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Max Abramovitz interviewed by George M. Goodwin

March 31, 1993 in New York City

Tape I, Side A

Family background. Father, Benjamin, from Romania. Talked very little. Married in Turkey. Lived in Argentina or Brazil, then returned Romania. Max born in U.S., 1908. Oldest of three children. Father farmer in Michigan, as was his older sister. Mother lost eye from bee sting. Family moved to Chicago. Father had grocery store. Lived Cicero. Max attended Crane Technical High School. Shop courses. Graduated at 15. Read Horatio Alger and history. Job in bank. Drafting courses at night school. Fascinated by buildings, as Richardson's Marshall Field Warehouse. Studied architecture and architectural engineering, University of Illinois, Champagne. Graduated 1929. Had never met architect. Fired from summer job. Lemuel Dellenback, head school, later to Columbia and Syracuse, gave encouragement. Won medal. Not interested copying historical architecture. Became interested Wright. In 4th year, discovered Corbusier. Lingering Beaux-Arts influence from Chicago exposition, 1893. Designed restaurant in air: functional not decorative. Never given up approach. Went with Dellenback to Columbia. Master's, 1931, big joke. Taught two years. Won more 10 medals. Competed for Paris Prize. Placed second in U.S. Also second in competition for Rome Prize. Given Columbia scholarship to Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1932-34. Through Talbot Hamlin at Columbia, exposure to Wright and European modernism. Not interested in diploma. Traveled throughout Europe: France, Holland, Austria, Germany, Italy. Also Middle East: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece. Black Sea, Romania, Hungary. Didn't meet modern architects: too shy. Drew, sketched, photographed. Can't sit still. Didn't consider self rebel or modernist. Poor kid from Chicago, overwhelmed. Heavily influenced by Corbusier, but not his disciple. No money to return to Chicago. In love with New York. Last year at Illinois, sent to Lake Forest to study estates. Housed at Lake Forest College. Acquainted Howard Van Doren Shaw. Letters of recommendation to New York architects. Freightier from Europe to New York was \$50. Had \$15 left in pocket.

Tape I, Side B

Before trip to Europe, involved in project with New York firms and New School to study housing of Lower East Side. Not paid. Asked to join Ralph Walker's study team. Through mistake, sent to Wallace K. Harrison's team, who had worked on Rockefeller Center. Luckiest thing ever happened.

"Wally." Invited work his office. After return from Europe, contacted Harrison. H planned to open own office. At Columbia, earned \$75 week. At Harrison, \$40. Make-work: studies to redesign Central Park. Drew with conte crayon or charcoal not pencil. Harrison found patron, young Nelson Rockefeller, my age. H never had formal education but well educated. H liked young people. H's wife, Ellen Milton. Her brother married to Rockefeller. Would not marry until had \$200 and two suits. Lived 56th St. and 2nd Ave. Designed home in Bermuda. Rockefeller Apartments on 54th St.: first real job. 1939 World's Fair. Design of theme building: Trylon and Perisphere. Andre Fouilhoux, H's partner until 1945. Had fun. Started go to town: more work. Office of 30 to 40. Never considered self modernist. Architecture for U.S. Edward Stone in office. "International Style" at Museum of Modern Art. Saw Wright's influence in Europe. Max wanted control individual buildings. Rarely visited Chicago. Knew Sullivan's work. Visits to Taliesin West and Arizona Biltmore. Max designed only two houses. Prefer large commissions. Heard Wright speak at Columbia and New School. Watched Guggenheim being built. Visit to Fallingwater. Usonian houses more human than Corbusier's. Never to Taliesin or Johnson Wax. Visit Florida Southern College. Thinking of developing self: country gave me great opportunity. Religious architecture. Inter-faith chapels for Brandeis University. Knew President Sachar from Illinois. Designed Hillels for Illinois and Northwestern. Northwestern better, but torn down. Early 1940's. Francophile. Being Jewish, didn't like standing on sidelines. Enlisted Army. Very little religious education. Have heritage and don't follow other religion. Jewish bureaucracy self-serving. Wife not Jewish. Rarely experienced anti-Semitism. Two or three Jews in class at Illinois. Didn't worry about discrimination. Asked why not change name. Couldn't work for Brandeis after War because work on United Nations. Later, 16 buildings for Brandeis: until Sachar left. Campus plan begun by Eero Saarinen. Became very close to Sachar: trusted me. Idea of clustered buildings. Sachar needled by Boston architects. Sachar should have left earlier. Design of Three Chapels. Donor, Dr. Berlin in Boston, chapel in memory parents. Sachar wanted include Protestants and Catholics. He suggested example of Air Force Academy chapel. Don't put guests in basement. Board gave trouble. All chapels same size. Not face each other, around pool. Insisted on height and disgnity. Look up to sky. Arguments over symbolism. God is intangible. Went once year to synagogue with father. Took Hebrew class but meaningless.

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Max Abramovitz interviewed by George M. Goodwin  
May 6, 1993 in New York City

Tape II, Side A

Brandeis Interfaith Chapels continued. Kennedy Airport Chapels followed idea but were terrible. Pleased with Brandeis designs. Consulted on site of Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs. Was colonel in Air Force. Invited by Gropius to consult. Never anything to do with Harvard. At odds with Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. Never mechanistic. Respectful of construction but humanistic. Concern for people subconscious. Not against radicalism. Find own way. Never thought of imitating Gropius or Mies. Gropius less artistic than Mies. Philip Johnson also sense refinement. J's political and sexual background. J could laugh at himself. Designed Port Chester, NY, synagogue for forgiveness. Had lot Jewish friends, chiefly Lincoln Kirstein. J never personal friend. Got along nicely. Always had gays in office: could send away on jobs. J just another talented architect. Fight with J about Lincoln Center: use of glass to be seen at night. Break of faith. Always wanted to be different. J mimicked Gothic at PPG. Post-modern movement dead and wrong. Respect I.M. Pei. Always admired cohesiveness of Gothic. Preliminary design for Philharmonic (Avery) Hall. Acoustical problems required three skins. Neoclassical orientation, though never interested classicism. Harrison threw out good ideas. Rome's Campidoglio is source. H retreated. H's best work: Stamford Church and Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Last 20 years, went different directions. H preoccupied Albany Mall. Raymond Hood credit for Rockefeller Center. Walked out few times because arguments. Initial work with H. A credit for Rockefeller house in Seal Harbor, ME. Credit for New York World's Fair, 1939. Job captain for Rockefeller Apartments, 53rd Street. Some office buildings big and mediocre. Junior partner. H critic at Yale. A did dirty work with students. We made it exciting. Invited Aalto. H not so close to Rockefellers. Deserve what he got. Ability to handle architects, as United Nations and Lincoln Center. Always designer in his mind. A emphasized planning. Never partnership agreement. Deferred to him. Subtle relationship. Buildings for U.S. Steel and Mellon Bank.

Tape II, Side B

Won own clients. Brandeis, for example. Shared fees. Received 10% during Fouilhoux years. During World War II, being Jewish meant lot me. Don't ask me to explain. Don't believe Jesus, hereafter, Bible, or gifts from God. Sense morality. All subconscious. Feel part Jewish people.

Can't tolerate bureaucracy. Invited three times to Israel. Consulted on design Knesset while working on U.N. Israeli competition. Invited by Abba Eban, U.N. Ambassador, to represent U.S. Deputy director to H on U.N. Not mature architect until 40: make lot mistakes and acquire judgment. Israeli leaders wanted to talk about mother's genealogy. Present for dedication of Knesset. Competition for Israel Museum, late 1950's. Won by Mansfield and Gad. Shrine of Book by Kiesler and Bartos. Funded by Bartos' father-in-law. Missed opening of Museum. Very interested Shrine of Book. Two best new museums: Jerusalem and Mexico City. Indians so proud their heritage. Knesset building not great nor bad. Lipchitz sculpture for Columbia Law School. First choice was Henry Moore. Gave Lipchitz sculpture to Brandeis. Not been Brandeis recent years: won't suck up. Grew apart from H. Schism over Assembly Hall at University Illinois. Not trying to show him up. Enjoyed team. H said would be divided by clients. Victoria Newhouse's book on H. Credit for A buildings. Stamford Church offered to A. Too much time on religious buildings. For synagogue, have 100 clients. H took over Stamford. H not jealous. His wife never accepted A as partner. H modest about fees. Took going rates. H vacated office without notice. Rockefellers selected A for Saks Fifth Avenue. H wouldn't talk for year. Also asked to take charge at Rockefeller University. In rage of old man. Nelson had reached out other architects. Later had lunch together. Not invited his funeral. Attended memorial service. Wife thought was using his money. Close to H over years. Partnership dissolved. Met Erich Mendelsohn once. Was dynamo, but had tough time without clients. Better synagogues than Percival Goodman's. G broke new ground. Did thesis on synagogues at Illinois. Was God damn lucky to do major work. Was wonder boy of generation. Maybe have leadership abilities. So busy didn't think about larger issues. Working day and night. Colleagues not exceptional: Saarinen, Bunshaft, Belluschi. Like me. More important to be satisfied than what anybody says. Very pleased Illinois buildings, which better than those Iowa. Pleased Radcliffe Library. Big monster of Mellon Bank. Phoenix Life Insurance, Hartford, one of best. So daring, but just right thing to do. Redecorated to original design. Broke the ice on rectangular building. Hard to visit Lincoln Center. Design compromised.

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tape II, side B

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