonderful man, but I never thought he would make it. He had been in publishing, you know, not in painting; so, I didn't think he was an expert on painting. But, he was very nice to the trustees and they liked him.

SZ: I wanted to ask you about the [Oskar] Schlemmer picture, because I think in Marga Barr's chronicle she mentioned your having gone to Europe and seen it. I just wanted to ask you to tell me whatever you can about its acquisition.

PJ: You mean the Bauhaus picture [Bauhaus Stairway, 1932]?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: I never saw the picture. Alfred told me about it, and the unbelievable price. I trusted his judgment. He said this was the best Schlemmer he had ever seen and would I buy it? Of course, since it cost \$100, I did.

SZ: So you never did go to see it? You don't know where.... ?

PJ: No, I knew Schlemmer. I knew his work, slightly, but he wasn't one of the great painters. He was no Klee, and he was no Kandinsky. But this was the most important picture he had ever painted. And then I bought another one.... [PAUSE]

SZ: Another Schlemmer?

PJ: ...Schlemmer, which I gave to the Athenaeum in Hartford. [PAUSE]

- SZ: So you never went to see the picture in Germany; you just....
- PJ: No. It was just Alfred's recommendation in a telegram. Alfred was a very.... Everything he chose has turned out to be right. He helped me pick--helped me pick! He picked the Flag, by Jasper Johns. He said, "Buy that one for me." That was the kind of thing. And he did the Schlemmer. So, I feel it's not my collection I gave the Modern, but more or less Alfred's taste, at that time, of those people--a [Mark] Rothko, he picked--because no one else would get them, you see.
- SZ: So that's how he got the Johns.
- PJ: That's how he got it, and it worked very well. It was pittance money, and I was more than happy to do it, because I love the pictures anyhow. Then in the '60s I built my own gallery. Then it changed, of course.
- SZ: I would really like to get to the point where you return to the Museum. Now, you came back to New York, you say, in 1939.
- PJ: I came to New York, yes, but I didn't join the Museum. I saw Alfred a good deal. Then I went back to school and graduated in '43. Then I went to war, got out a year later--'44-'45. I don't know where I got the idea for the Mies show.
- SZ: Well, I found in the records that in 1945 there was mention of having you work on an exhibition, a war monuments exhibition, which they were thinking of doing?
- PJ: That was my idea. That's when I wrote the article on the war memorials, but there weren't any war memorials to put in. We didn't have many after the last war, so I wrote the article instead and we never had the show. I discussed it with Alfred. When was that?

SZ: That was in 1945. I think [it was] the second half of '45. So was that really your first...?

PJ: That was about the first contact with the Museum. Then I must have gotten the idea for the Mies show. Maybe from Alfred; it could have been. He said, "Why don't you do us a Mies show?" That's a very good thought.

SZ: But all of this, with no real plan....

PJ: What? Of going back? No, I didn't have a job. I didn't have a title, apparently, and probably no money, which I didn't need anyhow.

SZ: The Museum must have been a very different place when you came back in 1945.

PJ: Yes, but I paid no attention to the Museum as it was organized post-Barr. I still saw everything through Alfred's eyes. And René was the director already, I think.

SZ: No. He was around but he was not the director.

PJ: When was he made director?

SZ: In 1949.

PJ: Was there a director then?

SZ: Not as such.

PJ: Well, who was making decisions? [Dick] Abbott? It must have been somebody around.

SZ: Well, Barr was still around, but not with the same....

PJ: Yes, but he was hiding in a closet. He must have had a lot to do with the programming, though, or I wouldn't have had the show. Because Dick Abbott wouldn't have known whether I had a show or not.

SZ: But when you returned, if you can remember, what was your sense of the architecture department?

PJ: Betty Mock, I think, was the director?

SZ: No, well, [Eliot] Noyes....

PJ: Yes, but Noyes was already on the way out after the Eames/Saarinen prize show. When was that? Forty-five [1946]? And he was a practicing architect in New Canaan and didn't come in much. So, Betty Mock. Maybe.... yes, what's his name from New Canaan was sort of in charge--Alfred's best friend--Soby. Was he officially around then?

SZ: He was around. But, because, I think what we were really trying to figure out is how, when you first came back, you were brought in. But now you say it may have been, well, through Alfred, but first....

PJ: But, you see, Betty Mock wasn't strong, and I may have suggested it to her: "Let me guest curate a Mies show." I can't tell you....

SZ: What do you mean by not strong?

PJ: Well, she wasn't the one who would throw me out. She was more interested--as her sister was--in housing and on doing good, which interested me not at all.

SZ: From what I can gather, there were some realignments going on for a bit of time. But, tell me how Edgar Kaufmann came to the department.

PJ: [LAUGHING] I have no idea. He was already there, I think, as head of design. I don't know what year we started that Useful Objects [of American Design Under \$10] show [1940]. That was Alfred's idea.

SZ: That was Alfred's idea?

PJ: Yes. But I did the first one. Things are not clear, that far back.

SZ: Well, tell me a little bit about Edgar Kaufmann, then.

PJ: Edgar and I didn't get along very well. He had a different set of tastes from mine. He came from a different.... My background was Bauhaus and Mondrian, his was Vienna and [Hans] Hofmann, and that was an entirely other direction from the strict functionalist International Style. So he felt a stranger from Alfred and my direction. He remained a very good friend of Alfred's. Alfred had [John] McAndrew and Kaufmann as main friends, and Soby, intellectually. But oil and water couldn't be further apart than Kaufmann and me, and I appreciated him only later, when I was no longer there. Then the department was split, for him, and he became head of design and began having furniture shows and "Useful Object" shows, where I kept on with the architecture. But I don't know what the years were.

SZ: And that was the way....

PJ: That was one reason that department was split.

SZ: Well, you were made director in 1949, but you must have been acting....

PJ: Oh, yes. The Mies show was '47.

SZ: ...in a similar capacity before that.

PJ: Oh, yes.

SZ: So this was just an official....

PJ: Official, sure. Still no money, but at least I had an official title. It was a very strange time.

SZ: Why was that?

PJ: Well, because Alfred was still persona non grata with the top people. We sort of had to push our programs through the back door, so I never saw Clark again after Alfred left, I mean, was fired.

**END TAPE 3, SIDE 1**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: 885 THIRD AVENUE  
NEW YORK CITY**

**DATE: FEBRUARY 6, 1991**

**BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 1**

SZ: Philip, I'm going to try something a little bit different this time, but the one thing I neglected to ask you straight out last time was why, after the war, you went back to the Museum, for yourself.

PJ: I went back.... I was at loose ends, and I hadn't started an architectural practice that was worth anything and there were things to do there. My best friend, Alfred Barr, was still very influential in the Museum, and that was an area I knew well, so I could button it onto my early life better than any other thing. Just to open a shingle in 1945 didn't do much good; there was no building yet.

SZ: There was no building at that time?

PJ: No, but as soon as I could, my first client was a house out on Long Island, and I did that at the same time as I was working in the Museum. But, it seemed like a logical way to pick up life again, after the war. So, it was really the personal influence of Alfred Barr.

SZ: He wanted you back.

PJ: Yes. He said, "Well, why don't you come back?"

SZ: Of course, he had a slightly different position by that time too.

PJ: Yes, he was out in the boondocks, but he was very influential still. He just refused to take his dismissal, just hung on, so it worked very well. Then, his successor was, when he was appointed... when was he appointed?

SZ: He was appointed in '49, but....

PJ: He was around, and Nelson was around. Now, I can't remember if Nelson played any part, I don't think he did, in my coming back. But René knew perfectly well of my close connection, over the years, with Nelson and with Barr, so it was naturally to his interest, for peace and progress, to go along with my coming back.

SZ: Well, when you did come back, I guess what you're saying is that René's strong presence was already felt.

PJ: It was, through Nelson. It was clear that he was going to play an important part.

SZ: What about staff people at that point?

PJ: Staff people, it's funny.... I don't remember Betty Mock's reaction. I remember Kaufmann's all right, and I don't remember.... Eliot Noyes was not in any position to bother my work there.

SZ: Well, what was Kaufmann's reaction?

PJ: Kaufmann. Oh, he never liked me anyhow, and we disagreed on approach. So that was....

SZ: The approach, as you described it to me last time.

PJ: Through Vienna and through Bauhaus. So we never saw eye to eye in taste. I really can't explain it any more than that, why I went back. It seemed like a good idea.

SZ: And there was no problem for you being back and taking your own commissions at the same time? Because you were still not salaried, right?

PJ: No, I was never salaried that I know of. I never received a check from the Museum. I didn't mind it, and it's been traditional for the head of the department to be a part-time architect. Arthur [Drexler] built things when he was there, and I did. But, when it got too much, as Frank Lloyd Wright said, "Look, you better move one way or the other; you can't carry water on both shoulders." I took it very seriously.

SZ: He said that to you at what time?

PJ: In the early '50s. He said, "Look, you can't run with the hare, or hide with the hounds.... " Whatever it was. Run with the hounds....

SZ: Hide with the hare! [LAUGHS]

PJ: Something like that. You can't do both. I was shocked at first, because I was a power mad young brat and I decided I wanted to do both.

SZ: And you tried.

PJ: Yes, I tried to do everything. The worst was when I had a show of "Built in the USA" [Built in USA, 1932-1944, 1944] and put my house in it, and Wally Harrison said, "I notice you put your house on the good wall, and the building of mine that you showed of mine on a back wall." That was a rather bitter comment. It never crossed

my mind, I was that innocent. So, Wally and Frank Lloyd Wright got me out of that. But that isn't helping the Museum any. That's not a Museum story. Or is it?

SZ: That's fine.

PJ: All right.

SZ: Well, when you returned, you must have found the department different. I'll let you describe it.

PJ: Yes. There was Betty Mock... I don't know when she came. At first my secretary took over, I think, didn't she? Ernestine Fantl. She was a very bright girl but nothing new and original. Betty Mock came in, through housing and do-gooding and sociological-interest things, and did a book, If You Want to Build a House [1946]. I think she did one of the "Built in USA" [exhibitions]. Maybe she started it. But nobody thought she was a permanent star. I don't remember why she left.

SZ: Well, she left, I think, not long after you came back.

PJ: Really?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: When was the official thing, when I became...?

SZ: Well, the official thing was 1949, but I think you were really back two to three years....

PJ: I was guest conductor for the Mies van der Rohe show and I doubt if there was much of anything else in the department going on.

SZ: Well, there was, I think, the beginning of building the design collection.

PJ: Oh. Greta Daniel and the design collection.

SZ: Yes, and I was wondering....

PJ: Well, that must have been Kaufmann, because I had nothing to do with it.

SZ: You had nothing at all...? Because somewhere I read that what would happen would be.... Well, Greta was the one....

PJ: ... who did the physical work.

SZ: And I guess what she brought in would be sifted through by Kaufmann and then, finally, by you.

PJ: With Alfred. Alfred and I would go through the stuff and say, "Well, isn't that a piece of you-know-what." Or, "That's good, we should feature that more. That doesn't belong in the study collection, that should be featured." And Alfred's taste was so brilliant, and we worked so well together that I remember going through Greta's back room--everything was a back room in those days. It was in the house next to the Museum, and picking things out.

SZ: You mean the "21" ...?

PJ: The old "21" building. One room there was filled to the ceiling. We had a meeting.... Good design, of course, in those days was very different from what it was later. It was a very exciting time since anything that was absolutely simple would be a plus, and we put it in. I mean, it wasn't so much a judge of quality the way you judge old silver or the way you'd take a Tiffany vs. an Art Nouveau thing. It was simple enough

to be counted as a "useful object" or "machine art." So our criteria were extremely simple, and it was easy. Alfred was just as convinced as I was that Machine Art was the only possible ending. This was twelve years after the show, or more. Then, of course, Kaufmann was pressing a more decorative, Hofmann thing on the design side at the same time. But, because of Alfred's backing--and this was before '49--that wasn't even an incident in my life, getting the actual employment. But, you see, Alfred could come out of hiding to do that, on a totally informal basis, but he acted very much as if he was in total control of the Museum.

SZ: Are you saying that the early design objects that were accepted into the collection were as much a reflection of his...?

PJ: Oh, yes.

SZ: Not yours?

PJ: It's hard to say which was which. I think his was the dominant leadership role, as ever. Well, we fought, maybe twice, but....

SZ: Over what?

PJ: I can't remember, naturally. It couldn't have been anything very important. But I felt he had the final say. I wonder when.... Where was that other man who came in, in the '30s, after me?

SZ: John McAndrew?

PJ: Yes. He was fired.

SZ: He was fired. And do you know anything about that?

PJ: No. Well, yes. He traveled too much and lectured outside the Museum. According to Clark, he wasn't doing his job. I never heard any more of that. That happened when I was in the Army, I think, didn't it? In '43 or '44?

SZ: I think it revolved around a show of Mexican objects that he was putting together. There are various accounts of it, of what happened to him and why.

PJ: Well, of course, I only heard Alfred's point of view, which was naturally very anti-Clark.

SZ: Alfred thought well of John McAndrew?

PJ: Very much. He picked him, in the '30s, when I left.

SZ: Did you know him?

PJ: Very well. He was the one I went around with in '29.

SZ: John McAndrew.

PJ: Yes. That was my first trip to "Modern Architecture." We met and I said, "Let's take a trip." He was very bright and very nice, but he wasn't like Kaufmann; he had an interest outside the pure International Style, which was Mexican. He was an expert and wrote an excellent book on the open [air] churches of Mexico. So, I always felt his interest was aside from the Museum's, and he wasn't a strong Museum putter-on-er of shows the way I was. But, Russell and Alfred liked him much better than I did and kept defending him, right to the end. Then he became a professor at Wellesley, I think. [PAUSE] So, when I came back in '44 from the war, it was pretty much just Betty Mock, who was a very nice girl--that's about all; she wasn't an expert in any field. I told you before, I think, she was very much influenced by her sister, a very strong woman, Catherine Bauer, who was mostly interested in social matters.

SZ: And Noyes.

PJ: Noyes.... As I said, I didn't run into him in the Museum corridors. I think already his mind was on his work in his office in New Canaan. Anyhow, I never ran into him. When was the Eames... well, it was in the, '30s wasn't it, the Eames/Saarinen thing? No, after the war [in 1946]. He must have been away at the war, wasn't he?

SZ: In the war?

PJ: Yes.

SZ: That I don't know. I know he separated from the Museum in 1946.

PJ: Well, you see, that was before I even was just beginning....

SZ: Around the same time, yes. Okay. Now, you talked to me, I guess maybe two sessions ago, a little bit about Conger Goodyear, but you really didn't say very much about Stephen Clark and your relationship with him.

PJ: You asked me that before, and I never met Stephen.

SZ: I did ask you that?

PJ: Yes.

SZ: Then that's why you didn't talk to me about it.

PJ: Stephen was a distant character to me.

SZ: That's right, because....

PJ: He wasn't distant to Alfred, of course, but he was interested only in painting. He didn't see any point in having a department of architecture, remember that, we started it in '32, but he got used to it because Mrs. Rockefeller laid down the law. But when he had a chance, he got rid of John McAndrew. I personally never met him after that; so, since '32, I never saw him. In other words, I wasn't in touch with the trustees. When did I become a trustee? In '57?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: So, you see, I had no contact with him.

SZ: But you did hear something through Alfred about...?

PJ: About his leaving, oh yes. I sort of turned off my hearing aid because Alfred, like everybody who's been badly wounded, it's all you can think of. So, he'd sit down for dinner and two hours later he'd still be moaning and groaning. There are two sides to that, of course. Nelson was, of course, at first a big backer of Alfred, like his mother, but he learned to hate him and was instrumental in getting rid of him.

SZ: Hate him for what reason?

PJ: Bad management. Why anybody would.

SZ: But, I mean, hate is such a strong word.

PJ: Well, hate wasn't the word. He said, "Can you help me get rid of that man?!" Then, when he did get rid of him, he was emotionally running the place, from his closet. There was no question of that. He didn't hate him so much as, "Why doesn't he get out of the building?," or, "Why didn't René [d'Harnoncourt] get rid of him?"

SZ: And what's the answer to that question?

PJ: Of why they got rid of him?

SZ: Why they didn't. Why couldn't they...?

PJ: Handle him? How do you mean?

SZ: Well, no. You were just saying that Nelson would say, "Well, why can't they...?"

PJ: Oh. Then I told them--I remember this was before I went to war--"Maybe I can help. Tell me what's so terrible, and we'll get him help or something." And Nelson said, "Well, he has all the help in the world; he's sick most of the time." He was always having nervous troubles and going off to psychologists in Stuttgart. From their point of view, he was an absentee director and there were practical things to be done-- money raising, policy decisions, trustees to be hand-held. He wasn't a very good hand holder with the trustees, and that's very much an important part of a director's job. Not being a managerial executive type--I don't know what the word is--he couldn't manage several different departments. When it was a one-man show he ran it beautifully because then those of us who could do things would rally around. But when he got out beyond the one-to-one thing.... Oh, he had another person who could help, who was Iris Barry, and her husband [Dick Abbott], who became the business head, were all completely loyal, and maybe among them there was a manager type. So, they needed very badly a man like d'Harnoncourt, who had all the courtly charm of an Austrian count, the height of a monster, and the understanding that delicate intellects like Alfred Barr were important to save.

SZ: And so he did.

PJ: And he did. That's what he spent his life doing, and to no thanks from Alfred!

SZ: Yes. That relationship, how would you describe it?

PJ: Well, one-sided. René knew his job. He said, "I don't care whether he likes me or not; we've got to preserve this man's effect on the world." But Alfred, every time he wanted to do something, he thought René was just bucking him out of personal pique, which simply wasn't true. But, he was a psychopath, of course, Alfred, and there's nothing wrong with that, because we're all nuts in one way or another. But, of course, it's hard to understand in an operative, business-like world. And it was fun to watch René handle that. And, what bothered Alfred probably--we're a little bit later now--was René's attempt to do shows and things. For instance, he did something I know Alfred would disapprove of and I'm sure did.... Again, Alfred was so loyal to the Museum that he wouldn't even complain to me about what was happening in René's world. Although, one knows that, for instance, when he had a show of shop windows, Bonwit Teller windows and all that, that was hardly what we were doing at The Museum of Modern Art. And it was a very bad show. He did Mexican shows, which you couldn't say anything about because that was Nelson's interest. Then, he was a very good installer, so he would install the collection artistically and manage trustees. They ate out of his hand. And backed me. I must say, I was just as difficult. Sometimes Nelson or Goodyear or Mrs. Rockefeller would say, "What the hell are you doing? Your department is spending all our money?" I don't know what the complaints could have been, but I imagine normal ones. But, see, I led a charmed life because I didn't get a salary. And, of course, they would say, "Well, I know we don't pay him...." So....

SZ: But that gave you a kind of freedom.

PJ: Oh, total freedom! I didn't have to ask anybody, never did, and I wasn't in the habit of working for anybody. But it was harder for my successors. There was no board there is still no board--that was influencing. There was Mrs. Rockefeller, and there

was Conger Goodyear, and Conger made life miserable for Alfred because his painting taste was different. But those were the years, in the '50s, when, I think, I bought the Rothko. In the '50s, and the Flag.

SZ: At Alfred's request? Is that how it worked? You told me about the Flag.

PJ: Yes, yes.

SZ: He would say to you....

PJ: "Look, I can't get this by the committee."

SZ: "Buy it," and...?

PJ: "Buy it and give it to us." And I was so anxious to get the Museum going.... They were not large amounts in those days.

SZ: What did you think of the Rothko at that point? Or the Johns.

PJ: I couldn't understand Rothko, I told you that, or maybe I didn't.

SZ: No.

PJ: But Alfred took me to Rothko's studio and I said, "I'm sure I could do that just as well."

SZ: You said that? [Giggles]

PJ: Or, about a [Jackson] Pollock, "For heaven's sake, I would rather have a good piece

of marble." Brilliant, intelligent remark for a young man. So, that was the extent of my knowledge of this. I remember the Flag was more interesting to me because it had content and I could see it, but not much more.

SZ: But you just did it.

PJ: Sure.

SZ: Because you had that kind of....

PJ: ... devotion to the Museum. And more especially to Alfred. I wanted to get that collection up the way he wanted it. Oh, he inspired great loyalty, like with Jere Abbott and me and Soby, and Iris Barry.

SZ: Now, the other thing I thought I would ask you, even though it's a bit of a repeat from what you've been doing the last couple weeks, but I'll ask it in a different way, is, would you talk about your relationship with Mies? How it started, and bring it up through the Mies show?

PJ: Mies.... I first went to see Mies in 1930 or '31--I wish I could remember which--with Alfred and Marga and Russell. So there were four of us... and ever since Mies always called that "the American invasion"; to him it was just an overwhelming force of barbarians, almost, from across the ocean. He was a very delicate, Catholic, semi-recluse, and he just was appalled of this invasion of alien forces that said they liked his work but couldn't possibly understand the finer points. From then on, since I could talk a little German by then, I did the interpreting. Also in the work, because Russell was such a Corbusier man that he just wasn't as interested in the Germanic or the design approach that Mies represented. I was much more interested in Mies than I was in Corbu.

SZ: So, as a person, you found him...?

PJ: Well, he wasn't very sympathetic as a person, but I could get along with him. Nobody could get along with Corbu; I could listen and respect the master, and I couldn't Corbu, because I never had any respect. He was a crazy man, difficult and dour, but no more than Mies. After that, I saw Mies every year, when I was there, and that, of course, led to my being very interested in him, and in his background, that is, [Karl Friedrich] Schinkel. I'm not sure how much Mies influenced me about Schinkel, but I don't think so. That came from Russell, and Russell was very sympathetic to my interest in Mies, although he thought I exaggerated the importance of him, as did [Siegfried] Giedion. Giedion was the great theoretician who was most believed and wrote the biggest book in this country--because Hitchcock was hard reading, Hitchcock was complicated and interested only in forms--and Gideon tied it up to world history and social upheaval. He believed that modern architecture was the end of architecture because that was the first time in history that architecture and technology and sociology all met in one place, which Hitchcock and I didn't believe at all. So, he said, "The trouble with your book is the exaggerated respect for Mies." He just thought that was dreadful, in our book [The International Style]. The amusing part was that in his fifth edition or something, he was so popular, he had to include a chapter on Mies, he had no....

SZ: Choice. [LAUGHS]

PJ: He was forced to, which was nice. So, I don't know how much of my respect was for Germany and the 19th Century "geist" and all that, and how much was admiration for Mies's design. It's hard to separate out one's motives. And, because I could talk the language, of course.

SZ: But, you're saying it wasn't the personality particularly.

PJ: No, he had a very difficult.... As I told you, The New Yorker reporter took his notebook and closed it up and said, "There's no story here." They were going to do a profile, because they had done one on Corbu, but there was nothing to write about. The man gave no anecdotal interest, no key for a New Yorker writer. A colorful figure like Corbu, of course, was easy. He was not colorful, Mies [LAUGHING]. So, when I suggested this show, he said, "Ya," and that was the bottom line.

SZ: Now, wait, yes. I read somewhere that you were instrumental in bringing him to this country. Is that true?

PJ: I wasn't here. I was in the war. No, I wasn't, but I had already left the Museum in 1934--I got my dates wrong again--and Mies never realized he'd have to leave. To him it was unthinkable, because he was a German. But when it came time to realize that he would sooner or later have to, he put out feelers, and the real person who brought him over here was [John A.] Holabird of Chicago, who had seen or had pictures of the Barcelona pavilion. He said, "That's the man to get," so the actual moving of Mies was Holabird. But before that came the episode of wanting him to be the dean at Harvard. As I get the story, [Joseph Fairman] Hudnut, the dean then, said, "Well, Mr. van der Rohe, we're looking at two people: Walter Gropius and you." And he said, "Any school that is stupid enough to think there is any similarity, that we're equal to be considered in the same breath, just count me out." He was that arrogant. So, Gropius got the job--to his fury--and that settled that one. That was when--'36, '35? Wait a minute. Yes, it must have been in that period.

SZ: Yes, well, he finally came in 1938.

PJ: For the first time?

SZ: I think to stay. He came before....

PJ: He left Berlin in '37 and ran across the border. I know I met him here in '37, I think. Alfred had gotten Mrs. [Stanley] Resor to pay him to come over on the theory that he was going to do a house for the Resors in Wyoming. He started to work on that house. I remember him asking me how he could get patents on his furniture. See, he lived in Germany on his furniture, so he thought he could once again pick up the royalties. Unfortunately, we didn't have any such laws, so I couldn't help him. He was a very resentful man. He always said, "What's the matter with you stupid Americans? Why don't you...?"

SZ: Do it this way?

PJ: "It should be done this way," yes.

SZ: So, the exhibition...?

PJ: The exhibition. So, when I suggested it to him, in what year?

SZ: Well, it [the exhibition] was 1947.

PJ: I know when the exhibition was, but I was wondering whether it was '45, the summer trip? When did I start going...? I didn't go to Germany after the war until '52. And, of course, I didn't have to: He was here in Chicago! Gosh, the decades get superimposed! [PAUSE] Then I remember the trouble of getting the old drawings from Germany. He had them all shipped over here but he couldn't find them; they were never organized.

SZ: He had them shipped when he left, you mean?

PJ: Yes. But where, and in how many boxes, and in whose barn? It wasn't that easy.

SZ: Did you have to go all through...?

PJ: I didn't, he did.

SZ: He did it all.

PJ: Oh, he got interested. No, my work was getting the book out, with Ernestine Fantl in my little apartment. Now, wait a minute; I'm mixing things up again. That was done.... I was at the Museum by that time.

SZ: Yes, the one you're talking about was the early book. But you did the book, and he did, really, the whole show? I guess what I'm asking is, how much input and what kind of input did you have in it?

PJ: Well, I was the one who had to outline which direction he would go in; then, he'd influence me more that way,. I remember his decision to take a little sketch he had done in the mountains and cover the whole wall with it. We blew it up to twenty feet long, this little sketch. Wow. It was beautiful, but he picked that. Then, toward the end, the latest things I remember he picked, like a concert hall and a museum for a small city. The early things, of course, I could pick. Artists tend not to care about their earlier work and, of course, coming from the Museum, you had to pay attention to the beginning. But, he was less interested in things like the Bismarck Tower and fantastic things from 1919-20-21-23-23. Those were the great years of Mies's career, which, of course, he wouldn't have been very glad to hear. But, at least I didn't have the later work to contend with, because by '45 he hadn't built much in this country. We ended the show with his first building here, for the Armour Institute.

SZ: Did he install it?

PJ: Yes.

SZ: Was there a story about the installation?

PJ: Yes. His theory was that what you don't want in a museum is a wall like that [POINTING]--a wall like putting a lot of pictures on, around a big picture or on either side of a main picture. That was, of course, anti-modern, so his theory was that the vertical height of every blowup was exactly the same, no matter. If it was a horizontal picture, it would be eight feet long, whereas a skyscraper would be about two feet. You would lose all the importance of it, and you would lose any accent; there would just be a wall of one meter high pictures, and they're all exactly...but it made a nice looking room, a stripe like that. That's all he wanted. So, I did it. I remember.... Now this is a strange memory. How could I have commissioned all those photographs from a German source...? Did I work on the show in the 30's for Mies?

SZ: You mean thinking about it?

PJ: Yes. No. No. I learned that principle of his from before, and applied it to some shows here, like the Richardson show [[Henry Hobson Richardson, 1838-1886: Architectural Masterpieces, 1947](#)], and had the cases made in Germany. I remember the case; no one would ever make a case like that here.

SZ: Why?

PJ: Expensive and over-elaborate and detailed. They were all on cloth, and each different sized photograph would have a different hole for it so it was entirely surrounded by soft cloth. The resulting case was so heavy you almost couldn't ship it in the American sense, and this would be used forever in a traveling show. I couldn't lift the thing, I remember. What was that show for? Anyhow, that principle was all set, so when we did Mies's show.... Oh, then the principle came about that we could use pictures from a magazine, with all the dots, and he said, "Look, you blow up a picture that far, that's not going to bother you." He was right. So, mixed in

with top quality photographs and careful enlargements were things out of magazines. Because there were no originals.

SZ: And that was his idea, to do that?

PJ: His idea, yes. I said, "What are we going to do? We've got to represent whatever this masterpiece is. He said, "Oh, cut it out of a magazine." Things like that. Then we'd fight about the column. He asked me if the columns were chamfered, that is, where the corners were cut off, at the Museum of Modern Art. Well, they're all covered up, of course, so I said no, they weren't chamfered. Because he wanted bare columns. So we dug down to the bare columns and, of course, they were chamfered. He was absolutely furious: You can't chamfer a column in Mies's aesthetic.

SZ: But he had to live with that.

PJ: Oh, yes, it was there. By the time he got there we had prepared the... When I say.... He did install the show. He designed the partitions and which buildings were to go on which partitions. No other architect would have bothered. See, that was his detailed, finicky side--the furniture maker, the way he did the interior of the Tugendat house, which Corbusier never would do. Corbusier would give you some colored walls, very carefully, but, "Oh, get some Thonet furniture." Whereas he [Mies] would place each chair in an elaborate plan, like he did my apartment.

SZ: He did it?

PJ: He did my apartment, from Germany, in '30. It was the first modern kind of apartment in New York.

SZ: Did it have a lot of his furniture?

PJ: It was all his furniture, and what he didn't have that would fit, he would design it. Like the dining room table and the end board of the bed and the bookcases. The only trouble with the bookcase was you put a book on it and it fell down. But you can fix those things; they can all be arranged. He gave me the name of a German architect here who had worked for him, whom I got to help me install. A little apartment! I wouldn't give it ten minutes, I wouldn't, today. But, he was an incredible detail man.

SZ: So that's how he dealt with the installation.

PJ: Every square inch. Then Kaufmann asked him to do the installation of the objects in the entrance hall. He was so tired and so drunk that he did it, but there was no love; so, the objects were just sitting on shelves. But Kaufmann wanted to get in on the act. Kaufmann and I were polite, but by then he was picking "Useful Object" shows. I don't know when he left.

SZ: Fifty-five.

PJ: Fifty-five. And he was head of the design.... The department was split somewhere along in there. And Alfred and René must have asked me if that was all right, and I said, "Oh, heavens yes. Anything to be in a separate world." Then he put on a show like the Finn Juhl exhibition. I don't remember what other big exhibitions he did.

SZ: Did you think Mies was pleased with the press notices his show got?

PJ: He didn't read. I gave him the text of my book, for him to check, for God's sake. It was all Mies van der Rohe, sort of his biography--and I said, "How was it Mies? Let's sit down." "It was fine." He hadn't read it. So, it's probably full of errors. But once a thing was done, I don't think he read a press release or press reaction. See, other architects would have spent more time on the press reaction and the reaction to the reaction than on the show.

SZ: Well, it certainly did something to change the course of his career in this country, didn't it?

PJ: Oh, no question about the effect of the show. But, of course, the effect of the show was him. I could have shown zilch, or Finn Juhl, and it [the Museum] would have got Finn Juhl, not a [Mies] chair, whenever that was --'50, '52? But, it changed Mies's career. Well, did it, you see? Mies already had... as I've told you, Holabird, entirely independent of Mrs. Resor and Alfred Barr, who got Mies his job in Chicago. So, Mies was his own best... well, his work [was his own best advertisement]. That's the way architecture should be, but usually it's publicity and the way I do it--screaming and yelling.

SZ: At this time, after the war, how well did you know Monroe Wheeler?

PJ: Was he still there?

SZ: Oh, yes.

PJ: He was head of the....

SZ: Exhibitions and publications.

PJ: Publications we always thought of him, because exhibitions...simply because Alfred Barr wasn't director anymore and René was director of the whole place. He got that title, but he only actually designed or set up a few shows that I can remember. He didn't instigate anything unless there was a book connected. Anyhow, I didn't have any contact with him whatsoever. He was always pleasant to me, all through his career.

SZ: But then, of course, you both were trustees at some point.

PJ: Yes, well, you see, he got along very well with Stephen Clark. I remember he took an apartment on Park Avenue, which he could not afford; it was a nasty, little, back-windowed apartment, but it was a good address. He's the type that would do that to get a good address, and he was very good with dowagers. I was good and bad.

SZ: And that's an important....

PJ: That's an important thing for a museum. Well, right now the important thing is writing reports for foundations. Things change, you see. But in that time we were consolidating the trustees, and Alfred just antagonized them all, one after another, and then Marga did the rest. She really was nasty. But Monroe was always there. He was a director of [the Department of] Exhibitions, wasn't he? So you could believe what you wanted, but really it was run by Nelson Rockefeller and René d'Harnoncourt; or, let's say, the other way around, by René d'Harnoncourt with the backing of Nelson, who was an intensely loyal man and believed totally in René, and René returned it. I was always the mad artist that Nelson liked, but trust? I don't know. Although they did give me the first wing to build, in 1952. Something like that.

**END TAPE 4, SIDE 2**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: 885 THIRD AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**DATE: FEBRUARY 13, 1991**

**BEGIN TAPE 5, SIDE 1**

SZ: I wanted to ask you today if we could talk about the garden at the Museum and its various incarnations.

PJ: You certainly can.

SZ: What I guess I wanted to do was go back, first, and have you just talk a little bit about the garden, the original garden, and, actually, the original building. That's one thing we never really discussed at all: the 1939 building and what part...I know you played a small part in its design development.

PJ: Very small. [INTERRUPTION] Yes, I had very little to do with the design of that building. I wasn't in town and I wasn't particularly interested in architecture, but Alfred Barr wanted my take on the façade. And since I didn't like a part of it that they were doing, I gave him my opinion.

SZ: He was unhappy to start with?

PJ: He was unhappy not to get his architect. But then, he never stopped. Just because he had an architect that he didn't appreciate completely, it wouldn't keep him from being interested and wanting to influence the design. What he did was to influence

it, watered everything down--just the way all other busybodies and all architect's troubles do, just makes it a little worse--but one thing about it struck me as not very good, so I pointed that out. But, much more important is the letter from Hitchcock, of course, which you have.

SZ: Which the Museum has.

PJ: Yes. No, I had nothing to do with that, though. The person who had to do with it was John McAndrew. I think, for instance, the cheese holes in the top thing there were McAndrew.

SZ: From your own aesthetic point of view, once the building was up, in its first incarnation, what was your judgment of it?

PJ: Nothing particular. It was a watered version of an International Style building in the reductionist mode, but there wasn't any spirit or architecture about it. The front door I actively disliked, and when we moved the front door to the middle, that left. That was the one element that Bob Stern, our severest critic, said later, "Philip, you ruined the building." In other words, that was the most characteristic [thing about it], a question-mark-shaped entrance, over the front door. But, of course, it was impossible to get the people in that little squeezed way, so we put it back in the middle. But that had more character than the rest of the building. It wasn't a very interesting building. It still isn't.

SZ: It's a lot different than it was.

PJ: It is?

SZ: Well, it looks different.

PJ: Does it? We'll have to get some pictures. Looks very much the same to me, except

the front door.

SZ: All right. The first thing you had to do with was the annex, the "21" building.

PJ: Twenty-one, that's right.

SZ: And how did that come about? You were at that point Director of the Department of Architecture [and Design]?

PJ: No. Was I? Well, then, I was the logical candidate, and I don't know who was the one.... Was Conger Goodyear still there?

SZ: René was there.

PJ: Oh, René was there. What year was that?

SZ: That was '51.

PJ: In '51. And René was there and Alfred was lurking in the shadows, but he was always screaming his head off. So, I suspect that's how.... There was nobody to decide anything except Nelson, and Nelson I'd known.... So that's how it was. Nelson, I think, of course.... That's the way the Rockefellers worked. When was the fire?

SZ: Fifty-eight.

PJ: Oh. Late. See, you know more than I do.

SZ: So, tell me about the annex and what you were thinking when you...?

PJ: Well, it was such a simple building there wasn't much thinking to do. We had to

carry the lines of the floors across. I put a very simple, Miesian front on the building.

PJ: But there was no architecture to it. It was just a sliver and I didn't want to make an architectural statement. So, really, after consulting with the users, we just say, "What do you use another twenty-foot space with on your floor?" There's no architecture involved. The only thing I was interested in was my own office, which, instead of making...how much space I had was twenty feet, so instead of making two ten-foot offices, because Arthur Drexler was there, we made one office and both sat in it, which was always considered very strange. We got along fine.

SZ: And you did that for the feeling of space?

PJ: Yes. Got a nice room, and I furnished it. I guess I bought the furniture, probably, and it was a very nice little room. There are pictures of it. I had the only nice space in the place. Museums tend to hire somebody else and say, "Well, we'll just cut this office in two. You know how they do. So I was very lucky. So that was a simple job.

SZ: So, now, the original garden--the 1939 garden....

PJ: The '39 garden, I wasn't there at all. It was done by McAndrew and Alfred and didn't disturb the terrain and kept a lot of trees that later had to go, and built very reasonably priced little constructions around. In time, Mr. [Philip] Goodwin built that little pavilion. Then I don't know what was on the site where the wing is now. I guess nothing, where the restaurant is. But, that really wasn't...I didn't think it was a design. It didn't cross my mind. It just looked as if it happened. It was gravel, and pieces of sculpture just sort of placed around. It wasn't organized. Then, when did the Whitney [Museum] get built?

SZ: The Whitney...?

PJ: Built on the garden [1954]. Facing the garden. That building [the annex]. See, I built that, and the garden under it.

SZ: Yes. It was done for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Museum? Fifty-three... '54.

PJ: What did I do?

SZ: You redesigned it.

PJ: The way it is now?

SZ: More or less. Then it was changed, somewhat, again when you did the '64 building. But it was a major....

PJ: That was a major do, with the two pools and everything.

SZ: Yes.

PJ: That was very early.

SZ: Yes. Whose idea was it to do that?

PJ: I suppose Nelson. Oh, of course. Nelson wanted to pay for it, with his brothers, to honor his mother. I had that part done. Nelson was the one who put the two gates in. I had it closed off like a cloister, and Nelson, quite rightly, said, "That's no good against the neighbors," you see. It made it a horrible blank wall, just like any cloister does to a neighbor; so, rather than cloister it, he wanted an entrance and some views through there. So I put the two gates in, which are still there. I remember the

interventions more than I remember anything else.

SZ: What others were there?

PJ: I can't think. I can't think what was on the spot now, where the Whitney is, or the Whitney building was in those days. What was at the west end of the garden, before I built the Whitney wing? Must have been houses. I can't remember what that west wall of the garden looked like.

SZ: But you say that Nelson had a hand in the design process.

PJ: Sure. Nelson, with René, and René was my connection. He said, "Philip, wouldn't it be better to...." He didn't mention Nelson's name, but it came out it was Nelson. But Nelson and René were brothers, and they worked very, very well. René was very tactful and very strong, easy to work for--unlike Alfred, or any of us, those of us who have doubts in this world. He didn't. René was the biggest help. Oh, René threw out my first design. He said, "I don't think that's worthy of you, Philip." He said it in such a way I didn't mind at all. I redesigned it. And it got better and better the more you worked, of course. So, finally we met together and it was fine. That was the process of very close working with René. He was adamant, dictatorial, but fair. And he was right. See, it's very hard for me to separate the different remodelings, but that one was a vital one. I remember Alfred telling me, "Philip, how did you know that if you cut the level down like that it would enlarge the garden?" Two things he objected to. He loved that. Hated the fact I cut his favorite palonia tree. "Pavlovnia-palonia." He said, "You've cut our great tree," and I said, "Look, trees grow, you know, Alfred." Of course, after that, they couldn't. Then I planted the wrong trees; they died at once. My favorite tree in the world is a cryptomeria, which is the great Japanese cedar, all over Nikko and Katsuura, and I thought it would be great having great cedars, but they don't stand the fumes of New York. Which none of us knew. We planted the big weeping beeches, which nobody thought would last, and of course they've done marvelously.

SZ: They're still there.

PJ: Too big, of course, but we don't know how to cut them. Unless they do this new thing, starting the garden over again, which of course [means] we can plant younger weeping beeches.

SZ: Do you have a deep knowledge of plants and...?

PJ: No, James Fanning did that with me, and he still resents it that he isn't listed...well, he is listed officially, but not from the press, as my landscape architect, of course. But people would think he designed the garden. [Robert] Zion, in fact, our new man, says in many articles, the garden that I designed for The Museum of Modern Art, "all he is is the maintenance landscaper, as far as I'm concerned." But all these different things about credits are complicated. Did you see in the morning paper that [Oscar] Niemeyer did the U.N.?

SZ: I thought to myself, I've been reading these books long enough, talking to people long enough....

PJ: Well, he was [Wallace K.] Harrison's designer--factotum, right hand and left hand--he was a very awkward man, but Harrison could get on with him. He [Niemeyer] thought he was as good as Corbusier, you see, and Harrison knew that he wasn't, so he pushed Oscar a lot, but it was clear that he [Niemeyer] didn't design it. But it's what you say on your deathbed, you see, that gets printed in the obit. I must prepare my death-bed statements. Anyhow, the garden.... We are now back to the garden, and the trees....

SZ: So, really, you needed him, to help.

PJ: Fanning, oh yes. We sat through weekends. He lived in New Canaan, and we sat weekends and worked on all these things. I needed somebody to talk to--every designer does--and I bounced things off him. He was a professional landscape architect. I thought, of course, he knew his plant material.

SZ: And then the trees died.

PJ: The trees died right away. But that's not so unusual in New York. I found more success with Bob Zion, although all the trees we planted at AT&T died, so.... Again, you can't do a thing in New York. [PAUSE] I think my philosophy of the original garden has been published a lot--the four experiences and the four places for sculpture, since it [was] increased, of course, by the terrace to the east. Of course, we're lacking now the main part, which is the terrace before you go down.

SZ: According to the press, when the garden was unveiled it was well received.

PJ: Pretty well. Some of them...[Henry] McBride wrote that article, but he was a friend of mine. He thought I was terribly amusing. Then, Lockheim wrote the article--my dear friend Aline Lockheim [later Aline Saarinen]--"Museum Cutting Great Trees." It's amusing how sentimental people get about trees. Fanning has a good saying: "It's never wrong to cut a tree," because they're usually in the wrong place, anyhow, or they're going to die next year, anyhow.

SZ: Especially in Manhattan?

PJ: Of course, but anywhere. That's all I've been doing for forty years at my place.

SZ: Cutting trees?

PJ: Cutting trees. I cut hundreds and hundreds every year. It looks better and better. Of course, I'm known as the man who cuts trees, not the man who built the Glass House, in the locality. But there are plenty of trees in the garden now. You couldn't have more and get the sculpture in.

SZ: The garden.... With talk of building again, at the Museum, will that require great change in the garden?

PJ: No.

SZ: Well, tell me what, up until now....

PJ: It's a great question. The landscape architects tell us we can replace every single thing that's there and it will look exactly the same as it does now. They don't tell us what happens to the leaking water out of the pools--which we've always had trouble in every building I've ever built or known about--if you build under a fountain, it's going to leak. It's the nature of the beast. That's a minor detail, perhaps. Then the trees could be replaced, but they'd be little saplings for ten or fifteen years. All the plane trees and the birches and the beeches. But this can be done. Physically, it can be done. It's very, very expensive, but if they need that space that badly and if they're willing to do away with it for a lobby, or the bookstore, or the education department, to get down, it can be done.

SZ: Because they would have to get down some way.

PJ: Well, they'd have to go down two floors. Thirty feet...three floors down. Terrible problem.

SZ: Well, how do you feel about that alternative?

PJ: I don't like it, because I don't like to go into a sub-basement. Macy's basement is used for cheaper goods. Right now, the D'Harnoncourt Galleries are not favored.

SZ: You don't care for them?

PJ: I don't mind them as much as most other people, but they do object to them.

SZ: So this would be not unlike the D'Harnoncourt Galleries.

PJ: Oh, but much worse. Twice as far.

SZ: Just because....

PJ: Well, you'll have to take two escalators to get down. It's like going down to the theater. Somehow, going down to a movie house isn't as bad as going down to an art show. It's one of those emotional things. You do go down in the Louvre, you do go down in the National Gallery. But there, in the National Gallery, you go most of the way down while you're still in the big room. In the Louvre, you go down when you're in the great park. So, by the time you get to where you're going, you're not conscious of being underground. But, in this case, you've got to drop right down. It would be terrible. But I'm not going to make that decision.

SZ: But you'd like to see the garden remain the way it is?

PJ: Of course. Because I know they won't get it back the same way, and if you redesign it--which, of course, I'm perfectly willing to do--then I wouldn't put the water in, if there's a room under it. But I don't see this great sense of preservation. Build a new

garden, get a new landscape man. I'm not going to be around by then, anyhow. We've had all these years with the garden, it's been very nice. But, boy, the cost! But, that's up to Mr. [David] Rockefeller, who may have the money. I don't know where he's going to get another \$50 million, maybe, something like that, but maybe he does.

SZ: And he favors this?

PJ: He's the one that's trying....

SZ: And from his point of view, a change in the design of the garden would be...?

PJ: Well, that isn't as much point as getting this enormous space right in your own building. Of course, we can buy a building across the street or down the block or something, but that isn't the same thing as being in the building, under your control. He's quite right. It's different.

SZ: Now, Alex Cooper, his firm is working on...?

PJ: He's working for the Museum on ways to make this thing real. Is it possible? Anything's possible. You can take away the front lobby, but who would want to do that? That isn't what you're researching, however. It's what we're interested in, naturally, all of us. Let's see, any more of the history of the garden? Sixty-four was the best change in the garden. It made the dining terrace on one side and the cafeteria in that glass window; at the other end we had changeable shows like the "House in the Garden" idea, with the Breuer house and the Japanese house [House in the Museum Garden, 1949; Japanese Exhibition House, 1954]. There was the garden.... No, maybe the garden is still better now with the cafeteria at the other end, because we gained another little space for sculpture with that birch grove. But

we lost--where they had to put the escalators in--we lost the terrace looking over the garden. But that was, I suppose, the best time in the garden. Then the trees have ripened and become mature and the hornbeams on the terrace, on the other side--the education side--are full and luxurious. They were just little spindles thirty years ago, but they've done extremely well. We'd need another thirty years to get back to this, or more. No, it's a problem.

SZ: You mentioned Arthur Drexler before, and we haven't really talked about his arrival on the scene.

PJ: His arrival.... I got a budget, or enough money somewhere, to hire an assistant. I didn't have to submit it the way you do now, to directors and things: I just hired him. He was a young guy who wrote very interesting articles in the local architectural press. His choice of English showed his brilliance, and we talked and talked and talked, and I was very impressed, because I don't write. So, he joined me in, where, 1951?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Then, when I left, he was the obvious candidate.

SZ: But when you hired him, had you been thinking already about leaving? At some point?

PJ: Yes. You see, I wanted to be an architect. I enjoyed doing both, but Frank Lloyd Wright finally persuaded me that you can't do both.

SZ: And how did he do that?

PJ: He said, "Philip, you can't carry water on both shoulders; you've either got to hunt with the hounds or run with the hares; you can't be on both sides. You can't criticize

and judge and still be a creative artist."

SZ: Did you agree with him at that time?

PJ: I was amazed, but the more I thought of it, it was perfectly obvious that I was just being a selfish pig, wanting my cake and eat it too. In one show, for instance, I had an exhibition of "Built in America" or whatever--"Built in the USA"--and in it was my Glass House, which seemed a perfectly good thing to put in a show. Yes, but, Mr. Harrison noticed that I put it quite near the front door, and that one of his buildings--I put it in because he was a trustee, not because it was a great building--was around the corner.

SZ: Was in the back.

PJ: Well, no, but it wasn't exactly in the line of vision when you entered. He said, "I don't know if that's so fair, Philip." So I had those things in the back of my mind, and I realized that, to my credit, and recommended Arthur, who worked extremely well.

SZ: But when you hired Arthur, did you have it in mind that he would succeed you?

PJ: No, nothing was in anybody's mind.

SZ: What you really said was he had complementary talents.

PJ: He had complementary talent and could do shows and had a good originality of mind, and we worked together very well. And, he was a genius, both good and bad, of course.

SZ: In what way?

PJ: Well, he was difficult, impossible on budgets. It got so that any director couldn't

stand to have him around. Mrs. Rockefeller [Blanchette Rockefeller] was then the president, and the present directors couldn't have him in the room because he was so bad on money controls. But he got the Mies archive and he did marvelous shows--and some terrible, terrible shows.

SZ: Like?

PJ: Like his one called "Transformations" [Transformations in Modern Architecture, 1979].

SZ: You didn't like that?

PJ: Nobody did. It was just a lot of glass boxes. He loved glass boxes. So, his take on what was good in contemporary architecture was not amusing, because there wasn't a strong enough point to the show. But then he had the brains to get those Beaux Arts drawings [The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1975].

SZ: But that was controversial too.

PJ: Oh, yes, but that's the way to be controversial. The other one wasn't controversial so much as dull. Then he did "Buildings for Government" [Buildings for Business and Government, 1957], and there was a show we showed the Seagram Building in. He was a great admirer of Mies's. Of course, he did the Mies show later [Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Memorial, 1969].

SZ: Did he get on with Mies?

PJ: Well enough to get "the will."

SZ: He got all the....

PJ: All the stuff, persuaded Mies that that [the Museum] was the place to [house the Mies van der Rohe Archive]. Mies never mentioned it to me, but when he died, it all came to us. You see, my relations with him were complicated, with Arthur. There was the father thing, there was the rivalry, and he didn't want me anywhere near the place, which was fine with me, it was his show, and I liked it.

SZ: What about the direction Arthur took the department in? Well, first of all, Arthur, from what I have read, had, I guess, the same belief in architecture-as-art and sort of took that....

PJ: The basic idea, oh yes.

SZ: ...the basic side in....

PJ: Well, wouldn't any museum person? What's the point in having a museum of sociology? The one time he did try something like that was under the influence of this mad guru, Mr. Peter Eisenman. That's where they split up. Too many bright people.

SZ: With a lot of different ideas.

PJ: Yes. That was a disaster. Then he hired this brilliant guy, [Emilio] Ambasz, who did the Italian show [Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, 1972]. And the taxi show [The Taxi Project: Realistic Solutions for Today, 1976]. No, Arthur was a meteor. He did the department very well, because he was so exciting and controversial. He shouldn't have died.

SZ: He was too young.

PJ: People die.

SZ: All people do.

PJ: I know. It's the damndest thing.

SZ: He was not that old, was he?

PJ: Sixty-something. Sixty-one?

SZ: I remember Arthur always had a cigarette lit.

PJ: In the gallery.

SZ: I never saw him without a lit cigarette.

PJ: And people objected very much to that, in a conservation laboratory.

SZ: That's how I remember him.

PJ: I never minded, but of course the committees did, those who used valuable paper, and a cigarette hanging out was not considered the thing to do. For instance, when he set up, redid the offices, he put his office where there was no window, in an inside room. He didn't want to be distracted. Most of us, in our pride, want the biggest and best place for the director, you know. The present director has a three-window office. And why not? No, he was good. He invented that wonderful phrase we had in our catalogue of the automobiles: "Automobiles are hollow, rolling sculpture." That got our point across without any further sentences. When you think of how to encapsulate him, in colorful, precise words, the thought that even designing an automobile can be art, where you can get a disposition of one hundred pages, and just put it in that one phrase--he was like that. Brilliant. That was the first thing he did when he joined me, so I was quadruply impressed. Marvelous.

SZ: And you were glad to see him succeed you.

PJ: Oh, I was delighted. He was my man, as it were.

SZ: But then you say he kept you at arm's length.

PJ: Quite rightly. The man left, he left. Keep out of the way. Oh, no, he was absolutely right. I never minded that at all. He was completely authoritarian about the committee on...there's always committees on these different things. We had one on architecture and design that had no power at all, because Arthur just said, "This is what we're doing, isn't it great? Meeting's over." Wonderful.

SZ: How was he with the trustees?

PJ: He had very little contact with the trustees. He persuaded Marshall Cogan to give him a lot of money. Marshall wasn't a trustee; we got him to be a trustee later, because he helped us--so much money.

SZ: Well, the only remaining bit of building designing that you did, Museum-related, while you were there, was the Rockefeller guest-house?

PJ: That wasn't Museum-related. In the other wing, of course. East wing....

SZ: That was in '64.

PJ: Was it? Oh, that was part of that re-build. Was that the time we built the great stairs, then?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Oh.

SZ: On the east side.

PJ: On the east, yes, where the food is now. There's a case where change of level shouldn't be done for exhibitions, you see. We had that pleasant stairs going up, but it was just too high. It wasn't a one-storey walkup, it was two stories, so you had to plunge up this long, forbidding staircase to see more of our collection. We could have had little shows up there, but nobody went. It was under-utilized because of its inaccessibility. That's a good point, I shall remember, for the new wing, thirty feet down. It was supposed to be for major exhibitions, and if you didn't use it for major exhibitions down there, it would have some of the collection. People don't run through the collection if it's difficult. They go to Arthur's one on the fourth floor because it's a simple escalator, and you see....

SZ: There it is.

PJ: ...you see the helicopter, yes. That was all Arthur, of course. He parlayed that into good space. He got that helicopter.

SZ: But you're saying he knew where he wanted to be.

PJ: He knew where he wanted to be because he could get more space, and the people said, "No, I don't want to go to the fourth floor." Well, he made it so easy, you see, by the big room, that people actually do go up there, although it's never, as there should be, a lot of new excitement up there. Excuse me. I'm rehearsing, of course, all the time for the battle on the....

SZ: Well, I'm going to turn this off. Yes, I know you are....

PJ: Well, I don't mind being on the record.

SZ: I'm interested.

PJ: Of course, but you're supposed to be doing an oral history.

SZ: Is it going to be a significant fight, do you think?

PJ: It depends on which way it sways. Probably not. Mr. Rockefeller holds all the cards.

SZ: And that's what he wants.

PJ: Well, surely. Everybody does. I don't like anybody to say I'm wrong, especially when I have the money to do it the right way. And he's got behind him the two great directors, you see, Bill Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe. [PAUSE] I'm glad you remember the inaccessibility of that upper garden.

SZ: In general, were you pleased with the design of the '64 edition?

PJ: Oh, that was wonderful. Of course, I enjoyed working on the stairway, and I enjoyed getting a restaurant at the other end. It made a complete design, it was wonderful.

SZ: What about the last expansion?

PJ: What was that, the [Cesar] Pelli one?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Well, I didn't like the fact he took away the terrace, of course. But I thought doing the other was perfectly logical, the east end.

SZ: Well, what about just the premise of the necessity for....

PJ: Oh, absolutely right. Oh, no, I couldn't argue against that. There was this space to take and you still can get down. There's a little terrace left there. But, it doesn't have the feel it did before. On the east, of course, it's much better, because it has a nice point of enclosure there, for the food. Of course, a lot of us feel, with Rona Roob, that food belongs in the basement, not in prime visiting territory. No, Rona's idea is to put the restaurants down where the D'Harnoncourt Galleries are, and move the D'Harnoncourt Galleries upstairs. Nobody minds going up, because as you go up, you've got the garden and the escalator. Very pleasant. Rona, she should run the Museum.

SZ: Philip, how do you feel about the choice of Pelli?

PJ: I was for him. I suggested it, among the three of us, the trustees that were architects. Since no trustee could be the architect of the building, it was a logical point. We had to pick a man, and we all three recommended Pelli, because he was able and knew his way around, and he was attractive enough to work with the trustees and take care of their troubles. And, nobody wanted to go through a Corbusier or a Mies business again, with a young architect, and I don't think the three of us would agree, I don't think, on a Rossi, let's say, or a high-flying architect. I think he did an excellent job. I live there. Best-built building in New York. That was worth doing because it made us a lot of money.

SZ: For the Museum.

PJ: Yes.

SZ: Well, that was the whole....

PJ: Oh, boy, that was a lawyer's nightmare, or delight, rather, I suppose. It was quite a shenanigan.

SZ: I have one more thing, just see if you remember: the twenty-fifth anniversary. I know there was a party, but there was a year-long sort of celebration with a lot of interesting exhibitions?

PJ: What year was this?

SZ: This was '54-'55.

PJ: I don't remember.

SZ: The Family of Man exhibition [1955].

PJ: Oh. Family of Man. Now I remember.

SZ: Then there was a [series of] "Good Design" show[s], 1950-54[5]?

PJ: I don't remember that.

SZ: And Masters of Modern Art--that was the year Barr put that out [1954]. The garden opened [1953]. But that was right around the time you were getting ready to go.

PJ: Did I leave about '54?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Yes, I remember The Family of Man. I was no longer curator. "Tits and Tots," we all called it. Did you ever see the show?

SZ: [LAUGHING] Yes. I was little. I was just a little girl, but I did see it. I remember being very fascinated by some of it.

PJ: Really. Isn't that interesting?

SZ: All right. That's all I have for today.

PJ: Okay, dear. Well, you're about finished with me.

SZ: Well, I have one more. I have to figure out what it's going to be.

**END TAPE 5, SIDE 1**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: 885 THIRD AVENUE  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**DATE: FEBRUARY 27, 1991**

**BEGIN TAPE 6, SIDE 1**

SZ: One thing I have on my list which is left are exhibitions. This was something that you guest-curated, which was the Deconstructivist show [Deconstructivist Architecture].

PJ: Yes.

SZ: I just wanted you to tell me a little bit about how that all came about.

PJ: That came about because the new director [of the Department of Architecture and Design], Mr. [Stuart] Wrede...he is a fine man and he was very kind, because I had helped him get his job, as it were, maybe. I don't know, but anyhow, he thought he ought to be nice to the old goat, so he said, "Do you want to do a show?" Well, I'm never loathe to accept an invitation, so I had this in mind, and it was a new breakthrough, I felt, for architecture, and for this department, which had been riding around since Arthur's death without any particular direction. We didn't have any place to put it, so we put it in a little, tiny gallery about the size of this room. But it wasn't the show that was important, it was the idea of showing this new stuff. We had an absolutely marvelous time. The show was done by [Mark] Wigley of Princeton. It was the book that was important and the idea that was important, and it worked way beyond my dreams, and it's now in every school in the country.

SZ: Now, did you read that piece that [Michael] Sorkin wrote?

PJ: Sorkin? In Spy?

SZ: Either Spy or The Voice, I can't remember, but it was not....

PJ: Spy. Not a very nice article.

SZ: No.

PJ: Well, he's a very mean man, and naturally I didn't like it. They're doing another one now, Spy. They say it's very nice. Well, there's no such thing as a nice Spy article, so we'll see.

SZ: On what?

PJ: On me. It went to press the other day. But that has nothing to do with the Museum.

SZ: But his accounting of how that show started, how does that jibe with...?

PJ: Which show, the first show?

SZ: The Deconstructivist show.

PJ: The Deconstructivist show. No, he talked with the people who don't like me, naturally. No, it had nothing to do with that. It came about through Peter Eisenman and Aaron Betsky from the West Coast. The whole idea of the breakthrough. Then the list was made up by Wigley, Eisenman and me. We just sat together until we picked a list of people we wanted to show. But it was all so fast. Oh, no, Mr. Sorkin

talked with [Joe] Giovannini and people who think they invented it. Well, there was nothing to invent. It was common property.

SZ: It was out there.

PJ: It was there. It was the artist who did the work.

SZ: Well, how do you feel when something like that appears which clearly has a personal side to it?

PJ: Oh, it hurts terribly. You think the end of the world has come, of course. And he did a very good job. He's a very bright man. He did his library work extremely well.

SZ: Who?

PJ: Sorkin.

SZ: Oh. Sorkin.

PJ: Oh, they're very thorough over there. But nothing can bother me too much anymore.

SZ: Does that imply that at one time it bothered you more?

PJ: Yes. When I was younger, it had an effect on my career, but the career being near an end, everything is very beautiful, marvelous. Everybody is very nice to me. It's wonderful to be old, because you don't have to worry anymore about the future. There isn't any; you don't have to worry about it. It's a grand time of life. Well, we've got some things to talk about on the Museum, surely.

SZ: Yes, but you just brought one other thing to mind, which was the architecture department, now under....

PJ: Wrede.

SZ: Yes--what kind of direction you do think it's taking.

PJ: Well, he's a very quiet person who's really just carrying on.... He's Arthur's suggestion, and he's just carrying on what Arthur started, still. I really don't know if there's any new direction he's going to take. He's a very nice man and he's, I think, feeling his way still. He's been there three years. Every director puts an entirely different stamp on the department. This man is not very popular, and I just don't know how it's going to work out.

SZ: Why is he not popular?

PJ: Well, the staff doesn't like him, and none of us outside like him because he isn't energetic enough. The Museum is the most powerful institution in the world in architecture, and he's not breaking new ground or, there's no excitement generated.

SZ: But Arthur handpicked him is what you're saying.

PJ: Arthur handpicked him; the only man who could do it, he felt. He was working there. Before he died--he knew he was dying--he said, "This is the only man." So, the search committee there wasn't, but the director and I looked all over the world and made long lists. We sent for people from Europe and interviewed and interviewed and interviewed. Then we thought, "Well, the best man is the man who knows the ropes here," and the director liked him very much because he had worked....

SZ: The director being...?

PJ: Dougherty. I always call him Dougherty. Oldenburg.

SZ: Dick, Dick Oldenburg, yes.

PJ: When I don't think of a name, I think of another name, and the director is what comes naturally to me. Dick liked him because he had known him, and they're fellow Swedes, of course, which always made it easier for him. I don't blame him. I had no objections; nobody did. So I don't know. I really don't know what's on Stuart's mind. [PAUSE] I've got lots of ideas for shows, but I don't want to.... It's not good when trustees start interfering. I've always said that when I was on the other side, so I do my best to keep my mouth shut, which isn't a very good job.

SZ: Shows that you would want to curate, or just shows....

PJ: To have done; to have someone do it.

SZ: Such as?

PJ: Well, there's a show on housing, which we haven't done for forty years, with the example of Paris, which is a beautiful job of housing. There's a show of Frank Gehry furniture, who has just designed a new chair, which is an entirely new direction in chair design. That's hard, in the construction of a chair.

SZ: Not out of cardboard.

PJ: No. No, this is out of wood lathing. Delightful. And there's a show on landscaping; there's an entirely new direction in landscape art and we'd like to show it. I mean, I think we should. It's anti-architectural and very, very interesting. It's mostly West Coast.

SZ: Well, are these things you do bring up in committee meetings or...?

PJ: No, I haven't, because in our committee, our department has never run by committee. Arthur nor I ever paid any attention....

SZ: But there is an architecture committee.

PJ: There is one, but it's a rubber stamp, and I'd like to keep it that way because it's much easier to run a department when you don't have a lot of democracy around. So I don't really know what to do.

SZ: You're on that architecture committee, are you not?

PJ: Oh, yes. I could run it if I wanted to.

SZ: So what do you do? You just meet, and whatever is presented...?

PJ: Whatever the director brings up, we say yes, or we vote on an acquisition, something of that kind.

SZ: And there has not been a time when you have come into conflict with the director? I'm speaking now of the director of the department; I assume that's what....

PJ: Yes, well, I had a little conference, asked him if I could...a little all-day session without the public, up in the trustee's room, on architectural theory. The papers came in and I said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful for the Museum...? It would be another arm for the Museum world to get into sponsoring a theory of architecture," which is big these days. He [Wrede] said he didn't think it was the kind of thing for the

Museum. So I was pissed. So of course we're publishing them anyhow, but it would have been nice if the Museum had published them, to keep our finger in the door. No, Rizzoli is publishing them. Good for them.

SZ: But that's the kind of direction you would like to see....

PJ: Well, I think collaboration with the new architectural department at the Carnegie, [and] there's Phyllis Lambert's museum--both very active--and the Columbia Buell Center for Architecture. If the four of us, let's say, would all get together--it's very important, because everything is so terribly expensive now--to join in some of these ventures. I don't care who curates them, but they should be joint efforts. Then I think we should have shows of young people all the time, let's say monthly, in the Johnson Gallery, which is not used. Or, at least, it's a lot of models. It's like a hall of casts. I never thought of that. I must use that. I don't think we're getting proper use out of it. And a monthly letter, maybe; some way to get press notice.

SZ: Things are too sleepy?

PJ: Yes. Well, for me. I'm a little impatient. There's different ways of running departments, you know.

SZ: But the direction.... The division is still the same?

PJ: Between what and what?

SZ: Well, the division of what architecture is and should be....

PJ: Oh, yes. Sure. There's no problem at all. No, he got it from Arthur and that is the right direction. It started a generation ago. Well, the big thing now we're all arguing

about is whether to go under the garden or not, for new galleries.

SZ: You and I talked about that last time.

PJ: Oh, did we?

SZ: Although that brings to mind one other question I wanted to ask you, because I did read somewhere that when the Museum decided on the expansion, and Cesar Pelli was selected, that you were unhappy about that, because you had been thought of as the Museum architect.

PJ: Well, that was just an assumption I didn't have any right to make. They can pick any architect they want.

SZ: Well, were you unhappy at the time?

PJ: I was very hurt. So then, ...they made a committee of all the architects on the board--three of us--to choose the architect, and we chose Pelli. It was a very good choice.

SZ: Had you had a vision for that?

PJ: No, I wasn't in on any of the preamble of that. And I never knew why. Strange, isn't it? Right there in the middle of it all.

SZ: Not to know?

PJ: Not to know what they were dissatisfied with before.

SZ: Can you guess?

PJ: No! It's very funny. Well, I'd be too expensive, of course, and I'd have too much of a drop on the board so they couldn't say no to me as easily as they could to an outside architect. That's the good reason, if that was their reason. Because I would have. Good architects are more expensive. It's a tough world.

SZ: Well, I will come back to that, in a way, in a minute. I wanted to ask.... You talked in some degree to me about René d'Harnoncourt and the kind of leader he was. I wanted to ask you what you can remember of Bates Lowry and the controversy that developed around him.

PJ: Can't help.

SZ: No? Because...?

PJ: You can't get it from anybody?

SZ: You had known him before, is that not...?

PJ: No. I didn't know him before nor since.

SZ: Interesting.

PJ: He sort of went to pieces on the job, on liquor and.... He would lose his temper all the time. It just didn't work at all. And [John] Hightower I never knew. Neither of them before or after.

SZ: And since they stayed for such a short time, obviously, the impact was only in this....

PJ: Well, Mr. Paley was a very quick study, and he didn't tolerate any nonsense. A lot of people were very angry with him.

SZ: Because?

PJ: Well, firing people without the board's backing. You're not supposed to do that, under constitutions. But he treated the Museum as his fief. I liked him enormously, of course.

SZ: What was he like?

PJ: Just the most wonderful man you could imagine. The books, of course, are all wrong because they didn't know him. The books recite the facts, which, I guess, are incontrovertible, but you couldn't help but meet him without being completely captivated. Everyone. And that doesn't show.

SZ: Well, what were some of those characteristics that made him wonderful?

PJ: You can't describe charisma. You just can't describe it. Why is a woman...well, some say they're beautiful, but it's a lot more than that when a woman is really seductive. It isn't just beauty. It's a lot of things. Bill Paley wasn't handsome, but he had an attractiveness about him that the whole world felt. An awful man to work for. On the other hand, if he hadn't been Bill Paley, we couldn't have had as good a building as we got. In the new building, I mean.

SZ: What do you think his greatest contribution to the Museum was?

PJ: To The Museum of Modern Art?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: Well, to me he represented decision, and ability to decide. He didn't have the vision of a Nelson Rockefeller; I mean, he wasn't an idealist. Nelson really liked art, I think, better than Bill did. Bill, one suspected, collected for reputation and international fame, whereas Nelson...it's hard to know now, in the collection, which are his. But Paley is going to have his name in lights over every picture, sort of. His collection has to go around the world and be cared for. But, he had an arrogance. Of course, I liked his firing people and his partisanship, I guess because he didn't include me in his list of enemies. But, boy, when people didn't like him, they didn't like him.

SZ: Do you remember what the trustee reaction was when he and David Rockefeller fired Lowry without consulting the executive committee, as you said?

PJ: That's right. That's what I mean.

SZ: Well, did that split the trustees?

PJ: Yes, but they all got over it, except John de Menil, who resigned. I wasn't as close, so I can't make a sensible report. I wasn't on the trustee...yes, I was, wasn't I? But we were just paper trustees, just rubber stamps. That's what de Menil didn't like. He thought if you have a board of trustees, you ought to listen to the board of trustees.

SZ: Well, Philip, you have been on the board of trustees for a long time. Has that always been true, or has that sort of ebbed and...?

PJ: No, it's always been true. It's a Rockefeller institution; it's a democracy of one, as I've said, whose name is usually Rockefeller, but it was Paley during those years. [UNINTELLIGIBLE] If you want to get something done, you see the executive in between meetings, but you should never have meetings unless you know how it's going to come out, because you just get chaos.

SZ: So what's the major function of the board of trustees, then?

PJ: They make a lot of trouble. We're making trouble for poor David [Rockefeller] now, on going under the garden. He can't just go under the garden, although he would like to, because the lady trustees, especially... "If you cut down that tree...." So, the man at the head can't just do what he likes, no more than Bill could, but little decisions like firing people never bothered him. Once in a while he fired the wrong person, as he did at CBS. He was mercurial; difficult, but attractive. It's hard to say, isn't it.

SZ: Did you ever have any doubts that his pictures would not come to the Museum?

PJ: No. They should have. Because [Stephen] Clark's didn't, you mean? I don't know. I wasn't party to any of that, and I guess we did have to promise him a lot to get them. Catalogues.... [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

SZ: So it was worth it?

PJ: I'm not a judge. I like to look at them.

SZ: But just getting back for one more minute to the function of the board of trustees, you say pretty much straight through--since you've been on--it's been a rubber-stamp organization. Its major function must be giving....

PJ: Giving money is the main thing, and advice to the executive, whoever it may be. That fluctuates: is it the president, is it the chairman, is it a combination? These are all very personal and difficult things, but if you have an axe to grind or something you want to do, you do it the way you do in any organization, you get to the top.

SZ: And the top now...?

PJ: The top was René d'Harnoncourt for many years, because Nelson was off being Governor. Then it was Bill, then it was Dick.... [INTERRUPTION]

SZ: You had been talking about various leaderships, so I was going to ask you if you would, thinking about Dick Oldenburg, now, for the last twenty years, how you would compare and contrast....

PJ: Oh, Dick is quite a different. Oh, he is so different from René that you can't say they are holding down the same job. He's what we call Fabius Cunctator, the great Roman general who kept putting things off so much, but he had won all the wars. I told him once that's just what he was, in a moment of personal...when I was close to him. Lisa [Oldenburg] was there, and she laughed and said, "Yes, that's what he is," and he didn't mind. But, no, he knows his reputation for delaying tactics. But, you see, it works extremely well if you're not the type of charismatic leader, like René, who watched like a hawk everybody but could always lead, see. Oldenburg doesn't lead, but he gets things done, and he is the center point of all these thousands of pressures, and can stand it. The president didn't like him--[Donald] Marron--and he didn't like Marron. Then all sorts of things happened, as in any institution, and he's won through absolutely everybody, especially, of course, because he had Blanchette's ear. Through Blanchette--whom everybody loves, but she was not quite the active leader that Nelson was--he could always get somebody else to make his points for him. He's one of those, and of course, I just adore him. I just think he's the best thing that ever happened to the Modern, and he's a different kind of a leader but it works extremely well. Now, what the next constellation will be, I just can't imagine.

SZ: Well, you said it's always been a Rockefeller institution, in one form or another.

PJ: In one form or another. But what's it now? I don't know. David stills runs it as if the name were the same, whether Nelson were wielding it or he. It isn't true, of course,

and Marron, I think, has been marvelous. But he hasn't been popular.

SZ: Among the trustees?

PJ: No, among the staff and the trustees, and the art world. Especially the art world. He doesn't understand it. Why should he, for heaven sakes? Mr. Paley didn't either. But now, the art world has become so strong and so important in itself, as it wasn't in the old days.

SZ: You mean because of its financial power.

PJ: Yes. It was just a tiny little thing. People would say, "Oh, come on, do a nice picture for me, I'll give you \$300," kind of thing. Now a picture is costing \$17 million, by the same artist. It's a little different.

SZ: Of course, there are people who would say that that's created largely by the existence of the Museum.

PJ: Well, the auction houses. But I don't know. I just think it's the times. The nineteenth-century painters were also the richest people in town. It just goes up and down. We may have another collapse now. I doubt it, because in any uncertain times paintings have their own value. We've been wondering, through all these years of enormous rise, whether it was tulipmania, which totally collapsed when people got interested in other things besides tulips. Well, is that going to happen, and we're going to go back to ivories or just what? But we won't go completely down, I don't think.

SZ: Philip, you told me last time.... We talked a little about.... Well, in the beginning, Alfred urged you to buy some pictures, pictures that you didn't necessarily have a great affinity for, because he wanted them. I think subsequently you--I don't know if this is a fair thing to say--but your taste in art changed, grew?

PJ: Yes, it grew, thanks to Alfred, I think. But also, I really was interested, I guess. So I bought things on my own. But I gave the collection to the Modern because of Alfred. That one collection.

SZ: The one in 1967?

PJ: Whenever it was.

SZ: And how did that work? Alfred came and picked what he wanted? But he already knew a lot of what you had, because that was part of...

PJ: Oh, yes. He knew what I had been collecting. I don't know why I gave it to the Modern, do you? Oh. Taxes, maybe. Sixty-seven?

SZ: Well, in '67 you told the Museum--and I assume it was really Alfred--to come and pick, what? Forty pieces? Or that's what they took.

PJ: They took forty?

SZ: I think so, yes. But I didn't know if those were largely things that Alfred had asked you to....

PJ: It's hard to say, because it was mixed. He liked some of the things I bought on my own. I gave money in those days, too, so there was a fund.

SZ: Yes, and then there was this exhibition in 1984 of works that you had either given outright, or had been bought with the fund.

PJ: I picked the ones I wanted to show. Eighty-four?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: That couldn't have been seven years ago. Well, that shows you. Dates go faster and faster, because to me it was two years ago. It wasn't two years ago that I had that show on the third floor? Eighty-four...I can't believe that.

SZ: No, mid '80s.

PJ: All right. Well, that was very nice. [PAUSE] Of course, Alfred was furious when I built--I talked to you before [about this]--when I built my gallery.

SZ: No, you didn't tell me that.

PJ: Well, in '65 I finished my gallery. So he knew I would want to collect for that building. It would be only natural. Well, of course, I said, "Oh, no, Alfred." Obviously, I gave things after I built it, because '67.... Then that's happened, of course. I got things, then I got mad at the Modern when they didn't let me build.... What year was that they built the new wing?

SZ: Well, it opened in '84.

PJ: Pelli's wing?

SZ: Yes. But they started planning it in '79 and '80.

PJ: In '79, and of course the minute that happened I said, "You get no more pictures."

SZ: You did say that.

PJ: They didn't believe me. The director spoke to me last year, "Would I give some more things?" Then, what's-his-name, Kirk [Varnedoe], just asked me last week.

SZ: And your response?

PJ: I said, "No, I've given you all I'm going to give. I've done enough, for heaven's sake." I gave them a whole collection. What did they expect? That I would like just being thrown out like that? But I've long forgotten all that, but it sticks in the pictures because I do like to see them on my walls. The Museum has everything, but two they really need. But I also need them for the same reason.

SZ: Which are those two?

PJ: A Disaster by [Andy] Warhol, and the Summer by Jasper Johns. They're the ones they want, of course.

SZ: I think I was just reading something that Leo Castelli wrote about your coming up, the time you went and got the flag picture, when you bought it. His version of it is that you then decided you liked it so much that you didn't turn it over [to the Museum] right away.

PJ: That's perfectly true.

SZ: Is that true?

PJ: There were hints and hints that, "After all, Philip, it was I who told you to buy it, because the Museum wouldn't. You said you bought it just to give to the Museum," and I said, "That's right, Alfred, but...." I used to hang it in the gallery up there. So, in '67, I guess that was the year I gave the Flag.

SZ: Did you ever miss them? I guess you did.

PJ: No, because I was more interested in new pictures. The unfortunate thing about collectors, which is something people don't understand, collecting is like "getting

there is half the fun." Buying the picture is the fun. Then, you enjoy it, you go up to it and say, "Oh, that was a smart buy" or "God, do I really want that?" for a while, then it just sits there and becomes part of the wall. Like these pictures: I don't chuckle when I read these anymore. You can't help that; that's the way the world is and your eyes are. It's very funny.

SZ: Let's see what else I have here.

PJ: I gave the house [the Glass House], too, you know, in my first will. I gave the house and everything to the Modern. I changed that to the National Trust.

SZ: Was that a result of the same...?

PJ: Yes, but then I realized that that was a good deal. It would be stupid to load the Museum down with a museum house in the country. It's always just a headache; they're not equipped, nor do they want to be equipped to run a house in the suburbs. That's not their business.

SZ: Well, for a while they had Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller's house, right? As a guest house?

PJ: Yes, they had that and couldn't use it. It was too much of a problem.

SZ: Too much of a problem.

PJ: Yes, the place should be in the Museum, not way down the street there.

SZ: Do you remember anything about the fire in 1958?

PJ: I certainly do. I was at the Seagram Building. In '58?

SZ: Yes.

PJ: I was working along and somebody said, "The Museum of Modern Art is on fire." I nearly died. I rushed over there, just in time to see them carry out a dead fireman. So, I was in no condition to do anything. Alfred was completely out of his mind, just wandering around like a lost.... Picking one picture up here and carrying it out. I realized that nothing made sense, so I got out. I mean, I couldn't help. Alfred got the pictures out he could. The water was covering everything by then. How he lived through it, I don't know. It was frightening to see billows of smoke coming out of our museum. God. It was sort of like the end of the world, you know? We're still there. The Seurats weren't hurt. That's no good for reputations.

SZ: Excuse me?

PJ: It's bad for a museum's reputation, of course, for insurance value....

SZ: To have a fire?

PJ: Yes. We always considered our place safe, and that we were very good arrangers of things. That's the way the world is.

SZ: I have one other thing left on here. As a trustee at that time, I don't know how much knowledge you had of the whole struggle between Bill Rubin and Bill Lieberman.

PJ: Oh, yes, because that had repercussions in the trustees, and we all took sides, of course, and some people of his old.... He was a dowager-looker-upper, Bill was-- Metropolitan Bill.

SZ: Lieberman.

PJ: Thank you. I was always against him. Alfred changed in the middle. Of course, he

was dead, but I mean, he was gone....

SZ: What do you mean, changed in the middle? He had felt one way....

PJ: He hired him, he was his protégé, and then something happened. No one knows, but he was not in favor anymore. But [Lieberman's] reputation went on as "Alfred's man in drawing," you see, and he became acceptable to Louise Smith and any collectors that were around, in a cocktail party way, so they were all.... Mrs. Schoenborn, Florene, she had wonderful pictures, so we were scared to death anything might happen to our Bill, because he controlled, one wondered, these things. But Bill Rubin is a very strong man, so I think most of us took the position that Rubin was right, that you couldn't do them both, and that Bill....

SZ: But Rubin, they both wanted....

PJ: Wanted at the same time. Was René there?

SZ: No, this was after. This really came about because one of the things Lowry wanted was to sort of have that under him when he came in. So it all evolved after that.

PJ: After Lowry was thrown out.

SZ: Yes.

PJ: So who was the director then? Oldenburg?

SZ: No, I think it happened before he came. I think it was in that interregnum time.

PJ: See, that's the kind of thing that happens in an interregnum.... That's right. It couldn't have happened if Oldenburg were at the Museum now, because the interregnum with Kirk was handled very slowly, but it was handled. And getting a

new man in from outside is never good or easy because of the staff. Kirk has handled that part just fine.

SZ: In any event, I think also they were not in agreement on the way in which the department ought to grow.

PJ: Which? Bill and Bill?

SZ: Yes, the two Bills.

PJ: Not in any way. On nothing did they agree. Yet, it really came down to personality and power because...I really don't know the doctrinal differences; I don't think we knew, any of us, and I never wanted to know. I felt so strongly that Rubin was just the greatest. Bill Lieberman is not a scholar, is not a strong man. It was clear that Rubin would win. That Rubin is...nobody likes him, it isn't that, but he happens to be very good. But he doesn't like modern art, so then that became a new cause for the young. That's why Aggie [Agnes Gund] and that younger committee got started, and why they hired first Linda Shearer and now [Robert] Storr.

SZ: Do you have an opinion on that?

PJ: Oh, yes. Storr was good and Linda wasn't.

SZ: No, I don't mean that. [LAUGHING]

PJ: You don't mean that. [LAUGHING]

SZ: I mean on the issue of.... Well, you know, of contemporary arts versus....

PJ: That's ridiculous, making out "versus," anyhow. Just like our department was historically divided because of Edgar Kaufmann and me, between design and.... But

before that, the design department was the same as the architecture department. I started them both as the department of architecture. So now it's just ridiculous to have two wings of the department. It's the same thing with drawings and prints. Why, in heaven's name, do we have all those different departments? So I'm hoping Kirk would eventually work into a director of the Museum, not like, God help him, the work Oldenburg does, but do the work that an art person in control does, so you don't have internecine battles. Well, for instance, where do posters go? Nobody ever settled it. It's right now in the department of design. Shouldn't it be in the graphics department? Or prints? Alfred worked on this. He was baffled by the whole problem, all of his time, because of the personalities involved in each department at each time. But it always ends up with people, and then history takes over. You get somebody, like, "Posters have always been in the design department." Well, that wasn't true; it wasn't in any department until Alfred desperately found that he couldn't do it, and that somebody had to. I don't know who it was at the time, who was willing to take over. It wasn't me. So institutions have this load of history now which we never had. Then the propriety of the divisions become a thing in their own right and start galloping off in all directions, like prints. But Kirk could be that kind of a director. I mean, he's multi-knowledged and has the interest. He could be over my department, for instance. There's no point.

SZ: You don't think that this recently closed show, and the brouhaha that came up around it...

PJ: Around what show?

SZ: High and Low. That that will hurt his stock with the trustees.

PJ: Yes. Yes, it has.

SZ: It has?

PJ: Oh, yes. It's going to take him a long time. Of course, that's where Storr comes in, because he's so universally popular. So Kirk is going to have to work. Too academic. I never read the book. Nobody ever has. It may be an interesting theory of looking at paintings. It seems like an old theory to me. Of course what's around you influences your painting. What's new, except Abstract Expressionism maybe, but that was a minor blip. Certainly Picasso, Cézanne, Piero della Francesca, everybody used images from around. Then, it's hard to use, to illustrate a thesis of that nature, to make a visual show, like the Times said. [PAUSE] I've got to go.

SZ: Thank you.

**END TAPE 6, SIDE 1**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: MANHATTAN**

**DATE: APRIL 3, 1995**

**BEGIN TAPE 7, SIDE 1**

SZ: Shall I ask you a leading question?

PJ: It would help.

SZ: I think I'll start with one not quite so blunt. Since it has been noted in several places

that it was probably not your intention to have this book released during your lifetime, what made you decide to change your mind, if in fact that's true.

PJ: We changed our mind and let it be published because I was afraid I would last so long that the publisher would be angry and the author would be very disappointed, and he was a friend of mine and I thought that I could stand any attacks that were in there. And there were bound to be, and I knew it, and I gave him permission to publish it because I said it would all be stale by the time I get around to dying, at this present rate. So go ahead. Then, of course, when I read it I realized that, like many biographers, he—and this is my main issue with him—that he started out with standard biography, the whole youth part is all perfectly pedestrian; the facts could have been corrected, but they're minor. I'm not talking about facts, I'm talking about tone. But that was a perfectly good tone that he hit there. No frills. Then, as it began about wartime, right through to the end, he became increasingly, obviously, disenchanted with his subject, for whatever reason. I'm a mean-minded man; therefore, I think, he married a girl that hates us, that hates especially homosexuals and that especially disliked me. He'd gotten so that at the end it's more like "little Philip leaving things out in the rain." Philip, of course, is a derogatory term when he's done Philip Johnson throughout, or Mr. Johnson. So he gets the "little Philip" syndrome, which, of course, you can easily get from looking through Spy magazine or New York Magazine or whatever it was, Vanity Fair. But I didn't think he was an inimical witness, you see. So this got more and more poisonous right up until the end. So that I come out badly and my friends come out badly, every one of them. David Whitney comes out badly, [Peter] Eisenman comes out badly. I just feel, well, what's the point here? You are supposed to be in love with your subject, too, as well as hate him; it has to be a love-hate thing. But the tone shouldn't change in the middle of the book. Everyone's noticed this, everybody that knows me. So I felt it was cheapening the whole book. That's really my main objection. Of course, on the way there are, shall we say, hundreds of [erroneous] fact, but aren't there are bound to be? It seems to me that in any biography of a person as long as that one there are bound to be things that the subject is going to object to. I'm sure [Ludwig] Mies [van

der Rohe] would have found things had he been alive.

SZ: You mean in [Franz] Schulze's book?

PJ: Yes. But Schulze's book on Mies was about a man that had died some years before, and it was much easier to do, but here he was dealing with a live eel who was a very difficult subject. So that is my main issue with him. And second, and, I suppose in the long run, more important is his lack of knowledge of architecture and his lack of interest in the art of architecture. He doesn't seem to know the history of art and architecture, he doesn't seem to know what my good points are and what are my bad points. This will all be, of course, the subject of a lot more books; there are two better ones that are coming out, I think.

SZ: That who is working on?

PJ: Ujjval [Vyas]. The other one is by [Lee] Hall.

SZ: Which, in addition to really talking about your architecture in more knowledgeable terms, will take on Schulze's criticism as well?

PJ: No, entirely separate. Schulze's book doesn't deserve any reference to architecture.

SZ: Philip, when you agreed to participate with Schulze, what was your opinion of the kind of criticism he had made of Mies's work?

PJ: He hadn't, you see; that was a hagiography and perfectly all right, but with me he put that edge in his voice toward the end of the book, which naturally I found offensive.

SZ: Did you sense that he was having those feelings during the process that you were

working with him?

PJ: Not at all. He still wants to stay friends. I don't think he understands what I feel, and I never discussed it with him and I'm not going to, because I'd rather keep relations formal but strained. There's no use battling about it. In fact, I hope I have indeed talked too much about it with my friends and it will get back to him, which is perfectly all right. I'm never going to bring it up. I resent, of course, his remark that with my bad eyes I'd probably never read the book [laughing]. Believe me, I read every word. And I read all day.

SZ: Had you not read it in its entirety beforehand?

PJ: That is the point. He wouldn't show it to me. Because he said, "Warts and all?" and I said, "Certainly, warts and all." Another one thing that we have to specify and that is his handling of the question of sex. I don't think he ever had any. I just don't understand a man of a sexual nature going on and on and on, unless he was just trying to prove what a son-of-a-bitch I am, which is not part of his business. My sexual life is not that interesting. In fact, it's quite ordinary—not normal, but it's ordinary.

SZ: It's something that you had obviously shared with him, though.

PJ: Shared with him? I'd told him.

SZ: That's what I mean.

PJ: He kept asking about...it was obvious that it was very distasteful to him. He's a Middle Western homophobe.

SZ: During that time, didn't that make you think that perhaps when he put it all together...no?

PJ: No.

SZ: Why not?

PJ: Because he was so sympathetic. Of course, he was trying to get more information. I'm not very bright and I went for it. I enjoyed talking about myself, and who doesn't? And I talk more than most people so I resent his taking advantage of that. Let's see, what else? The details of facts I'm not going to take up at this time. They don't seem important enough. But three things: his worrying about sex, his lack of knowledge of history....

SZ: Let's just go back to the first thing. There is a way of presenting a person's life. Plenty of people have had very different kinds of lives that are just presented by biographers as a fact.

PJ: Of course. You don't have to argue it, press it all the time and always bringing it up, as if there were something unusual or monsterlike about my tastes. I have a very modest little sex life, according to most people, but very funny.

SZ: His assessment of your architecture....

PJ: There's a lack there. It isn't there, it isn't in the account, and he gives no reason for any adverse criticism and he doesn't trace ideas through from one period to the next, he doesn't say where I got what. An architectural historian would want to stress the work. It says "Life and Work," but it isn't. It's a Vanity Fair article.

SZ: It's just sort of presented.

PJ: That's right. "Then he did some architecture, he did this building or that building," but there's no heart in the architecture part of it. Obviously, he thought the personality...but that's another point that everybody points out to me: I'm not in there—my humor, my.... That's the fourth big point, I guess. Let's see, we've got sex, the architecture, the meanness toward the end....

SZ: And the fact that, really, your person doesn't come through.

PJ: No, as it does in my own writings about myself. Just that little book I wrote, you know, that I dictated, has more of me in it than his book.

SZ: In a way, they're all connected to the fact that...I don't want to put words in your mouth, I'll just be quiet.

PJ: I don't want you to be quiet. It's more fun.

SZ: The fact that in some of the reviews of the book, you get a much better sense of you, from your friends who wrote these reviews, like Brendan Gill. At least you get an appreciation for the person.

PJ: For the person. Peter Blake's article. I'm in all the reviews, except the ones I don't read. Chicago reviews are particularly interesting. But no, it's funny, my personality just doesn't show, good or bad. Funny. So those are the reasons, and I don't think there's really much more I can think of.

SZ: One other thing, and I think this was something he presented and some of the reviews really talked about it, was, and I guess what you're saying is that this is part

of not having an appreciation for or an understanding of art and architecture, the criticisms of just moving--which one could also see as an evolution--but moving from one style or one era to another.

PJ: He doesn't tell. Doesn't give the whys. Nothing interesting at all.

SZ: These next two books, they're not really going to be biographies though, right?

PJ: Nobody's going to tell the life again. Lee Hall, hers is an appreciation of my work here, especially the work, and the other book is my philosophy. Ujjval Vyas, he finds the philosophy behind all my work is rather consistent, he says. And he being philosopher-trained or making himself that, he wants to know why the consistency is so clear. So he digs into that, and that's another whole direction. There is a book of appreciation coming out on my ninetieth birthday that [Peter] Eisenmann is doing and Phyllis Lambert, and that will have seven or eight articles by people that I don't necessarily know, but who will talk about my work. It's all about my work, and nothing else—not personality. A lot of these books won't come out, you know.

SZ: So those are your four main points. Are you sorry you did it?

PJ: Yes. I'm sorry I did it. But I couldn't tell from the Mies book. I liked the Mies book—it was low-keyed and lots of facts I didn't know about Mies's life, but the work, again, isn't in there. The work is much more in Neumeyer or in a few other writers. But I didn't know the facts and the sequence of his life, which is interesting. Everybody agreed: it was a nice book. So we don't really know what happened here, except he got off his base in wanting to do an interpretative psychobabble book on me, which is the style, and he wanted to be in the style. He's not equipped to be in the style. He's not even as good as the Vanity Fair man who was excellent. It wasn't very pleasant for me, but you could see what he was trying to prove. I called him up and said it was

good. So it isn't that; it isn't that I mind the attacks. And in Spy magazine there was one by that man from Columbia, [Michael] Sorkin. So what? I've met him since, we've had dinner; it's fine. I don't mind attacks, especially if I'm able to easily see where they come from and where we differ.

SZ: But this is supposedly your biography.

PJ: It's supposed to be biography. I'm not in there, my architecture isn't there. My sex life is in there to boredom, bored to extinction, and the meanness of the last half; the tone is antagonistic to the subject. That doesn't help explain me to the public. In fact, I haven't seen a favorable review that is very favorable. The Chicago people were polite to him because he was sitting right in the room. The interesting one to me is Ujjval, of course, Vyas's book giving my philosophy, even though I was stupid enough to go to Germany. Right through that he explains what my mental process was. It's extraordinary.

SZ: Which was not contained in here.

PJ: It's not in there at all. He doesn't know anything about philosophy. He mentions Nietzsche and Heraclitus but obviously it was just because I mentioned them. Funny, isn't it? So. Not much, is it? It's just that I've been thinking about it a long time. I can distill it for you, instead of wandering around.

SZ: It's important.

PJ: Yes. Actually it's not so bad. I may not even put a date on it. Well, I don't want to hurt [Franz].

SZ: Have you made any statements like this to press?

PJ: No, and I don't intend to. I don't want to hurt Franz. I don't bear any ill will to him at all. It's the fact that he lacks any sense of balance on the sex and on the...he wouldn't admit maybe that he was mean in the last half of the book.

SZ: But you felt it.

PJ: Rona felt it. Eisenman knew it. You don't think about it, but when you do, you think...and we do differ, in-house, as it were, about what date in the biography it starts to sour, but it's around the war, about halfway through. Curious.

SZ: Especially since he knew who you were.

PJ: He knew from the beginning.

SZ: And he wanted to do this?

PJ: That's right. I think he got tired toward the end. But much more serious is the lack of my work. I'd rather keep it quiet. Let's see, what should we put on it?

SZ: Do you want to talk to Rona about that, or you want me to talk to her about that?

PJ: Yes. We're done, finished.

**END INTERVIEW**