

Interview with William Lane

- Kathy Hersh: Today is August 9th, 2019 . My name is Kathy Hersh. I am interviewing William Lane for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project. So let's talk about ... you mentioned that you had come to Miami Beach before you actually moved here and that you loved Art Deco. So, tell us about your first impressions.
- William Lane Well, the first time I came here was in 1975, I was 20 years old. I came here with my brother and I specifically came to Miami Beach because I had seen the Art Deco. I was living in New York at the time. I was also fascinated with tropical Florida. It was actually the first time I came to Florida and experienced palm trees and this whole environment. From there I start traveling to Mexico, the Caribbean, I lived there for six years before moving here, in the Virgin Islands. So, I was just like totally taken by this climate. The flora and fauna.
- Interviewer And were you, at that time, aware of or interested in mid-century modern? You said you said you liked Art Deco, but your living in a mid-century modern home, here?
- Lane Yes. I actually very early on was starting to collect mid-century furniture. When I was living in New York I was working in I.M. Pei's office and we had done a large project for IBM and I was lucky to be on the interiors team and I brought in a lot of Saarinen. And a lot of furniture from that period. It was during the 80s and that kind of furniture was not... the Eames were not so popular. I was able to convince them to pretty much populate this 500 thousand square foot office space up in Sommers with mid-century furniture.
- Interviewer And were you, at that time, aware of or interested in mid-century And it went down well?
- Lane It went down really well. I mean, from there into the 90s, I remember we worked on the offices for Saturday Night Live. We used similar things: Saarinen, Eames also. And it was just from there, it took off. People started to... both of those companies: Knoll and... the company out of Michigan, both were producing the same furniture, the Herman Miller. So, it was kind of great. We were working with ICF and basically it just became more



and more popular. Certainly New York there are a lot of stores that were beginning to show mid-century original like ours.

Interviewer Did you — you said you worked for I.M. Pei — did you know him?

Lane I got to meet him, of course. I was a junior so I wasn't like someone that was actually personally knew him. He would walk through and he was, of course, a star.

Interviewer So were you an apprentice there?

Lane This was after graduating from school that I got to work there. It was one of my first jobs. And this was in 1983. It was during the time he was actually working on the Louvre. So, it was kind of an exciting time in the office. Of course his work is certainly — the stuff from the 60s — is pretty iconic.

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Interviewer So where did you go to school?

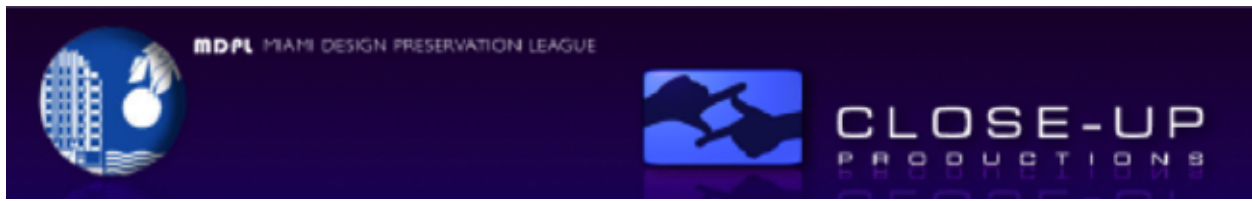
Lane I went to school in New York. I went to Cooper Union. It's a small school in the East Village. And I actually started there in the art school and then transferred into architecture.

Interviewer What were your influences?

Lane Back then? I suppose art. I loved Paul Klee. I loved Miro, Picasso. So a lot of the work was you know definitely influenced my interest in contemporary art contemporary music: Veres and Elliott Carter. A lot of these people that were, I guess, considered 20th century artists or writers.

Interviewer So you were living in the Virgin Islands. You were working as an architect there?

Lane Yes. I left New York in '87. I had gotten a scholarship to go to to Chivonne in the DR, and had won a grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Going back to New York I wasn't so keen on that. And I had friends who were living in the Virgin Islands, they said "come visit." I met an architect and I wound up commuting -- originally I was commuting from the East Villlage to 57th Street on the number 6 and six months later I'm commuting from St Thomas to St John on a little ferry. So it was



pretty remarkable shift and the work I was doing there. We did some contemporary projects. But we did a lot of West Indian, Danish Colonial homes. No air conditioning. Working with the West Indian winds. It was really beautiful, the topography working on that kind of landscape.

Interviewer So what made you decide to come here?

Lane It was interesting. I had a client who was a commercial film maker. He knew I was kind of perplexed about where to go next. I was thinking of going back to New York but I was also checking out LA. Interviewed with Frank Gerhy. And then he was saying there was a lot going on in South Beach, you should think about Miami Beach. Sort of like this hot spot. This was probably in 1990. So I came back. I had visited here in '87, probably came back the following year, stayed at the Tides.

6:00 I was really impressed with what was becoming somewhat of a bohemian community. I actually had several friends who had moved here from the East Village.. Again, there was this kind of like energy that was beginning to happen. People were coming from Europe, from New York, Chicago, LA. And it was a kind of convergence... and it was inexpensive to live here. You could get the kind of apartment for the same price you used to be able to get in the East Village. For the same reason attracted a lot of artists and -- I don't want to use the word misfits -- but creatives who kind of had something in common. I think that the original thing that came here was a lot of fashion people, photography, fashion shoots but a lot of those people were really excited about South Beach, too. There's a whole gay scene, the clubs. A lot of people were escaping the unfortunate consequences of HIV and the AIDS epidemic so just like what happened for a lot of the people who came here in the 50s and 60s, their last opportunity of their retiring, it was for a lot of people. Maybe a lot of them were on their last leg and it was a chance to be in a warm climate. Enjoy a fantasy, which is Art Deco. Again, kind of a funky vibe.

Interviewer Leonard Horowitz was already gone by the time you got here. Looking at what he did where do you put that, in perspective. How do you see what Leonard Horowitz did?

Lane I think he saw the magic of this place. And, I think that he saw this as a great opportunity to celebrate that. He was definitely an



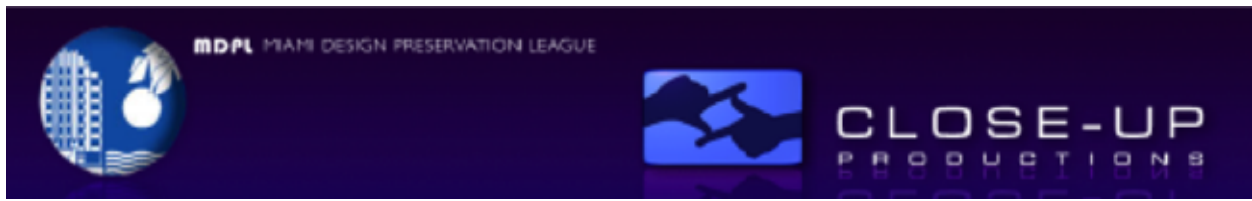
incredible humanist as were all the people that created the architecture that he was able to rehighlight and draw recognition to. I think that a lot of those people were looking for something different, special.

Interviewer So tell us about the lifeguard stations and that project. When did that start and how did you come to be. Was it a competitive process, or were you asked to do it?

Lane No, it was actually something that I put out there. And I had moved from St. Thomas a year before. It had gone through hurricane Hugo. I had lost my house and I was finishing up some projects. Again, I was looking for a place to move to.

Interviewer You Lost Your house in St. Thomas?

Lane In St. Thomas, yes. I was totally blown away. So, I ended up moving here and when the hurricane happened it was like right after I got here that Andrew hit. I had done a project in New York City with a group called Creative Time. At that time Creative Time had a thing called Art Under the Beach. And it was every year they would select an architect/ artist to do these follies. On the site which is now Battery City. So I had the opportunity to do a project there and it was called Oedipus in the Eye of the Dragon. I did it with a dramatist and some actors from the East Village. And it was very much like what the lifeguard towers became. This little pavilion with the steps. It was a set design. It also had a secondary purpose -- art, sculpture. So, when I moved here I had been influenced by that. I had been influenced by my dean at Cooper Union, John Hadick, who often... he never really built too much but he did a lot of theoretical work where he used architecture as almost personifications of people. Like theatre. Berlin Masque, a very famous paper architecture project he did that was published. So between that and living in the Caribbean all that wood, Danish Colonial architecture I came here and I saw that all those towers had been destroyed. And I thought, what a great idea to rethink them. Make them more than just a tower. Make them special. And I had been here and I loved everything that was up on Sunny Isle. The whimsy and the color and the stuff that Horowitz had done. So I came up with this project and I did a lot of drawings and I shared them with Tony Goldman, Craig Robins, Niesen Kasdin, Galbut -- everyone. So I went out there like a salesman, "look at this, why don't we do this?" Trying to get



some money to support it. In the end Niesen, Roger Carlton was the City Manager at the time, said, "you know, let's do this.?"

Interviewer Was Niesen mayor, then?

Lane He was. We built 5 of them on Lummis Park. Just the original ones. It got a lot of attention. They became somewhat iconic. A lot of travel guides put them on their covers. It was really funny. Like instant "what a great idea." So it was a simple idea that had a lot of -- at that time, at least -- got a lot of attention. Became somewhat representative of the emerging South Beach scene.

Interviewer So they became almost instantly iconic?

Lane I think so. Yeah. Used a lot.

Interviewer What covers were they on, do you remember?

Lane Fodor's. They were on Lonely Planet. They were actually multiples used on the Yellow Pages, that year. When you go into Miami Airport, when you leave, there were probably 20 huge pictures of them all going as you left along that wall. They were in Liberty Travel ads in the New York Times. They were featured Architectural Record. They were in Metropolis Magazine. They got a lot of press.

Interviewer I wonder if there were any people who came just so they could see them. Or if that attracted, said something to them.

Lane I don't know. I think it was just part of the whole experience.

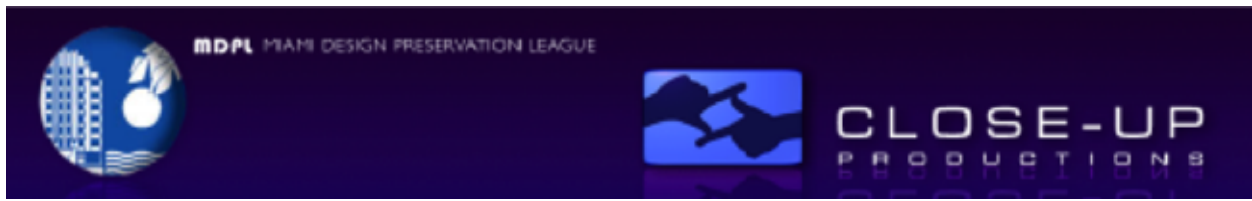
Interviewer Just a fun place.

Lane Yeah. Lummus Park for that beach was really the popular one, so fun to go out there with all these cool people to see these different set pieces on the beach, at double purpose.

Interviewer When you designed them did you know specifically, exactly where they were gonna be placed? Did the local flora and fauna come into play in designing them?



- Lane Not particularly. I think that the thing that we knew that Lummus Park was probably the most experienced and the most popular beach. So they were sited there. The influence was really, you know, the things I described, you know, some of my earlier things. But certainly the architecture of not only Art Deco Modern, but also a lot of the mid-century stuff up in Sunny Isles, Biscayne Boulevard so there was this... I've always had a fascination with what I would call populous architecture and so even though I consider the work I do conceptually based. I still like the idea that it can be engaged with anyone. Sort of what Morris Lapidus was somewhat about was speaking to the common man and not, you know, having something that seemed a little you know, beyond understanding. Something that I think maybe people could just genuinely identify with.
- Interviewer Something that didn't take itself too seriously.
- Lane Yeah, yes
- Interviewer So speaking of Morris Lapidus, you are a big fan of his and you had some contact with him.
- Lane Yeah, I was very lucky when I moved here in the 90s I Had friends that knew him and then, as a result, I was able to have lunch with him several times. I took him out to lunch. I got to go to some parties as apartment, which was incredible. But yes one of the one of my more favorite architects just because he was so different and brought to the tables a whole different take on architecture.
- Interviewer Describing his apartment as you remember it.
- Lane His apartment was a duplex and one of the most remarkable things was the dining room. And the dining actually had like a little canopy, a little Tempietto, and it was really beautiful. It had like fluted columns. Gold, leaved columns and then this incredible little dome cupola. And then underneath, this over-the-top plexiglass table with chairs on rollers. All the metal work being in a gold finish. But this clear plexiglass and so the canopy, the Tempietto or whatever, had such a classical feel and yet the furniture was so modern and then the gold finish gave it this deluxe kind of edge. And just the combination, was again, how I see Morris as being almost a surrealist. I t was just it was,



you know, a lot of his retail work in New York. It was all about engaging people and making them get out of their box.

Interviewer And get into his sort of stage sense.

Lane Yeah, into his other world. You know the idea of design to transport you to another place.

Interviewer What was this living room like?

Lane Living room I don't recollect that so much, but I do remember his bathroom and his staircase. His bathroom, like the shower walls was like this Plexiglas. It had in it all this kind of found objects and colors. Almost like graffiti. Not graffiti, but just a little ticking, like just colors. And even his sink was this epoxy plexiglass thing with all of this like color and shapes that he had actually cast into it. The Staircase was this sort of rolling spiral staircase and in it were all these niches and in the niches were these dolls that he had collected. Little Japanese dolls in kimonos etc that he and his wife had collected while on cruise ships. You know, they would take cruises like in the Asia and they would buy these and so they're kind of like mementos of his travel. But there was just so everything the whole combination. How he curated his apartment — very beautiful,

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Interviewer So back to the designing and placement of these towers. How much guidance were you given by the city of Miami Beach or were you given free reign?

Lane I worked with the Ocean Rescue people in terms of you know how big the cab should be how to enter the cab. But they all had pretty much the same size, volume, surrounding platform exit from behind stairs in the front. So everything was based on sort of a logic program that they had given me. And then beyond that they were like they had already seen some of my ideas and basically said go for it.

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Interviewer So you started out with five?

Lane Yes.

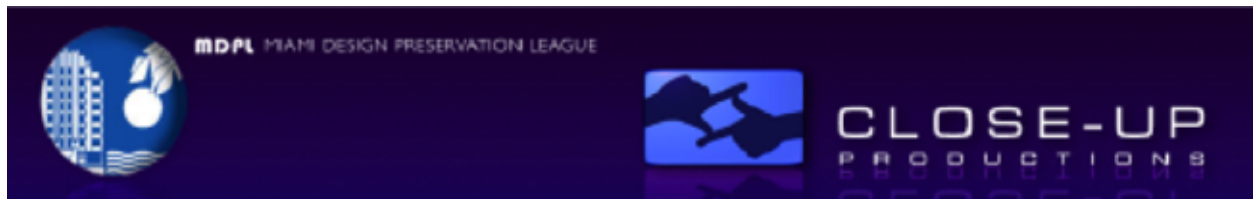


Interviewer And then in the end how many in total?

Lane Well, we ended up with five. After that, you know, to the chagrin of everyone, the ocean rescued kind of took it upon themselves and started building others that looked like it but really were not. And a few people in the community — this was like in the eventually in the 2000s — basically said, you know, these are not... we're going downhill. We're not going up hill. So there was real push to encourage the city to go back to looking at lifeguard towers as being something that could be in the public space and would sort of give Miami Beach their own identity and maybe bringing it up a notch. So, in 2000 — I guess with 2013 — we were commissioned by the city to go back to our original designs and rethink them with Ocean Rescue which now had you know other qualifications other ideas and at that point the towers throughout the the Beach were really on their way out. So they really did have to be replaced. The ones that we had done in the early 90s they were now 25 years old.

Interviewer So the sun and the wind...

Lane Yeah, they were kind of beat up. And it was interesting because Metropolis Magazine actually had done a story in 2014. And the the feature story was things that make cities iconic. And one of them was a picture of the pink lifeguard tower, the round one, and it was all in disrepair but still considered by them iconic. And they had the subway station from Washington DC, the Hollywood sign, of course, the Gaslight district in San Diego, the riverfront signage that was in Seattle. It was kind of cool to be, you know, put into that category. So It went on the shelf. We designed it. It was during Matti Bowers.... when she was mayor. It went on the shelf, but then when Levine came in, I guess it was his — I forget who his city manager was at the time — they saw it and they're like "Oh my god, this is really interesting" — because we had done all the board's etc., a lot of renderings. And so Levine, coming from a sort of advertising — he had done a lot of work with cruise ship — he thought "this is perfect." So they commissioned me to work with the city and they ended up building, replacing pretty much all the towers and replacing them with what we had created. Six prototypes kind of riffing off of the original design and then came up with six very distinct color palettes. So it was sort of like, you know, sort of like paper dolls were kind of dress each one in a different outfit.



So each one had its own outfit. So, you know we came up theoretically, somewhat, with 36 different very unique towers.

Interviewer Did anybody say no way? I'm not having that on my Beach?

Lane No, I think everyone loved it. You know, I really... It got to the point where it was even further, I guess for mayor Levine, it was an idea of further branding the city. And so, even now, you see the buses that go around the city, the free trolley, all of them have Pictures of lifeguard towers. So they've become a bit of an identity for the city.

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Interviewer Contributing features.

Lane I think so. Yeah, just part of the, you know, certainly we have this amazing district and we have some amazing buildings from such a range of periods.

Interviewer So what are you working on now?

Lane Right now we're working on a park — mid-Beach, the par 3 with a group called Savino Miller landscape architect and it's gonna be 22 acres, there's going to be a lake in it and we've done a few little pavilions. So that's kind of in line with our interests in public space. We worked on the South Pointe Park, which was on the former dog racetrack at the very tip of the island. And did some pavilions there. So the work I like specifically, I do private sector work, but some of the most engaging things have been work in the public sector. We recently also completed a cafe at the new Frost Science Museum and that was really fun. We got to put in some sculptural elements and then another project was in historic, like historical preservation project was the new freehand Hotel, which was comprised of four old historic buildings: one of them was Russell Pancoast's house on 27th and Indian Creek Drive, and then there was another... there was a Hohauser apartment building, there was a cottage that was originally on the ocean from 1918 that was moved like in 1925 to 28th Street, mid-block and then the Indian Creek Hotel, which was designed by Pfeiffer and Pitt in 1936. So a group out of New York's Sydel group came and bought all of the properties. The house had been vacant and not used for almost 20 years.



Interviewer The Pancoast House?

Lane The Pancoast House. And so we restored the house. We worked with Roman and Williams interior designer of New York, and Savino Miller did the landscape, and we basically redid things recreated a little pavilion for a new kitchen and bathrooms which was between the Pancoast and the Hohausers so they kind of rift on the two buildings and created this kind of potpourri and adaptive reuse. We were lucky and we won an award for that project with Date Heritage Trust. So, you know, it was really fun to go back and kind of like re-embrace, or embrace, some really beautiful buildings that were from different periods.

Interviewer Did they move some of them there?

Lane No, no. But the thing that was really special was there was this courtyard that had a huge ficus and overgrown bougainvillea and the designer and we too didn't want to touch anything. We were like, "this is amazing." So even when we repainted some things, repainted in the original colors, we just didn't want to lose the patina which is, I think, the problem with a lot of the preservation. They'll redo these buildings like the National and then strip it on the interior of any kind story. So the idea was, even though we had to rebuild the house, we redid it to look like it was the original rooms. So we had moldings and arches and just made it feel like it was a house. Literally fun.

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Interviewer I would love to see that.

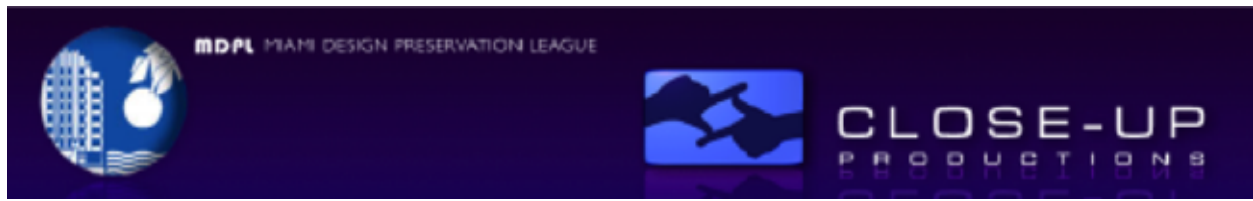
Lane Yeah, it's really great.

Interviewer What is it now?

Lane Well, the Broken Shaker is a bar, inside of it. There's the Free Hand Hotel. So says Free Hand Hotel. Still says Indian Creek Hotel.

Interviewer: How do you spell it?

Interviewer F-R-E-E H-A-N-D. So the the house was turned into a restaurant called "27" and Broken Shaker. When we opened it won the James Beard Award as the best bar in the country. The the company the Sydel Group are just phenomenal They are



just known for getting amazing properties in LA, New York, Chicago, Washington, and taking these historic buildings and just... They did the Ace Hotel in New York, really famous building, and doing like hipster, sort of boutique hipster hotels.

Interviewer You mentioned the word “story” referring to the interior. Do you believe that these structures have a story? Would you elaborate on that? The story you said you didn't want to disturb the patina because it has a “story.” I'm intrigued by that.

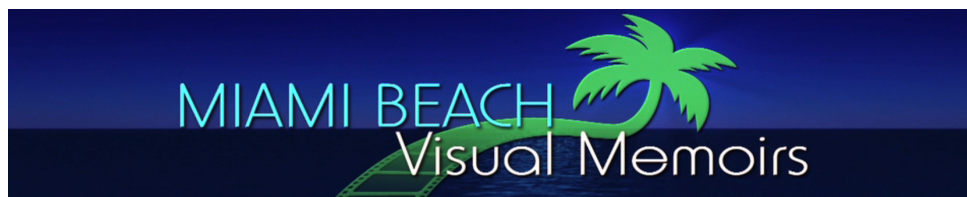
Lane Yeah, well, you know when you go into a space that has been used for a long time. A lot of times there's like second-generation elements that begin to add to, you know, the overall mix. And I think that in some ways by not touching them, it leaves an imprint of different people who have impacted those space. So, in turn that kind of brings with it a kind of a sense of time. And you know, we live in these buildings. They are only temporary. You know they're almost like renters, they move on we move on and the buildings stay. So I think that that was one aspect to how we looked at the interiors on that project, we didn't want to erase everything.

Interviewer We recently interviewed a Manny Milland who I don't know if you're familiar with him but his family owned 20 some-odd properties at one point including some major hotels; the Atlantis, the Algiers. They were in the period of time and ownership where there was a massive conversion to condos from old hotels. And of course that's how Galbut made his money. But the loss, the pictures of what we saw of the lobbies, for example, it's just lamentable. Are there any things that stand out in your mind that you've seen from a preservation ethic that you think are lamentable.

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Lane Not one in particular. I do feel that it was a trend where people would almost sterilize these interiors and not bring back maybe the original character of the interiors and because of the nature preservation often the only thing you often are required to preserve is the lobby and, of course, the exterior of the building. But I often saw a lot of the building thing going on a small budget, and then the rest of the hotel experience didn't really engage with the original residence.

Interviewer Have you been to the Betsy?



Lane Yeah, beautiful. Great job.

Interviewer Pretty incredible.

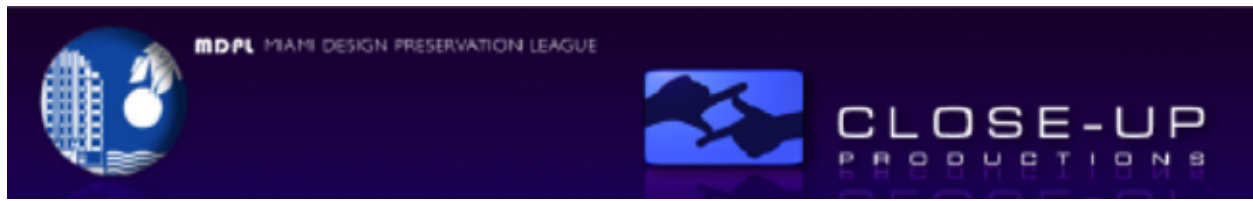
Lane Yes, beautiful property. So, that's definitely a commendable renovation they did an over-the-top job.

Interviewer And taking in that building across the alley. The skyway, pretty amazing. You know, it's amazing when given the creative space to do things like that.

Lane There's a lot of creativity a lot of people in the city who have brought a whole other layer. You know, Miami Beach has grown. I mean in some ways it's gone a little bit too much, perhaps. We see that maybe too many Nationals and maybe he's gotten a little bit too big from what it was maybe in the 90s, but changes sometimes inevitable.

Interviewer Can you foresee any changes or trends that you think might cause some kind of shift?

Lane Yeah. Yes. I think it's interesting. I was looking at some of your interviews from 2012 and of course emphasis is always going to be on the preservation. But here we are in 2019 and you know, even yesterday, we got this report from the UN and the dire condition of our planet. And unfortunately Miami's right on the target of ground zero. And we are going to have a dilemma with how do we preserve our history and the character of our neighborhoods in our our historic districts and still at the same time be proactive and responsive. So, you know we see now where the the base flood level and the beach This is more of a technicality, but it's gone from 8 feet to 9 feet. But you're allowed to even go to 13 feet, and the city is planning in time to raise all the streets. And so the city is going to change. How it changes and how we were able to keep the character, the personality that is so unique about this city, it's going to be a challenge. But I think everyone's pretty much up to this. This is going to be it you know, this is going to be something we're gonna have to deal with and it's going to be... It's going to require a lot of thought a lot of a lot of creativity. It's going to be a new layer. I'm very much for preservation, but as with many cities, you look at London or Paris, they evolve. Cities evolve and a lot of the buildings we have in North Beach for instance are first-



generation. Some of them are very beautiful, some they are not so functional and we're going to start seeing changes here, but that's part of cities. Cities grow. I'm a preservationist, I love architecture. We travel a lot. We love Europe. We love old cities and we love that urban experience. But at the same time, we know that Miami is going to, certainly the islands of Miami Beach, are going to have to evolve, it's going to have to change.

Interviewer Form and function.

Lane Everything, but still what a great place to live. The ocean, the climate. I guess it goes back to being conscious of the context of the building, the scale and also the people that experienced and lived in this city, the diversity of cultures that made up Miami. The people who originally created it and then over time for economic reasons changed. There are different groups and all of them are part of the history. Not only do we have the physical history but we have the memory. We have the memory of those times in history. So, sort of the things you are doing right now, your archiving this moment, this time, the people that have had a recent recollection of time. I think that all adds up to the story of a place. So, even memorializing... Maybe some of that architecture won't survive but memorializing it, archiving it. So important.

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